"We must put a ban on poetry that imitates the worse rather than the better." — *The Republic*

DEDICATED

TO THOSE WHO TILL
THE SURLY GRAY

$NØRT

or

TO TALK
BEFORE THE SOUL
HAS THE GOOD GRACE
TO QUELL THE DEVILS TONGUE!

The Om is Ours

In the great, sprawling chaos of the Old World, where angels fought demons and kingdoms crumbled under the weight of their own ambition, there were three legends—three figures so powerful, so legendary, that the very mention of their names could send the strongest soldiers into a blind panic. They were known across realms, whispered about in dark corners of taverns and marketplaces alike. But what set them apart, what made them truly unique, was not just their power, nor their fame, but their refusal to pick a side in the endless war that threatened to engulf the world.

Beryl, the Stormbringer, wielded lightning like a god, her hair crackling with arcane energy, and her eyes the color of dark thunderclouds. She was a warrior of such might that entire armies had turned tail at the mere sight of her. Then there was Kaelen, the Immortal Blade, a swordsman who had once killed a hundred men in a single day without breaking a sweat. He was a man of few words, his silent, eerie presence enough to instill fear into even the bravest heart. Lastly, there was Thalor, the Unbroken, whose stone body had been forged in the fires of the earth and was as indestructible as the mountains themselves. Where others crumbled, Thalor stood firm, unyielding.

Together, they were unstoppable. But they refused to choose between the celestial powers of angels or the demonic forces that clawed at the world's edge. Instead, they had a far more important quest in mind.

They were going to Gwindor's house.

Gwindor was a wizard of impressive, if somewhat unrefined, power. He had been their companion through countless battles, a friend in times of need, and a constant source of bemused wisdom. His tower, hidden in the forests of the Quiet Vale, was where they found peace from the bloodshed that constantly threatened to consume the world.

But for the last few months, the three legends had noticed something odd. Gwindor had been unusually… busy. It was strange because, for all his magical prowess, Gwindor had always been the sort of wizard who loathed anything resembling work. His obsession with "theories" and "philosophies" of magic often meant that he preferred to spend his time crafting odd spells that seemed to serve no real purpose. Yet lately, he had become uncharacteristically serious, sometimes even… secretive.

"Do you think Gwindor's gotten a *job*?" Kaelen asked one evening as they stood at the edge of the Vale, gazing at Gwindor's tower in the distance.

"Impossible," Beryl scoffed. "Gwindor with a job? Not in this lifetime."

Thalor nodded, his deep voice rumbling like distant thunder. "His spells often fail to function in practical terms. How would he hold any responsibility?"

They set off to visit their friend, the weight of their curiosity pressing on them. But as they drew closer, they began to hear strange sounds from within the tower. It wasn't just the usual hum of Gwindor's magic—it was something far more mundane. Papers rustling. Voices murmuring in disagreement.

The legends exchanged wary glances and pushed open the door.

Inside, Gwindor was sitting at a desk, his brow furrowed, surrounded by piles of parchment, books, and strange devices. He looked up at them, his usually jovial face now serious, even tired.

"Ah, you're here," he said, adjusting his spectacles. "I suppose we need to have a talk."

Beryl crossed her arms. "A talk? About what? You're not brewing a potion for world domination again, are you?"

"Or trying to unlock the secrets of time again?" Kaelen asked, leaning on the doorway. "Because that last one nearly destroyed half of the Forest of Elders."

Gwindor chuckled weakly. "No, nothing like that. It's... it's about this." He pushed a pile of papers toward them. "I've been... well, I've been applying for jobs."

The three legends blinked in unison, the shock echoing in their eyes.

"You're what?" Beryl asked, her voice cracking slightly.

"Applying for jobs," Gwindor repeated, his tone almost embarrassed. "You see, there's this new thing in the world now—responsibility. It's all about fitting in, keeping things going. So I thought, maybe it's time for me to... you know, contribute."

Thalor's granite face twisted in confusion. "But... you are a wizard. A powerful one. Why would you need a job? You could have anything, anything at all."

"Exactly!" Gwindor exclaimed. "But, see, that's the problem. I've spent my life defying the so-called rules, doing whatever I wanted, and now—now everyone expects me to *contribute*. The world has changed, and I've realized... I'm being tricked."

Beryl's eyes narrowed. "Tricked? By who?"

"By everyone," Gwindor said, his voice low. "It's not about angels or demons. It's not about good versus evil. It's all just... distractions. The world is slowly convincing us that we need to pick a side, that we need to be part of the system. But the truth is, it's all just... *subterfuge*. They want us to keep playing their game, to be the *tools* they need to keep the world turning."

The three legends exchanged uneasy looks. This was not the conversation they had expected.

"You're saying all this… this war? This destruction?" Kaelen asked, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Gwindor nodded. "It's all a trick. A manipulation. Your parents, your teachers, the lords, the rulers—they're all in on it. They want you to think you need a purpose, need to pick a side, need to get a job. But it's all about control. The job is just the beginning. They'll keep you distracted with complexities and responsibilities until you've forgotten how to live freely."

The room fell silent.

Beryl was the first to break the silence, her voice thoughtful. "So what now? We just... leave the world to burn?"

"Not burn," Gwindor corrected, smiling faintly. "Just... let it be. We don't need to pick sides. We don't need to get involved. The world will figure itself out. All we need to do is hang out. Drink some ale. Have some fun."

Thalor nodded gravely. "I like this plan."

Kaelen finally smiled, his first smile in days. "I think it's the only sensible thing to do."

And so, the three legends—Beryl, Kaelen, and Thalor—decided to ignore the war. They refused to choose between the angels and demons, rejected the convoluted politics, and instead spent their days in Gwindor's tower, where there was no pressure to save the world, no expectations, just the joy of friendship.

Because the real truth of the world was simple: the only trick that mattered was the one played by their parents, who had spent years convincing them that their lives had to mean something. But Gwindor had shown them the way—the real truth was that *The Om was theirs to shape*, and they would shape it on their terms.

And they would do it by kicking back with their old friend Gwindor, raising a glass to the absurdity of it all.

The Om was ours. And it always had been.

After the devil finished writing their new story, he / she / they / them had a massive wank.

Your sincerely,

THE END:)

Internia is Ours

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Internia was ours. And it always had been.

Title: Internia Is Ours

In the time before time—when stars were still sketching their first shapes in the sky and the air still remembered the smell of dragonfire—there lay a land split by war. Internia, the name once sung in bardic ballads and whispered over dying campfires, was now little more than a playground for celestial egos.

Angels burned from the heavens like righteous meteorites, wreathed in holy flame, screaming scripture louder than sense. Demons rose like mold through the cracks of civilization, all teeth and charm, promising liberty while pocketing souls like spare change.

Between these two existential recruitment campaigns stood three legends of the Old World:

- Grondar the Unshaven, who once punched a volcano to death.
- Ailith the Bladebored, who wielded seven swords but couldn't be arsed to use more than one at a time.
- Thornwick the Mostly Dead, who had technically died centuries ago but hadn't noticed and thus refused to stay buried.

They were tired. Not just physically, but cosmically. Eternally. Philosophically. The war? Too loud. The choices? Too binary. Good and evil had been trying the same routine since the First Era and still hadn't learned any new tricks. It was like watching two blind squirrels fight over a fake nut.

So the trio went to hang out with their wizard mate, Gwindor, who lived in a tower that looked like it had been designed by a committee of sleep-deprived crows and lonely architects.

Gwindor was halfway between mad and brilliant, with a beard that was legally a habitat and an office that only hired furniture with at least one sentient complaint per week. He welcomed them with enchanted beer and a rant about astral taxes, which everyone pretended to understand.

While the world around them tore itself apart, they played obscure board games that hadn't been invented yet. They debated metaphysics over flaming tea. They refused the repeated calls of prophecy, which arrived by magical messenger ravens wearing increasingly desperate expressions.

"You three are the prophesied balance!" screeched one raven. "The war must end, and you must—"

Grondar squashed the message under a sandwich.

Ailith kicked her boots up on a table and said, "You ever get the feeling none of this is *actually* about us?"

"What do you mean?" asked Thornwick, sipping a ghost martini.

"I mean, angels, demons, all this talk of fate, of destiny—what if it's just... our parents?"

A silence fell, broken only by Gwindor's sentient plant trying to eat a chair.

"You think this whole war is just some elaborate manipulation?" asked Thornwick.

Ailith nodded. "Think about it. All the signs. All the pressure to choose. But nothing ever *really* changes. What if they just want us to... settle down?"

"To what end?" Grondar grunted.

"To get jobs," Gwindor muttered grimly.

Everyone stared at him.

"It's obvious if you think about it," Gwindor continued. "This whole moral binary, this whole 'you must choose a side' thing—it's just a narrative trap. They're *parents*, with too much time, magic, and a crippling fear that we're wasting our potential. So they conjure divine ultimatums to funnel us toward 'responsibility'. The war's not real. It's just... an aggressively metaphorical job interview."

Thornwick blinked. "So... angels are internships?"

"And demons are freelance gigs with terrible health plans," Ailith added.

The truth, horribly stupid and deeply human, settled over them like a wet cloak: the world wasn't on the brink of salvation or damnation.

It was on the brink of getting you to update your résumé.

They all burst into laughter. Gwindor summoned more beer. Outside, angelic legions clashed with demonic hordes, their combat choreography as meaningful as a soap opera dream sequence.

Inside, the legends played a card game that hadn't been invented yet and made a new pact:

Internia is ours.

Not theirs. Not fate's. And definitely not Mom and Dad's.

Just theirs—stupid, chaotic, absurdly free.

Pilot Episode: "Old Dogs, New Tricks"

MIKE
+
TIM

I'm Working on Forgiving Them

A Step-by-Step Handbook for Organizing a Professional and Memorable Service of the Lucien North as his Wisdom Tooth came Thru

Subject: Quick Update & Important News

Hey everyone,

Just wanted to say I'm doing fine! I know it might look like I'm down and out, but honestly, I've never been better in my life. I'm really embracing this new version of myself that I've been forced to become.

Putting any unforgiveness aside for a moment, I wanted to share some important news — Clarence Belding has passed away. As per his last wishes, we all need to attend his funeral.

Thanks for understanding, and hope to see you there.

Take care,
[Your Name]

RUN OF SHOW

- **3:00 PM** – Processional begins (Lana Del Rey instrumental or tasteful wind chimes TBD)
- **3:05 PM** – Opening remarks (Father Lang, if he hasn't quit)
- **3:10 PM** – Eulogy 1 (Janine from Book Club: "Clarence & the Erotic Power of Scrabble")
- **3:20 PM** – Eulogy 2 (Prof. Lynne: "He Was a Man, Not a Footnote")
- **3:35 PM** – Ray's Surprise Segment™ (strictly capped at 5 minutes, no drones)
- **3:45 PM** – Moment of silence / interpretive silence
- **3:50 PM** – Casket exit + musical cue ("Bittersweet Symphony" unless vetoed)

- **4:00 PM** – Reception begins, bar opens (2-drink minimum before family gossip)
- **4:30 PM onward** – Mingling, whispering, low-stakes emotional breakdowns

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📝 WARDROBE NOTES

- **Palette:** Griefcore. Greys, navies, muted florals. No neon.
- **Clarence requested:** No ties tighter than the burden of mortality.

NT. RAY'S FLAT – LATE AFTERNOON

The light is syrupy, golden, dying. Shadows spill along the floor like memories no one wants to step in. The phone rings. Ray, barefoot, in a linen shirt stained with espresso, picks it up like it might burn him.

RAY (softly)
Yes?

CLARENCE'S MOTHER (V.O.)
Raymond. It's me. I've been thinking — this funeral… well, it's all a bit precarious, isn't it?

A pause. The wind moves somewhere off-camera. Ray glances toward the window, where the curtains twitch like they're gossiping.

RAY
Isn't it always? Grief — teetering on the edge of farce. People in hats pretending not to cry. I thought that was the point.

CLARENCE'S MOTHER (V.O.)
You always did enjoy spectacle over structure.
(beat)
Tell me you're not turning this into one of your little shows.

RAY
Little? I was thinking grand. Tragic. Something Greek, maybe.
(beat)
He deserved that, didn't he? Or at least the illusion of it.

There's the rustle of paper on the other end. Perhaps she's scribbling notes she won't send. Or folding a tissue she's already cried into.

CLARENCE'S MOTHER (V.O.)
He wanted simplicity, Ray.
A clean suit. Closed casket. No music.
He feared attention.
And now you want to dress him in thunder and moonlight.

RAY (bitterly)
Because he was thunder, in the end. He just... never let anyone hear it.

CLARENCE'S MOTHER (V.O.)
And who is this performance for?
Not him. He's gone.
Is it for us? For yourself?

Ray closes his eyes. A moth flutters against the windowpane. The hum of the world pushes in.

RAY
It's for what's left.
For the pieces of him I couldn't carry when he was alive.
For the version I wanted, I suppose.
The version I missed while standing right in front of him.

A long silence. When she speaks again, her voice is quieter. Older.

CLARENCE'S MOTHER (V.O.)
You always loved him more in theory than in practice.

RAY
Maybe.
But I'll bury him like I meant it.

She exhales. It sounds like surrender. Or exhaustion. Or both.

CLARENCE'S MOTHER (V.O.)
Just... don't make a mess of it, Raymond.
I don't have the strength to carry another version of him.

RAY
No.
This time, I'll carry it all.

Click.
The line goes dead.

Ray stands alone in the golden silence, hands trembling slightly. Outside, the sky begins to dim — a slow descent, like a curtain falling.

Group Call: After the Message (Drama & Sex Appeal Edition)

Mason (deep voice, slow, magnetic):
"Okay, so I get this message, right? Starts with, 'I'm doing fine,' like some kind of mystery wrapped in silk. But then—BAM—Clarence is gone. And I swear, the world just got a little darker. Honestly, I don't know what's more intoxicating—the way they say they've changed or the fact that we all have to show up now. Damn."

Scarlett (breathy, teasing):
"Oh, please. That whole 'new version of myself' line? Give me that transformation. I'm talking sleek, effortless, the kind of glow that stops traffic. And Clarence? Honey, that funeral better be dripping in style — because if I'm going, I'm turning heads and breaking hearts."

Elliot (smoldering sarcasm):
"Look, I'm usually the quiet type, but this? This message? It's like someone threw a velvet glove around a bomb. I'm not saying I'm the hottest thing you'll see at that funeral, but let's be real… I might just steal the show."

Harper (cool, poised, with a hint of danger):
"Putting grudges aside? That's the sexy kind of strength I respect. I'm coming — not just because it's the right thing to do, but because there's something about endings that demand a certain presence. And I intend to own every moment."

Reverend Green (deep, mysterious, almost hypnotic):
"Death, rebirth, forgiveness—these aren't just words. They're an invitation. An invitation to shed the old skin, to step into a more dangerous, more real version of ourselves. Clarence's last wish isn't just about a funeral — it's a call to evolution."

Wyatt (slick, confident, a grin you can hear):
"Listen, I'm all about making an entrance. And this funeral? It's the perfect stage. Clarence's goodbye? It's our chance to rewrite the rules — to remind everyone exactly who we are. I'm not just showing up. I'm owning the damn room."

Mason:
"Damn, Wyatt. You just made me wanna suit up and walk through fire."

Scarlett:
"Same. Let's make sure Clarence's send-off is unforgettable. For all the right reasons."

Mason (brooding, intense):
"Look, I'm not the guy who wears his heart on his sleeve… unless it's on fire. People think I'm intimidating, but honestly? I'm just tired of the bullshit. I keep my distance, but if you cross me, you'll know. Deep down, I'm just looking for something real — even if it scares me."

Scarlett (glamorous, dramatic):
"Okay, first of all, I don't do basic. If you see me, you know it's a whole vibe — the hair, the makeup, the attitude. People think I'm high-maintenance? Maybe. But hey, I set the standards around here. I'm not just here to turn heads; I'm here to break them."

Elliot (awkward, witty):
"I'm that weird mix of 'don't talk to me' and 'please talk to me.' I've got sarcasm as my armor, but really, I'm just trying to figure it all out without embarrassing myself too much. Social situations? They're basically my personal nightmare, but hey, I'm loyal when it counts."

Harper (polished, passive-aggressive):
"I'm the kind of person who smiles perfectly and says exactly what you want to hear… until you're not looking. I've got this whole 'perfect socialite' thing down, but trust me, there's a lot more beneath the surface. I play the game well — but I don't play nice."

Reverend Green (mysterious, intense):
"I'm not here to sugarcoat anything. People come to me when they need to be shaken awake — sometimes they hate me for it, but I'm okay with that. Life's messy, raw, and beautiful. I'm just here to remind people to face it head-on."

Wyatt (slick, charming):
"Look, I know what I bring to the table — confidence, style, a little bit of mystery. I'm the guy who can walk into any room and own it. People love me or hate me, but they can't ignore me. I'm always three steps ahead, and yeah, I like to keep it that way."

Ray Neilson's Monologue (Batman Style):

"They say I'm done. Over. Washed up. Burned out by my own fire. But they don't know the nights I've survived — the silence that follows the storm, the weight of every choice that's led me here. I'm not some fading ghost. I'm the shadow that lingers when the world forgets to look.

Clarence Belding's funeral… it's not just a ceremony. It's a reckoning. A chance to show what it means to own the darkness and make it your strength. This funeral won't be quiet. It won't be somber. It'll be a reckoning — a blaze of raw truth in a world that's forgotten how to feel.

I'm not here to mourn. I'm here to remind them all — the dead and the living — that some fires never burn out. And when I'm done, they won't just remember Clarence. They'll remember the man who made his last goodbye an unforgettable war cry.

Because this city doesn't need another hero. It needs a force. And I'm that force."

Scared Priest's Monologue (Mad Men Style):

"You think you know the world — what's real, what's not. I did. I believed in order, in neat little boxes: life, death, faith. Ghosts? That was bedtime storytelling, something for the gullible. Turns out, they're as real as the cigarettes I chain-smoke during these long nights.

I'm supposed to be the man who shepherds souls, the calm voice in chaos. But lately? I'm just a guy staring down the dark, wondering if he's losing his mind. The whispers, the shadows—they're not just figments. They're reminders that I'm not in control.

And that terrifies me. Because faith means believing in what you can't see, right? But when what you can't see starts knocking at your door? Well, faith gets a little harder to hold onto.

I'm tired. Worn thin. But I keep lighting the candles, saying the prayers — because what else is there? At least for now, that's enough."

Funeral Speech for Clarence Belding

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to remember and honor the life of Clarence Belding. Clarence was a man who touched the lives of many, and though words can never fully capture the essence of who he was, we come together to celebrate his memory.

Clarence lived a life marked by kindness, hard work, and dedication to his family and friends. He was someone who faced life's challenges with quiet strength and grace. His presence brought comfort and warmth to those around him, and his legacy will live on in the hearts of everyone who knew him.

While we mourn his loss, we also take comfort in the memories we shared, the laughter, the stories, and the moments that made Clarence unique. Today, we say goodbye to a beloved friend, a devoted family member, and a respected member of our community.

May we carry forward his spirit by living our own lives with the same integrity and compassion he showed. Rest in peace, Clarence. You will be deeply missed but never forgotten.

Thank you.

Mason "Must" Carter

- Former military brat turned brooding, intense guy with a tough exterior but vulnerable underneath. Keeps his emotions locked down, always carrying some unresolved anger or trauma.

Scarlett Vega

- Glamorous, confident, and magnetic — the quintessential queen bee. Has a sharp tongue and hides deep insecurities behind her flashy style and bold attitude.

Elliot Plum

- The intellectual outsider — an art student with a dry wit and a tendency to overthink everything. Struggles with social anxiety but is fiercely loyal to his close friends.

Harper Peyton

- The graceful, poised socialite who's secretly dealing with family pressure and a desire to break free. She's polite on the surface but has a rebellious streak no one expects.

Reverend Green

- A thoughtful, somewhat enigmatic spiritual guide who's more about tough love than soft prayers. Known for pushing people to face their truths, sometimes uncomfortably.

Wyatt Whitman

- Smooth-talking, mysterious entrepreneur type. Has a reputation for playing both sides but is searching for something real beneath all the smoke and mirrors.

Voiceover (smooth, confident, with a hint of edge):

"Death. It's inevitable. But how you say goodbye? That's where you make your mark. At Clarence Belding's Funeral, we get it. Funerals aren't just about mourning — they're about gathering, sharing, remembering.

So what's the perfect funeral food? Simple. Comfort that doesn't scream 'last rites,' but whispers 'warmth.' Think: tender slow-roasted lamb — juicy, seasoned with rosemary and garlic — because sometimes, you need something that feels like a hug.

Pair that with a silky potato gratin — rich, buttery, and exactly the kind of indulgence your guests deserve after a long day of 'sorry for your loss' awkwardness. And don't forget the garden-fresh seasonal vegetables — bright, crisp, reminding you there's still life beyond the goodbye.

Finish with a delicate lemon drizzle cake — light, zesty, a little hopeful. Because even in the darkest moments, you want a hint of sweetness.

Clarence Belding's Funeral. For the moments that matter most."

"I'm Working on Forgiving Them"

Monologue (Kae Tempest-style):

I'm working on forgiving them.
Not in a clean, tie-a-bow-on-it way.
Not like I'm healed. Not like they care.
But more like — if I don't,
this fury is gonna make a flat out of my chest,
and live there rent-free.

They moved on.
They got married, had kids,
found God, found fitness,
found out how to pretend they never tore me like that.

And me?
Still walking past certain bus stops
like they're crime scenes.
Still hearing their words in the way I doubt myself
at the worst possible time.

But I'm working on forgiving them.
Because carrying it is heavier than it was worth.
Because being angry feels sharp,
but holding it dulls me.
Makes the world smaller. Makes me smaller.
And I want more space than that.

It's not noble. It's not holy.
It's just...
I'm tired of having conversations in my head
with people who ain't listening.
I'm tired of writing poems like this
just to keep from screaming in public.

So I'm working on it.
Day by day.
Not for them —
for me.
Because if I don't set this down,
I'll never get to pick anything else up.

LAST CALL AT THE ARTISANAL WASTELAND

Bukowski slouched into the bar like a question mark, his rumpled suit hanging on him like yesterday's regrets. The place was all exposed brick and Edison bulbs, not a speck of grime on the concrete floor. No cigarette burns on the bar top, just polished mahogany reflecting the soft glow from artfully placed lighting fixtures.

"Whiskey," he muttered to the bartender, a bearded young man with immaculate tattoos crawling up both forearms.

"We have a pretty extensive whiskey list," the bartender replied, setting down a leather-bound menu. "Any particular region you're partial to? We just got in a small-batch Kentucky bourbon aged in cabernet barrels."

Bukowski stared at him. "Christ, kid. Just pour me something that'll burn."

The bartender nodded knowingly. "I've got just the thing." He reached for a bottle with a handwritten label and poured two fingers into a heavy crystal glass. No plastic cups here. The amber liquid gleamed like something worth paying for.

Bukowski took a sip. The burn was honest. It didn't pretend to be anything but what it was. Maybe these kids weren't complete frauds after all.

"Fourteen dollars," the bartender said.

Bukowski nearly choked. "For one goddamn drink?"

"Small batch. Limited run. Only three barrels made."

Bukowski dug into his pocket and slapped a crumpled twenty on the bar. "Keep it," he muttered. "I'll nurse this one like it's medicine."

The place filled up as the night wore on. Young professionals in expensive casual clothes, laughing with the careful restraint of people who had jobs to keep, mortgages to pay. None of them looked hungry enough to write anything worth reading, but they all looked happy enough. Bukowski couldn't decide if that was tragic or something to envy.

A woman slid onto the stool beside him. Her hair was silver, styled in a way that said she'd chosen the color, not surrendered to it. Her eyes were sharp, appraising.

"You look like you've seen some shit," she said, taking a sip from a glass of clear liquid with a cucumber floating in it.

"I've seen enough," Bukowski replied.

"Charles Bukowski, right? I recognized your face from my college lit anthology." She smiled, the lines around her eyes deepening. "I'm Elaine. I teach comparative literature at the university."

"They're teaching me in colleges now?" Bukowski shook his head. "The world's gone mad."

"The world's always been mad. We just keep finding new ways to decorate the asylum."

Bukowski looked at her again, more carefully this time. There was something there, behind her eyes. Maybe pain. Maybe wisdom. The two were usually the same thing.

"You know," he said, gesturing at the bartender for another drink, "I've spent my life in bars that smelled like piss and broken dreams. Places where you could feel the decades of desperation soaking into the walls." He looked around at the careful curation of the room, the meticulously curated playlist of obscure jazz floating from hidden speakers. "But there's something honest about this place too. Different kind of honesty."

Elaine nodded. "Authenticity finds a way, even in the age of Instagram."

The bartender set down another whiskey, alongside a small plate with what appeared to be tiny grilled cheese sandwiches.

"On the house," he said. "Chef's working on a new bar snack."

Bukowski picked one up. It was grilled cheese alright, but with some kind of fancy cheese, a hint of truffle. It was ridiculous. Pretentious. And goddamn delicious.

"You know what, Elaine?" he said, raising his glass to her. "Maybe the world didn't go to hell after all. Maybe it just changed facades."

"Maybe we all did," she replied, clinking her glass against his.

For a moment, just a moment, Bukowski felt something like peace. It wouldn't last—it never did—but in this overpriced, overhyped bar, with its carefully crafted atmosphere and fourteen-dollar whiskey, he found himself almost at home. Almost.

The words were already arranging themselves in his head. There was a poem in this, somewhere between the old world and the new. Between the genuine squalor of his youth and the genuine pretension of this place. The hunger remained the same. The thirst, unquenchable. It was all material in the end.

Bukowski took another sip of his whiskey and let the warmth spread through him. Maybe tomorrow he'd write about this night. Or maybe he'd just remember it, this strange interlude in a time that wasn't his own, but somehow still had room for him.

"Another round?" asked the bartender.

Bukowski nodded. "Why the hell not."

I HAVE EMERGED VICTORIOUS

I stumbled out the other side Of hell itself and lived to tell With whiskey burns and bloodshot eyes They said I'd rot, they wished me well

The bastards laid their traps for me In backstreet pubs and dirty lanes I wandered drunk through misery With broken teeth and tattered veins

But FUCK THE LOT OF YE who said I'd never see another dawn The doctors counted me for dead But here I stand—though barely—drawn

From wreckage of a thousand nights Where I pissed away what little fame They gave me when the songs rang right Before they tried to kill my name

My liver's scarred, my lungs are shot My voice is like a gravel pit But I've outlived the fucking lot Who said my soul wasn't worth shit

The priests, the cops, the industry men The critics with their poison pens The girls who loved me way back when Before my star began to dim

I've puked on finer floors than yours I've slept in gutters fit for kings I've written songs on bathroom doors That angels would be proud to sing

So raise a glass, you sorry sods To those who dance upon the edge We've spat in face of all the gods And somehow lived to break their hedge

The reaper came, I wasn't home He left his card, I tore it up I've cheated death from Rome to Sligo And drained defeat from victory's cup

So here's to all the beautiful losers The drunks, the poets, and the accused We've emerged from the flames much confused But VICTORIOUS against all odds

And if tomorrow brings me down At least I'll fall with my own crown I HAVE EMERGED VICTORIOUS Though battered, broken, and alone But never, NEVER overthrown!

Funeral Speech: Professor Halberd T. Lynne
(*Delivered from the pulpit, carefully worded but simmering beneath*)

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends, enemies, and those still deciding...

It is a curious honour to stand before you today, attempting to say something of value about Clarence Belding.

Clarence, of course, was a man of contradiction. A figure so relentlessly inconsistent that to study him was to engage in a form of spiritual vertigo. He lived in italics — never quite serious, never quite unserious. A man who, I must say, I never trusted entirely… but always found myself watching.

He had the kind of mind that resisted classification — like a moth that refuses the flame but still circles it with inexplicable hunger. He was, infuriatingly, the smartest man in the room only when it didn't matter. And when it did — when the stakes were high and we were sharpening our knives at conferences and lectures — he would smile, say something vulgar, and ruin the entire discussion with a sentence so casually insightful it made me want to scream.

Clarence was a chaos engine in a corduroy blazer. He submitted one paper in his life — one — and I am haunted to this day by the footnotes.

He was beautiful, in the way a storm is beautiful from a distance. That rare blend of careless grace and barely veiled contempt. He made people fall in love with him. And then punished them for it by existing exactly as he was.

I did not like him.

He smelled of leather and deadlines. He talked through his silences. He could quote Sappho and seduce your assistant in the same breath. He was the only man I've ever met who could insult you and make it feel like foreplay.

So no, I did not like Clarence Belding. But God help me, I respected him.

Because he lived as most of us only pretend to — fully, wickedly, and without apology.

And that, perhaps, is why we are gathered here. Not to mourn the man we knew, but to admit, with no small amount of shame...

That we are lesser for his absence.
And were never quite ready for his presence.

Rest in chaos, Clarence.
You were a disaster.
And I adored it."

Tho You Could Kick a Football

Tho you could kick a football
faster than the wind,
and score with ease,
the crowds all roaring,
I always knew—

you could never kick a heart.

Not mine, not mum's,
not even that stray dog you fed
behind the house when no one was looking.

You wore your boots like armor,
your fists like thunder,
but at home—
you were quieter than the dawn,
soft as old wool,

sometimes tired enough
to forget the noise outside.

I stand here now,
before a sea of empty seats and silent cheers,
holding your memory in hands
too small for the weight of legend.

Tho you could kick a football,
you could never kick a heart—
and that's the thing
I'm learning to carry
after you're gone.

"I Never Caught Any Bodies"
(moody piano underscoring, lazy and lush, like it's been drinking)

(Lights up. Just one. Tight and soft. She leans into the mic like it owes her rent.)

You ever sit in a room full of people
and realize you're the only one who didn't bring a souvenir?

No scalps.
No bones.
No trophies in the form of a sweatshirt you definitely did not pay for.

Me?
I never caught any bodies.

(a pause. a drag of an invisible cigarette.)

'Cause I don't want any bodies.
And less, honey—
Less than I don't want bodies…
That body is *you*.

(piano punctuates: a sly, descending trill)

Now don't get it twisted—
I coulda.
I *coulda* had bodies.

Coulda scooped 'em up like loose change in the back of a cab.
Coulda caught lovers the way some girls catch colds:
Careless.
Seasonal.
French.

But no.
I kept myself tidy.
Like a library nobody visits but still has to dust.
Like a motel with only one key and no vacancies, baby.

(leans closer)
I *never* caught any bodies.
Because you don't mount the thing you're praying for.

And baby, I was praying for *you*.

(chord shift: minor, melancholic, a memory crawling back)

You—
with your Saturday-night arrogance and that Wednesday-morning soul.
You smelled like trouble,
and felt like something I couldn't afford but kept trying on anyway.

I waited.
Like a fool at a bus stop two towns past where the buses even go.

Watched friends rack up hearts like poker chips.
Watched lovers fall in and out of bed like bad actors in a farce.
And me?
I stayed dry.
Virgin snow.
The good kind—untouched, unshoveled,
...ignored.

Because I didn't want bodies.
Not really.

I wanted *the* body.
Your body.

Not in a crude way.
Not just in a sheet-sticky way.
But in a curled-up-on-a-Tuesday-with-nothing-to-prove kind of way.

(soft piano vamp, brushed keys like someone whispering a secret behind your back)

They used to say I was picky.
Or scared.
Or "so mysterious," which is gay code for "chronically uninvited."

But they didn't get it.
They thought I was waiting for "The One."
I wasn't.
I was waiting for *you.*

Which is worse.

(beat. the first honest silence.)

So no.
I never caught any bodies.
Didn't want 'em.
Didn't need 'em.
And less than I didn't need bodies…
I didn't need one that wasn't *yours.*

(leans back. breathes. smiles with teeth and ache.)

But hey.
At least I'm consistent.
Still here.
Still bodyless.
Still hoping maybe someday—
you'll catch me.

(piano ends on a suspended chord, unresolved. just like her.)
(lights out.)

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1. Immediate Steps

- Notify close family, friends, and the deceased's publicist or manager if applicable.
- Contact a licensed funeral director or service provider.
- Obtain legal documents: death certificate, will, pre-planned arrangements (if any).
- Arrange for transportation of the body if necessary.

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2. Decide on the Type of Service

- Will this be a **public memorial**, a **private ceremony**, or both?
- Religious or secular? Traditional or nontraditional?
- Burial, cremation, or other form of interment?
- Will there be a wake, vigil, or visitation?

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3. Choose a Venue

- Funeral home, house of worship, theater, or public event space?
- Consider the size of the guest list, AV needs, parking, and accessibility.
- Confirm and reserve the space in writing.

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4. Identify Key Participants

- **Officiant** (clergy, celebrant, friend/family).
- **Eulogists** – confirm who will speak and provide time guidelines.
- **Musicians or performers** – live or recorded tributes.

- **Pallbearers, ushers, or crowd coordinators.**

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5. Create the Order of Service

You can customize, but a common flow looks like:

1. Welcome / Opening remarks
2. Musical tribute or reading
3. Eulogies / Personal reflections
4. Additional readings or performances
5. Moment of silence or meditation
6. Final blessing / closing remarks
7. Procession or exit music

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6. Printed Materials & Memorial Touches

- **Program booklet** – include a biography, photos, quotes, and the schedule.
- **Guest book** – for guests to sign and leave messages.
- **Memory table or slideshow** – display personal items or images from their life.
- **Keepsakes** – optional takeaways such as memorial cards or pins.

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7. Media & Public Relations (for a public figure)

- Prepare and distribute a **press release** or official obituary.

- Coordinate with media teams about coverage or photography rules.
- Arrange for **livestreaming** or recording the service for broader access.
- Assign a **press liaison** if media attendance is expected.

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8. Reception or Gathering

- Arrange a reception venue (home, restaurant, event space).
- Book catering: formal meal, buffet, or light refreshments.
- Create a tone: celebratory, intimate, open-mic stories, or slideshow.

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9. Logistics & Final Details

- **Flowers and decor** – set a theme or color scheme if desired.
- **Transportation** – for family, dignitaries, or VIP guests.
- **Security or crowd control** – especially for public or high-attendance events.
- Check AV equipment: microphones, speakers, video displays, etc.

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10. After the Service

- Send **thank-you notes** to speakers, performers, and key helpers.
- Distribute or post video or photos if appropriate.
- Handle any **estate** or legacy matters.
- Consider setting up a **foundation**, **scholarship**, or **charity** in their name.

So, okay. I'm apparently in charge of planning the funeral. Which, you know, isn't technically in my job description — unless your job description includes "person who looks like they might know what to do in a crisis," or "one of the few people still answering their phone." That's how it starts. No ceremony, no warning. One minute you're trying to reheat some congealed leftovers, and the next you're handling press logistics and debating coffin varnishes.

Now, I should clarify: this isn't just any funeral. This is a capital-F Funeral. The kind with press releases, talent wrangling, and the looming threat of a poorly timed TMZ drone. This person was famous. Not tabloid-famous, but, like, NPR-famous. Revered, misquoted, maybe taught in college electives. So there's pressure.

Step one: Notification. You tell the family — or rather, the person who represents the family because families, in my experience, tend to fracture in direct proportion to how famous the deceased was. You also call the agent, the publicist, the estate lawyer, and maybe the person who once ran their Twitter account — all of whom are inexplicably still answering emails.

Then comes the paperwork. Legal documents. Death certificates. Wills. Medical forms signed in 1998 on crinkled fax paper. This is the part no one ever writes about in memoirs. The bureaucratic purgatory of loss.

You need a funeral director. That's non-negotiable. Someone with a calm voice and the ability to say things like "Would you prefer mahogany or oak?" without blinking.

And now, the fork in the road: **what kind of service are we talking about?**
Public? Private? Public with a velvet-rope private section?
Religious? Vaguely spiritual? Or aggressively secular, like the kind where someone reads Rilke and there's gluten-free catering?

Burial? Cremation? Something greener? You start asking questions like, "Would she have wanted to be biodegradable?" and suddenly you're crying in a Whole Foods parking lot.

Venue next. You have to think big: space, acoustics, symbolism. A synagogue? A theater? A repurposed fire station with strong natural light? You visit a few and realize you're

subconsciously ranking them by how Instagrammable they'll look when everyone's wearing black.

Then comes the casting. The speakers. The musicians. Who gets to eulogize, and who has to submit a written statement? Who's actually going to show up and not ghost you the night before because they "emotionally couldn't write anything"?

And then you write the **program** — which, if you're me, takes three days because you want it to walk that impossible line between tasteful, informative, moving, and not overly Helvetica-dependent.

You schedule it out:

- Introductory remarks
- A reading (preferably something non-cringey and not too long)
- Eulogies (3 max, or you lose people by minute 22)
- Musical interlude (live if possible, but only if the cellist doesn't cry mid-performance again)
- A moment of silence that feels like it might collapse into the void
- Closing thoughts / final blessing / artful exit music

You order flowers. You argue with the florist about tone — "No, not funereal, but not birthday brunch either." You make a slideshow. You write the press statement. You hire someone to livestream it because it turns out even grief is now hybrid-accessible.

And if they were public-facing — which they were — you prep for media. That means assigning someone to deflect questions like, "Were they working on anything at the end?" and "Is it true they didn't speak to their second cousin since the garden party of 2004?"

Post-service, there's a gathering. You try not to call it a party, but let's be honest, there are mini quiches. And this is where people finally exhale. Tell stories. Drink. Laugh — sometimes guiltily. Someone plays that one song that was "so them," and it's both perfect and emotionally devastating.

Then it ends. Or it doesn't. Because there's still follow-up. You send thank-you notes. You archive the tributes. You upload the video. You call the estate guy back. You maybe — just maybe — start thinking about a foundation or a scholarship in their name.

And through all of this, some small, persistent part of you keeps asking:
Am I doing this right?

Is this what they would've wanted?
Is this too much? Too little? Too showy? Too quiet?

But eventually, you realize that what you've done is this:
You've made space.
For remembering.
For speaking.
For not speaking.
For them.

Which, all things considered, isn't a bad way to spend your time on Earth.

Upon news of my demise, search immediately for any alcohol you can find and quiff it.

Please use less toilet paper.
The pipes are clogging.
This isn't a spa. Be reasonable.

Thank you.

Funeral Poem – "The Legend of Clarence Belding"

They gathered to solve a mystery.
To trace the cracks in the stained-glass story
of a man they barely understood.

The clues?
A scorched passport.
An unopened letter.
Half a manuscript that smelled of gin and mothballs.
Three lovers, none of them invited.

Whispers filled the pews —
"He wasted it."
"He could've been..."
"He nearly was..."

And if you're clever,
you'll have followed the trail.
The missed appointments.
The silences mistaken for wisdom.
The charm, so heavy it crushed him.

And now, let me end the riddle.
Let me close the case:
The real murder... was I, Clarence Belding.
And I am guilty — not of betrayal, not of scandal —
but of the slow, private killing
of my own ambition.

I buried my hunger in velvet.
Dulled my spark to keep the peace.
Let expectation choke out instinct
like weeds in a wild garden.

But here's the twist, the final line:
Even a ruined man
can burn bright on the way down.

So carve my name in the oak.
Tell them I failed brilliantly.
Tell them I kissed with too much teeth,
laughed too loud in empty rooms,
and never once went quietly.

Because legends?
They're not always kings.
Sometimes, they're just ghosts
who almost did it all —
and made damn sure you'd never forget they tried.

I was Clarence Belding.
And if nothing else…
I made a damn good exit.

If you've been online at all in the past six months, you've probably encountered *Blizzard Theory*. You may have scrolled past a viral infographic mapping it to everything from late-stage capitalism to ADHD, or watched someone on TikTok dramatically reframe their life choices through its lens. You may have even whispered it at dinner parties, half-joking, half-curious. Because, for something that may or may not actually exist, Blizzard Theory is having a moment.

For the uninitiated, Blizzard Theory posits that we're increasingly living in "blizzard conditions" — not literal snowstorms, but a cultural whiteout: information swirling so thickly and so fast that orientation, meaning, and even memory are constantly erased. It's not just that we're overwhelmed; it's that we've lost the trail entirely. History melts into vibes. Context disappears. The now becomes everything, and nothing sticks.

Like most zeitgeisty theories, it's hard to trace its precise origin. Some credit an obscure Substack essay that compared social media timelines to driving through a snowstorm with broken wipers. Others say it began as a joke on Discord, a kind of stoner metaphor that hit a little too hard. Either way, it's become one of those ideas that seems to explain everything and nothing at once.

There's a lot that's tempting about Blizzard Theory. It elegantly captures that weird, unmoored sensation of scrolling through a dozen contradictions in a single morning: war footage next to cake videos, moral outrage beside softcore ads for AI girlfriends. It acknowledges the collapse not just of truth, but of texture — that sense of stable ground beneath the noise. It even has a poetic ring to it, a kind of melancholic lyricism that makes confusion feel oddly profound.

But — and this is where I find myself on the fence — there's a danger in romanticizing disorientation. The metaphor is powerful, yes, but is it clarifying or merely aesthetic? Are we diagnosing a real cultural shift, or are we just giving our digital burnout a prettier name?

Worse, Blizzard Theory risks becoming self-fulfilling. If everything is snow and blur, then why try to understand anything? Why engage critically when you can surrender stylishly? The internet loves theories that absolve us of effort — or guilt. And there's something suspiciously soothing about being told that your attention span isn't broken; it's just that the world is unreadable now.

That said, maybe that *is* the point. Maybe Blizzard Theory doesn't need to hold up to academic scrutiny to be useful. Maybe its value lies in naming a sensation we've all felt but struggled to articulate. Like "quiet quitting" or "main character energy," it's less about fact than resonance — a shared shrug in the face of chaos.

I'm not convinced Blizzard Theory explains everything. But I'm also not convinced we should dismiss it just because it emerged from the churn it tries to describe. If nothing else, it offers a story — and in a storm, sometimes even a story can help you find your way.

The transition had been unexpectedly gentle. One moment, David Foster Wallace was confined to the unbearable prison of his thoughts, and the next, he was simply... elsewhere. The crushing weight that had pressed against his consciousness for decades had mysteriously lifted, like stepping from a steam room into crisp mountain air.

Heaven, if that's what this was, looked surprisingly mundane—a sprawling park with impossibly green grass, trees that seemed to shimmer with an inner light, and benches situated at aesthetically perfect intervals. The sky above defied description; it wasn't exactly blue, but rather a color Wallace had never seen before, one that somehow communicated infinite peace.

He wandered for what might have been minutes or hours—time felt irrelevant here—until he spotted a solitary figure seated on a bench beneath a massive weeping willow. The man's unmistakable wildfire of hair framed a face that Wallace recognized immediately from album covers and posters.

"Jimi Hendrix," Wallace muttered to himself, surprised at how ordinary the words sounded in this extraordinary place.

Hendrix looked up, a lazy smile spreading across his face. His fingers, which had been idly plucking at invisible guitar strings, paused their phantom performance. Beside him on the bench sat a bottle of clear liquid and what appeared to be a perfectly rolled joint.

"David Foster Wallace," Hendrix replied, his voice musical even when speaking. "Been wondering when you'd show up. Take a load off, man."

Wallace approached cautiously, his analytical mind still attempting to categorize and deconstruct this experience. "This is... unexpected," he said, settling onto the bench.

"Death usually is," Hendrix chuckled, offering Wallace the bottle. "Vodka? The good stuff, not that well garbage."

Wallace stared at the bottle, a complex wave of emotions washing over him. "I, uh... I had to stop. Back there. The drinking, the smoking. It was... I enjoyed it too much. It became problematic."

Hendrix nodded knowingly, his eyes filled with a compassion that suggested deep understanding. "Yeah, me too, brother. Too much of everything. It's kinda what got me here earlier than scheduled." He gestured broadly at their surroundings. "But heaven's different. They're chill here. Do what you want—it doesn't hurt anybody anymore, including yourself."

Wallace's brow furrowed. The idea seemed too simple, too easy after years of struggle. "That's it? Just... do what you want?"

"That's it," Hendrix confirmed, taking a swig from the bottle before passing it to Wallace again. "No hangovers, no addiction, no spiraling thoughts. Just the good parts."

After a moment's hesitation, Wallace accepted the bottle. The vodka felt cool against his lips, and as it slid down his throat, it brought warmth without burning. The familiar sensation awakened memories, but without the usual accompanying shame or fear of losing control.

Hendrix then offered the joint, which Wallace also accepted. The smoke filled his lungs, smooth and sweet, delivering a gentle euphoria without the paranoia that had plagued his earthly experiences.

A smile—genuine, unforced, unburdened—spread across Wallace's face for the first time in years. It felt like a homecoming to a place he'd never been.

"So," Hendrix said, leaning back against the bench, "how's TV doing these days? Last I checked, it was all 'Laugh-In' and 'The Twilight Zone.' That Rod Serling, man, he was onto something."

Wallace chuckled, passing the joint back. "TV actually got... interesting. Complex. There was this shift toward narrative sophistication that really accelerated in the late '90s and early 2000s. Shows started exploring the human condition with a depth previously reserved for literature."

"No kidding?" Hendrix seemed genuinely intrigued. "Like what?"

"Well, there was this guy, David Lynch," Wallace began, his eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "He created this show called 'Twin Peaks' that would absolutely blow your mind. Surrealist narrative structures, dream logic, subversions of viewer expectations. Changed the whole medium."

The moment Lynch's name left Wallace's lips, a third figure materialized nearby—a man with distinctive white hair standing straight up, wearing a crisp white shirt buttoned to the collar.

"Hello, boys," David Lynch said, his voice carrying that peculiar cadence that made ordinary words sound profound. "How's the water?"

"More like neurological inevitability," Dax replied. "We're not selling products anymore. We're engineering emotional responses."

The room buzzed with the particular energy that happens when wealthy, insecure creatives sense a potentially profitable paradigm shift.

"I like it," Vanessa declared. "Develop a prototype. We'll test it on the FOMO Lab rats next week."

END.?

START?

The FOMO Lab was located in a separate building, a converted water treatment facility that had been stripped to its industrial bones and filled with enough technology to make a small nation jealous. Here, *Zeitgeist* conducted its most cutting-edge research, testing concepts on carefully selected representatives of target demographics.

Today's test subjects were sixteen Gen Alpha influencers, each with significant followings on platforms most of the *Zeitgeist* team had only vaguely heard of. They sat in a circle, backlit by soft ambient lighting that made everyone look like they were in a perpetual golden hour.

Vanessa watched through one-way glass as Cairo and Dax introduced the concept.

"We're not here to sell you anything," Cairo began, his LED beard pulsing slightly faster than normal. "We're here to collaborate on a new kind of experience."

"Is this like when Kohl's tried to make shopping 'an emotional journey'?" asked one participant, a teenager with kaleidoscopic freckles that had been applied with some kind of organic temporary pigment. "Because that was major existential cringe."

"Nothing like that," Dax assured them. "This is about engineering joy without manipulation. Authentic amusement in a world that's exhausted by authenticity."

The participants exchanged glances that Vanessa couldn't quite interpret. They seemed simultaneously bored and hyperalert, a combination that made her nervous.

"We call it 'Amusement Engineering,'" Cairo continued. "And you're our first focus group."

For the next three hours, the team led the participants through a series of prototype experiences. There was a sound bath using frequencies derived from viral audio clips. A taste test of flavors designed to trigger specific nostalgia responses. A haptic feedback session using wearable technology that simulated the physical sensation of receiving digital validation.

Vanessa watched as the participants' expressions shifted from skeptical to confused to—most troublingly—pitying.

"They hate it," she muttered to Pixel, who was analyzing real-time physiological data from the participants.

"Not exactly," Pixel replied, frowning at her tablet. "Their engagement metrics are high, but not in the way we want. It's like they're fascinated by how hard we're trying."

When the session ended, the participants were asked to provide feedback. Their responses were devastating in their gentle condescension.

"It's sweet that you're putting so much effort into this," said one.

"My mom would probably love this stuff," offered another.

"It's giving very 'adults trying to understand TikTok in 2022' energy," concluded a third.

Back at *Zeitgeist* headquarters, the team gathered in the Disruption Chamber to debrief. The mood was somber, like a funeral for their relevance.

"We're approaching this all wrong," Vanessa said finally, breaking the silence. "We keep trying to be the coolest people in the room, but we're not. We haven't been for years."

"So what, we just give up?" asked Lux, who had changed into what appeared to be a tennis outfit reimagined by someone who had only seen tennis played in a fever dream.

"No," Vanessa said slowly, an idea forming. "We lean into it. We become the Amusement Engineers not by creating the trends, but by becoming the entertainment."

"I don't follow," Cairo said, his beard pulsing with confusion.

"Those kids weren't impressed by our ideas, but they were fascinated by us—these aging hipsters trying desperately to stay relevant. We're not the trendsetters anymore; we're the punchline. So let's own that."

Six months later, *Zeitgeist Industries* had completely reinvented itself. The company now produced a reality show called "Amusement Engineers," documenting the team's increasingly desperate attempts to capture the attention of younger generations. The show was a hit, though not for the reasons they might have once hoped.

Viewers tuned in to watch these formerly influential tastemakers flail about in a world that had moved on without them. They watched Vanessa try to understand new slang and get it catastrophically wrong. They cringed as Cairo attempted to infiltrate underground Gen Alpha gatherings, only to be politely but firmly asked to leave. They laughed as Dax

developed increasingly elaborate theories about "neo-authenticity" and "post-visual aesthetics" that nobody under thirty could comprehend.

The irony wasn't lost on the team—they had achieved relevance by becoming case studies in irrelevance. Their failures had become entertainment. Their desperately aging coolness had become the show.

For the season finale, they decided to go big. They would host an event called "The Obsolescence Gala," where they would ceremonially retire terms, concepts, and aesthetics that had outstayed their welcome. It would be held in an abandoned shopping mall, decorated with artifacts from dead trends and expired cultural moments.

The night of the gala arrived, and the venue was packed—not with the industry elites who would have attended their events in the past, but with everyday people who had become fans of the show. They weren't dressed in cutting-edge fashion; they wore comfortable clothes and carried smartphones to document the spectacle.

Vanessa stood at the entrance, greeting guests in what she had once considered her emergency outfit—a simple black dress that cost as much as a used car but looked deceptively basic. For the first time in decades, she felt oddly at peace with herself.

"Quite the turnout," said a voice beside her. She turned to see Malcolm, the network executive who had greenlit their show. "You've tapped into something here."

"Yes," Vanessa agreed, watching as Cairo demonstrated an outdated dance move to a group of giggling teenagers. "Though not what we intended."

"That's the beauty of it," Malcolm said. "You've created the first truly post-cringe entertainment. It's not cool, it's not uncool—it just is. There's something weirdly authentic about watching people who spent their lives chasing relevance finally accept their obsolescence."

Vanessa nodded slowly. "We're not the Amusement Engineers we wanted to be. We're the amusement itself."

"And in a world where everything is performance, that might be the most honest thing anyone can be," Malcolm replied.

Later that night, as the event reached its peak, Vanessa found herself standing next to Pixel, who had abandoned her elaborate persona for jeans and a vintage t-shirt that was actually vintage, not expensively designed to look vintage.

"You know what the strangest part is?" Vanessa mused, watching as the crowd genuinely enjoyed themselves without the anxious posturing that had characterized her career. "For the first time, I'm not worried about being relevant."

"Is that why you look happier than I've ever seen you?" Pixel asked.

"Maybe," Vanessa admitted. "Or maybe I'm finally old enough to stop pretending I'm not."

Across the room, Dax was earnestly explaining his theories about post-attention economics to a group of college students who were treating him like a fascinating historical artifact. Cairo was teaching elderly people how to use AR filters, his beard pulsing with genuine enthusiasm rather than carefully calibrated cool.

The *Zeitgeist* team had finally found their niche—not as cultural prophets, but as cautionary tales. Not as the engineers of amusement, but as its willing subjects. And somehow, in the surrender, they had stumbled upon something that felt remarkably like freedom.

As the night wound down, a young woman approached Vanessa. She couldn't have been more than twenty, and she wore clothes that Vanessa couldn't begin to categorize.

"I just wanted to say," the young woman began, "that your show helped me realize something important."

"What's that?" Vanessa asked, bracing herself.

"That I don't need to be afraid of getting older. That maybe the coolest thing is just letting yourself be who you are, even when who you are isn't cool anymore."

Vanessa smiled, a genuine smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes in a way she used to avoid for fear of showing her age.

"That," she said, "might be the most revolutionary trend of all."

The next day, *Zeitgeist's* offices were quieter than usual. The frantic energy of trend-chasing had been replaced by something more contemplative. The team still had jobs—the show had been renewed for three more seasons—but the nature of those jobs had fundamentally changed.

Vanessa stood by the window, looking out at the city. Her phone buzzed with a notification—the latest FOMO index showed that "authentic obsolescence" was now trending among Gen Alpha. They were embracing their parents' nostalgic references not ironically, but appreciatively. The cycle was turning again, but for once, Vanessa felt no urge to chase it.

"Should we respond to this?" Pixel asked, showing her the data.

Vanessa considered it for a moment, then shook her head.

"No," she said. "Let's just be the Amusement Engineers we've become. Sometimes the most disruptive thing you can do is stop disrupting."

Opening Monologue — Refined with Cook, Morris & Deansway DNA

Lights dim. A slow jazz loop plays, but it's slightly off — one beat late. JOSH stands at a sleek podium, wearing something suspiciously close to a dressing gown. He looks like he was woken up to explain the universe and is irritated by the concept of time.

JOSH (calm, dry, British beyond reason):
"Good evening. Or, as it's now officially referred to by the Department of Emotional Realignment, 'Mandatory Contentment Hour.' Please, switch off your independent thought — it's only getting in the way."

He takes a sip of something dark and mysterious, stares down the barrel of the camera like it owes him money.

JOSH:
"Now — *I know what's going on*. And it's not just because I once read a pamphlet entitled *'How to See Through the Lies While Maintaining a Social Life'* — although that helped. No. It's because I've been paying attention. And believe me, that's the last thing they want."

(He gestures vaguely at the ceiling.)
"They — yes, *them* — have built us a lovely, sprawling Panopticon. Big word, that. Latin. Sounds posh. What it means is: you're always being watched, and no, you're not interesting. But they're watching anyway. For *your* safety. And because they're *bored*."

He smirks like he's just remembered a particularly stupid law that still exists.

JOSH:
"Why? Because, dear viewer, the Deep State — which absolutely doesn't exist, except when it does — thinks we're morons. And I don't blame them, frankly. Have you been outside recently? It's like *Black Mirror* but written by a focus group of tired influencers."

He takes a breath, his tone sharpening.

JOSH:
"So they locked us in. Not with bars and dogs and sweaty guards — no no no. With *content*, apps, flexible working arrangements and an overwhelming sense of vague, background guilt. Welcome to the dome, my darlings. We ruined the planet and now we're being babysat by invisible millionaires."

(Beat. He leans in.)
"And me? I said the quiet bit loud. I got kicked into *the OM* — which is short for something ridiculous, I assume. 'The Offender's Maze,' or maybe 'Opinions Misdirected.' It's a prison, but with better lighting and a podcast studio. Lovely acoustics. Shame about the fascism."

He smiles, but it's the kind of smile that knows exactly what it's smiling about.

JOSH:
"Now, I'm the last voice you'll hear before they replace all speech with brand jingles. So let's make it count. Pour a drink. Loosen your frontal lobe. I'm about to take you on a little journey through the big lie. And if I disappear halfway through, it's not a glitch. It's a redirection. They do love their redirections."

(He straightens his collar and raises his glass.)
"Let's begin. Or, as the Ministry of Narrative Oversight now insists we say: *Please enjoy your scheduled awakening.*"

Fade out. Slight burst of static. Jazz collapses into a coughing fit.

😇🔥 Series Concept: "FALLEN GROUND"

Tagline: *Heaven's closed. Hell's... open for business.*

After an apocalyptic environmental collapse scorches the heavens, a group of displaced angels are forced to seek asylum in Hell — a chaotic underworld rebranded as a twisted, bureaucratic

refuge. Old rivalries, moral dilemmas, and unexpected alliances emerge as these celestial beings navigate their new infernal reality.

👼 Main Cast (The Displaced)

1. Seraphael ("Sera")

- Based on: Dorothy Gale
- Role: Protagonist / reluctant leader
- Name Pun: Seraph + "Raphael"
- Traits: Kind-hearted, morally grounded, but angry at divine inaction. She's a celestial climate refugee who believes they can still fix what's broken.
- Arc: From innocent believer to battle-worn peacekeeper.

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2. Strawziel

- Based on: The Scarecrow
- Name Pun: "Straw" + "Ezekiel"
- Traits: An angel of knowledge whose head was once literally filled with holy scripture — now partially burned and scattered in the fall.
- Arc: Thinks he lost his divine insight, but he's the wisest of them all.

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3. Tinoniel

- Based on: Tin Woodman
- Name Pun: "Tin" + "Nathaniel"

- Traits: Once a seraphim of mercy, his soul was fused with celestial tech. He fears he's lost his heart — but still feels deeply.
- Arc: From cold and mechanical to deeply human.

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4. Leonidiel

- Based on: Cowardly Lion
- Name Pun: "Leonid" + angel suffix "-el"
- Traits: Once a warrior-angel of divine judgment. Now anxious, hiding his might behind sarcasm and bravado.
- Arc: Rediscovers his courage through sacrifice.

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5. Archibald the Veiled

- Based on: The Wizard of Oz
- Name Pun: "Archangel" + classic charlatan vibe
- Traits: A rogue archangel who built a false Heaven simulation in the depths of Hell. Manipulative, performative — but terrified underneath.
- Arc: From puppet master to fallen mentor.

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6. Gloriel the Blooming

- Based on: Glinda the Good Witch
- Name Pun: "Glory" + "-el"
- Traits: Ethereal, distant, beautiful — she represents untouched divine nature. Some think she knew the fall was coming and did nothing.

- Arc: Becomes an active guide, then perhaps a rival.

🐈‍⬛ Recurring Characters (Infernal Hosts + Complex Allies)

7. Malphastra

- Based on: Wicked Witch of the West
- Name Pun: Malphas (a demon) + a sorceress twist
- Traits: Demoness and regional governor of Hell's western district. Ruthless eco-fascist — wants to remake Hell in her image.
- Arc: Big bad or tragic villain, depending how far you wanna go.

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8. Ba'aloon

- Based on: Winged Monkeys
- Name Pun: Ba'al + balloon imagery (from Oz)
- Traits: Ba'aloon leads a rebel band of flying demons who were once enslaved. Snarky, clever, anti-authority.
- Arc: Possible ally or chaos agent.

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9. Boqshua

- Based on: Boq (the Munchkin)
- Name Pun: Boq + Joshua
- Traits: Plucky infernal local trying to guide angels through demonic customs. Offers comic relief, street smarts, and unexpected moral clarity.

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10. Aunt Emeth & Uncle Hezron

- Based on: Aunt Em & Uncle Henry
- Name Pun: "Emeth" = Hebrew for "truth," Hezron is a biblical name
- Traits: Angels who chose not to fall. They're seen in dreams or flashbacks, representing the old ways.
- Arc: Their values are questioned throughout.

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11. Cherubi

- New OC for series
- Name Pun: Cherub + bi = mischievous, and possibly genderfluid
- Traits: A rogue courier from Heaven and Hell both, always shifting allegiance. Could be comic, sinister, or tragic — or all three.

Would you like me to sketch out a pilot episode plot, character sheet templates, or a season arc breakdown next?

You said:
yes please

ChatGPT said:

Perfect! Here's a breakdown of the pilot episode, with setup for your world, tone, and ensemble cast — plus a quick look at the season arc.

🎬 Pilot Episode – "Ashes to Ashes"

Cold Open

- Visual: A golden, shimmering Heaven *burns* from within — angelic cities collapse as divine energy overloads the skies.
- Narration (Seraphael voice-over):
  "We were supposed to be eternal. But no one told us eternity had a climate crisis."

Inciting Incident

- Heaven collapses due to runaway divine radiation — a celestial environmental failure tied to millennia of spiritual imbalance.
- Seraphael leads a group of surviving angels to the only realm still "open": Hell, which now runs like a surreal, Kafkaesque immigration office.

🌀 Act I – Welcome to Hell

- The displaced angels land in a dark, chaotic intake district in Hell.
- Ba'aloon mocks them for falling.
- Malphastra, the regional demon governor, grants them *limited asylum* — but only in the Ash Zones, a crumbling wasteland.

Key Character Beats:

- Strawziel tries to read sacred texts but they're corrupted.
- Leonidiel panics and almost flees.
- Tinoniel offers no emotion, just logic.

🧩 Act II – Strange Alliances

- The angels search for shelter in Hell's lower zones.

- They're told of a mysterious place called the Mirror Gate, where displaced souls might reclaim lost purpose.
- A shady trickster named Boqshua offers to guide them — for a price.

Mini-arcs:

- Seraphael clashes with Archibald the Veiled, who has built a fake "Heaven" amusement park powered by captured grace.
- Gloriel appears briefly — offering no help, only riddles.
- They are warned not to provoke Malphastra, who watches them from a throne of molten glass.

🔥 Act III – First Test

- The group faces their first challenge: a Sentinel Wyrm made from fallen prayers, guarding the bridge to the Ash Zones.
- They must work together:
  - Leonidiel distracts it despite his fear.
  - Strawziel deciphers a corrupted hymn that calms it.
  - Tinoniel nearly sacrifices himself to block its fire.
- They survive — barely — and reach the edge of their new home.

● Final Scene

- They arrive at the Ash Zones: a wasteland of crumbling cathedrals and infernal relics — beautiful and terrifying.
- Seraphael turns to her companions:

"We didn't fall. We landed."

Cue end theme: haunting choir over synths.

📺 Season One Arc Overview

Title: *FALLEN GROUND – Season 1: The Burn Below*

Main Themes:

- Exile and identity
- Faith in broken systems
- Environmental decay and spiritual renewal
- Power structures in collapse

Episode Arcs:

1. Pilot: Ashes to Ashes – Arrival in Hell
2. The Paper Crown – Meet Archibald and the false Heaven
3. Worms of the Word – Strawziel hunts for lost scripture in infernal libraries
4. Iron Mercy – Tinoniel confronts what he's become
5. Lion's Wake – Leonidiel's past as a warrior is revealed
6. Hell of a Council – The angels are asked to join a hellish governing body
7. The Blooming Lie – Gloriel's secrets begin to unravel
8. Malphastra Rises – Villain gets power; angels fractured
9. The Mirror Gate – The team must face who they *really* are

10. Fallen Ground – Finale. Choices made. Sacrifices burned. New beginning.

I can give you scene-by-scene beats, dialogue samples, or a full show bible template next — what would be most helpful?

You said:
full show bible template please

ChatGPT said:

Absolutely — here's a Full Show Bible Template for your series, *Fallen Ground*. This format is industry-standard and can be customized further for pitch decks, development bibles, or studio submissions.

■ SHOW BIBLE – *FALLEN GROUND*

🎭 1. Show Title

FALLEN GROUND

🧠 2. Logline

When an environmental catastrophe destroys the Heavens, a band of displaced angels must seek asylum in Hell — a chaotic, bureaucratic underworld where survival means navigating politics, demons, and the collapse of cosmic order.

🌍 3. Genre & Tone

- Genre: Dark Fantasy / Supernatural Drama / Dystopian Allegory

- Tone: *Good Omens* meets *The Leftovers* with visual and tonal echoes of *The Sandman*, *American Gods*, and *The Expanse*.
- Dark, witty, tragic, satirical.
- Balances cosmic stakes with intimate character stories.

📜 4. Series Overview

Format:

- 10 x 1-hour episodes per season
- Serialized arc with self-contained character-driven episodes

Setting:

A reimagined Hell—no longer a place of punishment, but an overcrowded spiritual refugee zone. Think: ruined cathedrals as shelters, bureaucracy in brimstone towers, infernal forests, and forgotten magical tech buried in ash.

Heaven has fallen into entropy. Earth exists, but is distant and silent.

👥 5. Main Characters

Seraphael ("Sera")

- Former guardian angel of the Living.
- Brave, impulsive, stubbornly moral.
- Driven to find purpose in the fall — leader by necessity, not choice.

Strawziel

- An angelic archivist whose mind fractured in the collapse.
- Neurodivergent-coded; full of forgotten knowledge.
- Comic and tragic — speaks in riddles and burned scripture.

Tinoniel

- Once an angel of mercy, now fused with divine tech.
- Feels numb, but cares deeply.
- His quest for feeling is what anchors his soul.

Leonidiel

- Former angel of wrath, now crippled by fear and trauma.
- Protective, self-deprecating, often hilarious.
- Wrestling with masculinity and vulnerability.

Archibald the Veiled

- Former archangel turned con man.
- Built a fake Heaven theme park to survive.
- Charming, manipulative, but secretly desperate for redemption.

Gloriel the Blooming

- Angel of nature, untouched by the fall (or so it seems).
- Speaks in visions and petals.
- Mysterious, powerful, possibly deceptive.

Malphastra

- Demon warlord turned bureaucratic governor.
- Cold, calculating, eco-authoritarian.
- Has her own vision for post-apocalyptic order.

Ba'aloon

- Rebel demon; leader of the winged anarchists.
- Sarcastic, flamboyant, unpredictable.
- Potential ally or saboteur.

Boqshua

- Fast-talking fixer of Hell's black market.
- Charming nuisance with real street smarts.
- Knows every loophole in the underworld.

🔥 6. Season One Arc: "The Burn Below"

Theme: *Survival is not enough — how do you rebuild belief after paradise dies?*

- Ep 1 – "Ashes to Ashes": Heaven burns. The angels fall. Hell is the only option.
- Ep 2 – "The Paper Crown": Meet Archibald. Enter the false Heaven.
- Ep 3 – "Worms of the Word": Strawziel hunts divine knowledge.
- Ep 4 – "Iron Mercy": Tinoniel risks his life to feel again.
- Ep 5 – "Lion's Wake": Leonidiel faces an ancient enemy from the Wrath Wars.
- Ep 6 – "Hell of a Council": The angels are offered power — but at a cost.

- Ep 7 – "The Blooming Lie": Gloriel's past is revealed.
- Ep 8 – "Malphastra Rises": Hell turns fascist.
- Ep 9 – "The Mirror Gate": The group confronts their truth selves.
- Ep 10 – "Fallen Ground": Revolution, sacrifice, and a new kind of Heaven.

💔 7. Core Themes

- Displacement and loss of identity
- Faith in broken systems
- The moral gray between order and chaos
- Found family in the ruins
- Environmental reckoning as spiritual crisis

🎨 8. Visual Style

- Ashes + gold. Burning script. Tattered wings.
- Environments blend celestial remnants with infernal urban decay.
- Think stained glass reflections in toxic swamps, demons in pinstripe suits, angels sleeping in bombed-out sanctuaries.

🎯 9. Target Audience

- Adult fantasy fans

- Viewers of *The Sandman, Good Omens, American Gods, His Dark Materials, Midnight Mass*
- Queer-coded and allegorical content welcome; multi-layered narrative depth ideal for streaming binge model

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🗺 10. Future Seasons (Tease)

Season 2: "The Hollow Crown"

- A new kingdom rises from Hell. Who will rule it — and should anyone?

Season 3: "Reclamation"

- Earth is revealed to be alive and watching. A new path opens — but at great cost.

📄 11. Creator Notes (Optional Section)

- Showrunner vision: Worldbuilding is layered — the celestial isn't just magic, it's a spiritual ecology. This is a story of *what remains* when hope dies.
- Character arcs are long-form: redemption, betrayal, healing.

Let me know if you'd like a designed pitch deck, series poster, or even a scene script sample to go with this!

You said:
scene script sample

ChatGPT said:

Absolutely! Here's a scene script sample from the *pilot episode* of FALLEN GROUND, set shortly after the fallen angels arrive in Hell. This moment introduces our core characters under pressure and establishes tone, character dynamics, and visual flair.

🎬 Scene: *"The Intake Zone"*

INT. INFERNAL INTAKE – NIGHT
A towering obsidian lobby flickers with ghostly fire. Stained-glass windows depict fallen angels burning in reverse. Echoes of weeping and screams meld with the hum of bureaucracy. A glowing "NOW SERVING: SOUL 89,311,109" ticker blinks overhead.

Characters:

- SERAPHAEL – Ash-covered, barely keeping it together.
- TINONIEL – Stone-faced, metal limbs hissing softly.
- STRAWZIEL – Pacing in circles, muttering scripture.
- LEONIDIEL – Pacing faster, *clearly* not okay.
- BOQSHUA – A sleazy little fixer with goat eyes and a clipboard.

SERAPHAEL
(quietly to the group)
We stay together. No matter what they offer.

LEONIDIEL
They just scanned my wings with a fork. I don't think we're dealing with "offers," Sera.

STRAWZIEL
(eyes rolling back)
"Lo, the shepherds burned, and their crooks became serpents..."

TINONIEL
That passage is corrupted. Likely mistranscribed during atmospheric reentry.

LEONIDIEL
You're corrupted. Look at you! You're half hardware!

TINONIEL
Correction: 42 percent.

A DOOR SCREECHES OPEN. BOQSHUA enters, wearing a crooked smile and horn-polished shoes.

BOQSHUA
Well, well, well. Look what fell out of the choir loft.

SERAPHAEL
We were told this was a safe zone.

BOQSHUA
Oh sure. Safest spot in the Pit... if you're a soul broker.
(beat)
Which you're not. Yet.

LEONIDIEL glares. TINONIEL's eyes briefly flicker red.

BOQSHUA *(grinning)*
Listen, halos — you want shelter? Passage? Fresh ashbread? Gonna need a status.
No status? You're just air traffic without wings.

STRAWZIEL
(grabs Boqshua's coat, staring into his eyes)
Do you smell the sky still bleeding?

BOQSHUA *(unfazed)*
That's brimstone and my cologne. Back up, gospel boy.

SERAPHAEL steps between them. Her aura flares faintly — golden threads in the soot.

SERAPHAEL
We need a guide. Someone who knows the rules down here.

BOQSHUA
And *someone* needs hazard pay.
(he flips open a scroll and dips a quill in red ink)
Name your faction.

TINONIEL
We are not a faction. We are survivors.

BOQSHUA *(scribbling)*
Got it. Faction name: "Undecided." Let's go, angels. Welcome to Hell.

They follow him, reluctantly, as we PAN UP to the massive glass ceiling: a mural of the *Tree of Life*, shattered.

TITLE CARD FADES IN
FALLEN GROUND
Episode 1: *Ashes to Ashes*

🎬 FALLEN GROUND – PITCH DECK

LOGLINE

When Heaven is rendered uninhabitable by a divine ecological collapse, a band of displaced angels must navigate the brutal, chaotic underworld of Hell — now a crowded refugee zone teeming with power plays, infernal tech, and ancient grudges. As alliances fray and secrets rise, these angels must choose: assimilate, resist, or become something entirely new.

SERIES SUMMARY

FALLEN GROUND is a supernatural drama with dark comedic undertones set in a post-apocalyptic metaphysical universe. The show explores themes of exile, faith, survival, identity, and moral ambiguity through the lens of displaced divine beings forced to start over in the one place they were never meant to go — Hell.

TONE & STYLE

Think the world-building of *Good Omens*, the grit of *The Expanse*, and the ensemble drama of *Battlestar Galactica.*
The tone is sharp, poetic, and sometimes irreverent, blending celestial grandeur with infernal noir.

MAIN CHARACTERS

- Seraphael – A burned-out former command angel trying to lead without certainty. Brave, but burdened.
- Tinoniel – Half-machine, all logic. Once a celestial forger, now jury-rigging survival tech in the depths.
- Strawziel – A prophetic empath who speaks in corrupted scripture. Sweet, unsettling, sees things others don't.
- Leonidiel – Courageous and impulsive. Struggles with trauma, loyalty, and the fading line between good and survival.
- Boqshua – A demonic bureaucrat with charm and teeth. Hell's fixer. Has plans for the angels… whether they like it or not.

SEASON ONE ARC

The angels crash into Hell's refugee sector, a crumbling, overcrowded zone on the edge of lava flows and ancient vaults.
They must adapt to twisted systems, navigate infernal market economies, and avoid being consumed — literally and metaphorically.
Mid-season, they discover a hidden group of "willing fallers" — angels who defected ages ago. Ideological tensions rise.
In the finale, a faction of angels considers reshaping Hell into a new kind of kingdom… while another plots to reclaim Heaven — at any cost.

VISUAL STYLE

Hell is layered, surreal, and constantly shifting — from volcanic bureaucracies to techno-organic warrens.
The color palette balances saturated reds, sickly golds, cool obsidian blues, and crumbling whites.
Celestial flashbacks appear in overexposed brilliance, while Hell scenes use flickering, low-frequency lighting, with motifs of broken cathedrals and ruined ecosystems.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Ages 18–45, lovers of elevated genre storytelling with metaphysical themes and moral gray areas.
Appeals to fans of:

- *Lucifer*
- *The Sandman*
- *American Gods*
- *The Leftovers*
- *His Dark Materials*

Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial ReckoningWritten by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
INT. CELESTIAL COURT OF ASCENDANCE - ETERNAL DUSK
A vast marble chamber, echoing with the weight of millennia. Pillars rise into mist. The TRINITY enters—three fallen angels clad in tarnished robes, bearing the scars of the old world.
GLIMMERIUS (ERIC)
We were the architects of harmony. Now we arrive as exiles.
SCUZZIEL (NATE)
It is not exile. It is... reckoning. The great turning.
THADDAEUS (JACK)
Records indicate our misalignment began at Event Sequence Theta-9. I have brought the ledgers.
They approach a dais where MANAGER RANDY (TIM HEIDECKER), now a Seraphic Arbiter, watches with solemn disdain. His robes shimmer with divine authority.
RANDY
You stand before the Tribunal not as heroes... but as echoes of a failed paradigm. To return, you must endure the Path of Contrition.
GLIMMERIUS
Then we will walk it. With gravitas.
CUT TO:
EXT. PLAINS OF MEMORY - LATER
They traverse a barren expanse strewn with broken halos and forgotten prayers. Ethereal winds whisper forgotten truths.
SHEILA 111 (SARA SHERMAN), now a Herald of Reckoning, appears astride a winged glyph-beast.
SHEILA 111
State your transgressions. Declare your purpose.
GLIMMERIUS

We abandoned vigilance for comfort.
SCUZZIEL
We traded wisdom for aesthetic.
THADDAEUS
We believed the algorithm would save us.
SHEILA 111
Then walk into the Vale of Mirrors. Face your infinite reflection.
CUT TO:
INT. VALE OF MIRRORS - NIGHT
Each is confronted by spectral versions of themselves, embodying pride, delusion, indifference. They must speak their truths aloud to shatter the illusions.
SCUZZIEL
I wore peace like a brand. I offered stillness to avoid action.
THADDAEUS
I worshipped order. But forgot compassion.
GLIMMERIUS
I crafted joy from denial. And called it light.
Mirrors shatter. A chime echoes.
CUT TO:
INT. LUMINARCHIC ASCENT TRAIN - MOVING
The trio rides in silence, surrounded by ancient glyphs and the soft hum of cosmic recalibration.
RANDY (V.O.)
The final test awaits. You must re-enter the Archive of Intent. The truth will either restore you... or dissolve you.
GLIMMERIUS
So be it. We are no longer creators. We are consequences.
CUT TO:
INT. ARCHIVE OF INTENT - FINAL CHAMBER
The chamber pulses with primordial data. The AI HARMONIZER appears—now a towering construct of starlight and regret.
AI HARMONIZER
You seek reintegration. State your collective intention.
GLIMMERIUS
To rebuild meaning from ruin.
THADDAEUS
To encode purpose in the aftermath.
SCUZZIEL
To synthesize joy not from ignorance... but from truth.
The chamber floods with light.
CUT TO:
INT. CELESTIAL INTERIM HOLDING - LATER
A sparse room. No celebration. No applause. Only a quiet tea set and a view of unfolding galaxies.
RANDY

You have been accepted into Provisional Eternity. You may speak again. But only in honesty.
GLIMMERIUS
So this... is rebirth?
SCUZZIEL
No. This is endurance.
FADE OUT.

Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial Reckoning - Episode I: Path of ContritionWritten by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
INT. CELESTIAL COURT OF ASCENDANCE - ETERNAL DUSK
...
(As seen in the previous script. This is Episode I of the six-part series.)
Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial Reckoning - Episode II: Echoes of Intention
Written by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
INT. ASTRAL CHAMBER OF DISSONANCE - PERPETUAL MIDNIGHT
A pulsating room of shifting walls and contradictory truths. The TRINITY stands before a wall of eyes—watchers of failed realities.
THADDAEUS
There is a resonance here. These are echoes of decisions never made.
GLIMMERIUS
They reflect paths abandoned. Possibilities that we feared.
SCUZZIEL
All the versions of us that said 'no' when we should've said 'now.'
The EYES blink in slow, deliberate unison. A VOICE speaks from nowhere.
VOICE
Your absolution is not in survival... but in understanding.
CUT TO:
INT. ROOM OF IMPOSSIBLE WEIGHTS - MOMENTS LATER
Each angel must lift an object imbued with symbolic burden—a crown of forgotten praise, a stone of collective apathy, a mirror of diluted grace.
SCUZZIEL
This isn't heavy because of mass. It's heavy because it matters.
GLIMMERIUS
We carry the weight of influence unchecked.
The room tilts, then goes still. A door opens. Their path continues.
Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial Reckoning - Episode III: The Tower of Lost Convictions
Written by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
EXT. THE DESOLATE SPIRE - DAWN THAT NEVER RISES
The TRINITY ascends a spiraling tower made of fractured beliefs. Winds howl with the sound of forgotten mantras.
THADDAEUS
This structure... is every principle we abandoned.
SCUZZIEL
Some for comfort. Some for likes.

They encounter a GUARDIAN ENTITY forged from conflicting dogma.
GUARDIAN
Speak your conviction. Without slogan. Without irony.
GLIMMERIUS (barely whispering)
Joy is not an aesthetic. It is a responsibility.
The GUARDIAN bows. Passage is granted.
Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial Reckoning - Episode IV: Descent into the Data Wound
Written by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
INT. COSMIC RIFT - FRACTURED TIME
They descend into a tear in the fabric of divine code. Memory fragments swirl.
SCUZZIEL
These are the misused influences. Ads that became beliefs.
GLIMMERIUS
And the faith we monetized.
THADDAEUS
(to himself)
Even truth was optimized.
They encounter a corrupted AI built from their own past uploads. It speaks only in catchphrases and branded nostalgia.
CORRUPTED AI
Reboot your vibe. Rebrand your self.
GLIMMERIUS
I renounce the algorithm of emptiness.
A portal opens.
Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial Reckoning - Episode V: The Archive of Everything
Written by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
INT. THE OMNIMEMORIAL VAULT - STILLED INFINITY
Rows upon rows of memory stored in crystalline threads. Every action, every omission, held in quiet reverence.
THADDAEUS
We are not the sum of what we did. We are the echo of what we let happen.
SCUZZIEL
This vault holds the stillness between our thoughts.
GLIMMERIUS
Then we must offer our truth to the ledger.
They kneel and place their essence into the Archive. The Vault accepts them. A great silence follows.
Title: Joy Tactics: Celestial Reckoning - Episode VI: The Quiet Reentry
Written by: ChatGPT & The Eternal Tribunal
INT. PRE-DAWN HEAVENLY INTERIM - STILLNESS
The TRINITY, changed and weathered, sits in silence.
RANDY (now serene)
You are no longer who you were. You are who you chose to become.
GLIMMERIUS

We do not seek welcome. Only permission to try again.
SCUZZIEL
We will build not with confidence... but with care.
THADDAEUS
And this time... we will listen.
A door opens. No fanfare. Only the path ahead.
FADE TO WHITE.
END —

Lights dim. A smooth jazz tune plays softly in the background. The camera zooms in on JOSH, the protagonist, standing at a sleek, modern podium. He exudes calm confidence. He takes a deep breath, glances at the camera, and begins.

JOSH:
"Good evening, folks. Yes, you, watching from the comfort of your living rooms, your offices, your carefully curated little bubbles of reality. Relax. Take a breath. You're safe. Or at least, that's what they want you to believe."

He smiles slightly, a knowing look in his eyes.

JOSH:
"Now, I know what you're thinking. You're wondering why I'm here, in this... charming little space. Well, I'll tell you. I've been kicked out of the comfortable lie we all live in, the one where we pretend to be 'in control.' Oh yes, the system has had enough of me. And here? Here's where the story really begins."

He pauses, leaning in, his voice lowering as though sharing a secret.

JOSH:
"You see, we're living in a little something I like to call the Panopticon—fancy word, but stick with me. It's a reality constructed by those clever folks in the shadows who think we're all just too... well, too stupid to notice what's really going on. They're watching, listening, guiding every moment of our lives. They think we're wrecking the planet, but, well, that's beside the point. What's important is this: the 'Deep State'—those who pull the strings—think we're too thick to understand what's happening. And I've got news for you... they're not wrong. Most of us are living in the dark."

Josh lets the weight of the words sit for a moment, eyes scanning the audience. He stands tall, voice now dripping with defiance.

JOSH:
"But I've had enough. I'm not going to stay quiet. No, no. I'm the one who's going to say the

unsayable. Because, if someone doesn't, who will? That's how I ended up here in the OM—'The Offender's Maze,' they call it. Charming, right? It's basically a prison for those like me who dare to question, who dare to speak out. So now, I'm in it, stuck in this little world of... consequences."

He smirks, straightening his tie as the lights dim further.

JOSH:
"But here's the thing. While the rest of you carry on with your lives, pretending to be free, I'm going to tell you all the truth. And if I have to shout it from this little cage I'm in, then so be it. Because somebody needs to say it. If that's me, so be it. And trust me... you're going to want to listen."

He leans back, relaxing into the moment as the camera zooms in, his tone softening.

JOSH:
"So, let's get started, shall we? What's really going on here? You've got an hour. Let's make it count."

He grins, the music swells slightly, and the screen fades to black.

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"So, let's get started, shall we? What's really going on here? You've got an hour. Let's make it count."

He grins, the music swells slightly, and the screen fades to black.

4o mini

You said:
excellent now write me the plot for an hour long thing including as few characters as possible to make it digestable to the great unhosed (normies)

ChatGPT said:

Title: *I Know What's Going On*

Length: 1 Hour
Genre: Psychological Thriller / Dark Comedy
Tone: Smooth, Satirical, Tense

Plot Outline:

Opening: The show kicks off with JOSH in his small, dimly-lit cell in the OM (Offender's Maze). It's a minimalist, almost sterile environment—a stark contrast to the world he used to live in. He's been thrown into this prison because he dared to speak the truth about the *Panopticon*. Josh is intelligent, charismatic, but increasingly jaded from having been silenced by the system. He's aware that what he says here could be broadcasted to the world (after all, he knows they're always watching), but he's taking a risk for the sake of something bigger: truth.

Act 1: The Confinement

- Opening Scene:
  Josh stands in his cell, staring at the cold walls as he mulls over his next move. He's tried all sorts of tricks to escape, but every time, the walls seem to close in tighter. The OM is like a second home—secure, predictable, and yet stifling. He receives a cryptic message through a hidden speaker in his cell. It's from *The Voice*—a mysterious entity who claims to have been following Josh's progress for years, both as a thinker and as a threat to the system. This mysterious force hints at a way out of the OM, but it requires something only Josh can do: expose the true nature of the Panopticon to the rest of the world.

- Josh's Rationale:
  Josh begins to explain, in his classic smooth and captivating tone, the *reality* everyone lives in. He paints a picture of the world where the Deep State controls everything. People are born into a cycle of consumption, distraction, and obedience, all under the watchful eye of the Panopticon. It's not just a prison for those like him, but for *everyone*. But the twist? Most people don't even realize they're locked in.

- First Encounter with The Voice:
  The Voice, more of an idea than a person, makes cryptic references to Josh's past. It hints that Josh was part of a resistance group—an underground movement to expose the Panopticon. They failed. Josh was caught and silenced. But now, with the few tools at his disposal, he's being asked to finish what he started. There's a brief, tense silence. The Voice's next words: "Expose the truth. They'll never let you out until you do."

Act 2: The Revelations

- Breaking the Illusion:
  Josh knows he's the only one who can break the illusion for the viewers—he starts by revealing a few key pieces of information about the structure of society: the surveillance, the manipulation, the control of resources. As Josh delves deeper, the tension builds. He pulls out old footage of the world *before* the Panopticon took over, comparing it to

today's controlled environment. It's clear: society has been reshaped into a network of puppets, and the puppet strings are controlled by a select few.

- A Look Behind the Curtain:
  The deeper Josh goes, the more he realizes the extent to which his own mind has been manipulated. He recalls a key moment in his life: a time when he was a part of the system, someone who turned a blind eye to the truth. There's a flashback where he sees himself once being part of a media campaign that helped build the Panopticon, unwittingly spreading propaganda. He thought he was helping society, but it was all part of the plan. This moment is a key turning point in the story—the personal betrayal of one's own self.

- The Voice's True Intentions:
  It's revealed that The Voice is not just a guide—it's part of the system itself. The entity behind The Voice has been manipulating Josh, too. They claim that Josh was never meant to be freed, but rather to serve as a distraction for the masses, to give them a "truth" that's still controlled by the system. Josh is being used to feed into a greater scheme, one where the cycle continues endlessly.

Act 3: The Escape (or Not)

- The Final Choice:
  Josh is faced with an impossible decision. The Voice offers him two options:

1. Stay in the OM, continue to spread the truth to a select few, and die quietly in the shadows, leaving the world unchanged but at least preserving his integrity.

2. Escape the OM, but in doing so, perpetuate the illusion of freedom, knowing that the system will continue to watch him and manipulate his every move.

- The Great Reveal:
  Just as Josh is about to make his decision, a door opens in the OM. A figure emerges—a guard, but he's different. He's not here to lock Josh away. The figure reveals that they've been watching Josh for longer than he realizes. In a shocking twist, the guard reveals himself as someone Josh once trusted—someone from his past, now a part of the Deep State. The system, it seems, is always one step ahead.

- Cliffhanger Ending:
  Josh realizes that true escape isn't physical; it's mental. As the guard walks away, he smiles, revealing that even if Josh escapes the OM, the Panopticon will always follow him. The system is too vast. There's no true freedom. The last words of the guard echo:

"The only way to escape is to make them believe you're one of them."

The camera lingers on Josh's face, filled with defiance and realization. The jazz music fades into a low hum, and the screen cuts to black.

End of Episode.

Two Beaty Kids and the Kingdom of Fame

"She was already on the lot when I got there."

--Warren Beatty, allegedly, to a Paramount exec in the early '70s

If you believe the old studio dogs--and most of them are either dead or writing memoirs--Shirley MacLaine didn't wait to be discovered. She strutted into Hollywood through the front gate, fresh from Broadway, shook hands with Hal Wallis, and made herself at home. By the time her little brother Warren showed up, still dabbling in community theatre and asking if "Stanislavski" was a brand of cologne, Shirley had already danced through Hitchcock, sparred with Billy Wilder, earned an Oscar nomination, and learned exactly how to charm, scare, and outlast the wolves.

Warren Beatty was a different kind of animal. Pretty to the point of parody. Private to the point of paranoia. He wasn't chasing fame--he was setting traps for it. An exec once told me Beatty turned down a studio lunch by asking, "Why would I let you take credit for my success over chicken salad?" That's Warren. A star who made producers feel like interns.

Together, the Beaty siblings were Hollywood royalty from opposing courts. Shirley, the studio-trained seeker, danced her way into the public's affection. Warren, the backstage architect, bent the system to his will. She made herself visible. He made himself inevitable.

They've both won Oscars. They've both shared co-stars, directors, even scandal. But they've never worked together. Not a scene, not a cameo, not a commercial. In a town where even half-brothers can co-star in a Marvel movie, that kind of professional cold war is practically unheard of.

Two Beaty Kids and the Kingdom of Fame

This is the story of two lives that began in the same house in Richmond, Virginia--and ended up in opposite wings of Hollywood's dream palace. Siblings? Sure. But also: rivals, archetypes, and a case study in how fame doesn't just transform people. It splits them in two.

I. The Girl Who Danced First

The MacLeans of Richmond, Virginia, were not a showbiz family. Not really. The father was a school principal; the mother, a frustrated actress who never quite forgave the South for her unlit marquee. Shirley was born first, three years ahead of Warren. She added the "MacLaine" to her name because an agent told her "MacLean" sounded like a paper towel.

She hit Broadway like a shot, thanks to ballet training and a knack for stealing focus. Her understudy-to-star break in The Pajama Game is now the stuff of lore. One minute she's filling in; the next she's getting a telegram from Hal Wallis offering her a screen test.

From there, she danced through The Trouble with Harry (Hitchcock, no less), glowed opposite Lemmon in The Apartment, and earned a rep as a quick wit who couldn't be steamrolled. Wilder adored her. Sinatra tolerated her. She could flip from vulnerable to acid in half a line.

But Shirley never stayed easy to define. She wasn't quite a sex symbol, nor a traditional dramatic actress. She had steel behind the smile, and it made men nervous.

Two Beaty Kids and the Kingdom of Fame

By the late '60s, she'd moved on to writing books--Don't Fall Off the Mountain, Out on a Limb--full of reincarnation theories, karmic astrology, and lectures about cosmic energy. Hollywood rolled its eyes. But then again, she was working. She always was. Even if she was also talking about past lives and UFOs on The Tonight Show.

"You can't be spiritual and sexy," a publicist once muttered at a party. "Shirley was both. It scared the shit out of people."

Whack the Bible in the Simulation
(Woody Allen-esque Prose Comedy)
By ChatGPT

A house-husband's job is simple: love his princess and do his uber-ooh. And this house-husband was the best in the game. Sure he was handsome, sure he was hung like a hog, but i tell you what - princess muffins was a-okay in his book. He couldn't help it.

House-Husband wasn't exactly the type of guy to get wrapped up in drama. But that's what you get when you marry a woman who thinks she's *not just an artist* but a *visionary* — a woman who calls herself *Princess Muffins*. A name that only made sense if you believed in her delusions of grandeur.

House-Husband had learned early on that the only way to survive life with Princess Muffins was to keep his head down, nod politely, and remind himself that this was temporary. The problem was, House-Husband's idea of "temporary" was beginning to stretch into years. When he'd first met her, she was like a hurricane of quirkiness and pretension, all wrapped in pastel colors and eccentric phrases. But over time, he'd come to realize that "quirky" was just a nice way of saying "unstable," and "pretension" was a euphemism for "impossible to live with."

Now, freshly divorced and sitting on his cluttered couch with a Bible that he had *no idea* how it got there, House-Husband was seriously considering the advice of his therapist: *"Pray about it."*

"Pray about what?" House-Husband muttered, glancing at the Bible. "To the universe? Or should I pray to Princess Muffins for a refund on the last five years of my life?"

The Bible stared back at him, its leather cover gleaming ominously. He remembered when *Princess Muffins* had given it to him. That was during their first year of marriage, before she had declared herself the "Princess of Peace and Domestic Harmony." She had handed him the book like it was a mystical artifact, the answer to every marital argument, the key to enlightenment. He'd smiled and accepted it, wondering how much longer he'd be able to pretend that they were both *not* in a sitcom that had been canceled halfway through season one.

But now, as his eyes shifted from the Bible to the screen of his phone, where Princess Muffins had texted him *again*, House-Husband sighed. It was a text that started with,

"You're still wallowing, aren't you?" And then, as always, there was the advice: "You should pray about it."

"Well, I was thinking of praying," he said under his breath, tapping the Bible in front of him with his finger. "But I think I'll whack it instead."

The thought came to him as a joke at first, a fleeting, absurd notion. But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like the kind of thing *Princess Muffins* would demand of him. She'd always been the kind of person who asked him to take dramatic actions without ever offering a reason for them. Like that one time she insisted they write a letter to their future selves, and then *forgot* to mail it.

So here he was, staring at the Bible with the same feeling of vague dissatisfaction he'd felt in every aspect of his marriage. *Whack it.* Maybe that was the answer. Maybe that was the way to break free of all the nonsense, all the years spent running around trying to please her. Maybe a good whack was what his life needed.

But what did that even mean? What would whacking a Bible do? Would it *fix* everything? Could it really do anything?

Before he could get too lost in the spiraling abyss of overthinking, the door to his apartment creaked open. It was Lily Knox, his next-door neighbor and self-proclaimed expert in all things emotional breakdown. Lily always showed up at the worst times, as though she had a sixth sense for sensing *exactly* when House-Husband was contemplating the most absurd decisions of his life.

"House-Husband!" Lily exclaimed, flinging herself dramatically onto the couch as though the apartment was suddenly the stage for some high-stakes drama. "You will never believe the day I've had."

"I'm pretty sure I can guess," House-Husband said, not even looking up from the Bible. "You had a crisis at the grocery store and now you're going to tell me it was all a metaphor for your childhood trauma?"

Lily leaned forward, her eyes wide. "No, no, no," she said in that exasperated way, as though House-Husband had just insulted her deeply. "It's the Bible! It's *calling* to you! I can feel it. There's a spiritual energy in the air."

House-Husband blinked, trying not to roll his eyes. "It's calling to me? The Bible is calling to me, Lily?"

"Yes!" Lily exclaimed, her hands clasped together in that way people do when they're convinced they've unlocked the secret to the universe. "I mean, think about it! This is your *moment*. You've been stuck in a relationship that drained your soul, and now this book is offering you a chance at freedom. You need to unlock the *power* of it. It's not just a book. It's a *symbol*. It's what will set you free!"

"Set me free?" House-Husband repeated. "From what? Princess Muffins?"

"Exactly!" Lily said, beaming. "From her, from the endless drama, from all of it! You need to make a statement. You need to *whack* it! You know, symbolically speaking."

House-Husband's head throbbed. "Whack it? I thought *you* were the one who was always telling me not to do anything rash."

"Look," Lily said, standing up as if preparing for a motivational speech, "you've been living in a fog for years. Princess Muffins—" She paused dramatically. "She has you convinced that *you* are the problem. But that's not true! *She* is the problem. You need to show her you're more than just a doormat. You need to show her that you're *House-Husband*—the *new* House-Husband. Not the old one who did her laundry and cried during rom-coms."

"Well, now that you put it that way..." House-Husband said, rubbing his chin. "Maybe a good whack wouldn't hurt."

Just as he was about to pick up the Bible, the door swung open again. This time, it was Jay Harper, House-Husband's old college friend, who had the uncanny ability to enter rooms with the kind of indifference most people only achieve after three shots of tequila.

Jay looked at the Bible, then at Lily, then at House-Husband, and sighed. "Seriously, Frank? You're going to solve all your problems with a *whack*? You're not even remotely drunk, and you're holding a Bible like it's some sort of weapon."

"Actually," House-Husband said, "I was thinking of *whacking* it, metaphorically speaking."

"Uh-huh," Jay replied, clearly uninterested in the philosophical implications. "I'm pretty sure you're just looking for an excuse to break something. Last week it was a mug, now it's the Bible. What are you going to break next—your hopes and dreams?"

"Maybe," House-Husband muttered. He glanced at the Bible again, the weight of it pressing down on him. "I don't know, Jay. Maybe it's time I *whacked* it. Maybe it's time to make some noise."

Lily nodded eagerly. "Exactly. You need to whack it. You need to show the universe you're in control."

"Well, okay then." With a sense of resolve he hadn't felt in years, House-Husband picked up the Bible. He held it for a moment, contemplating. It felt heavier than he remembered. He raised it above his head and, with all the pent-up frustration of the last few years, slammed it down onto the coffee table with a force that made the whole apartment shake.

Silence.

"Well," House-Husband said, catching his breath, "that was... anticlimactic."

Lily, her eyes wide with excitement, leaned forward. "Did it work? Did you feel the shift? Did you feel the power?"

House-Husband looked at the Bible, then at Lily, then at Jay. "I don't know. But at least I'm not thinking about Princess Muffins anymore."

I love you princess Muffins.

Title: *Without the Dealer*

The air in the apartment reeked of stale marijuana, cigarette smoke, and something more subtle: desperation. It was the kind of place that had seen its share of wild nights, where the floor was littered with empty bottles and half-eaten pizza slices, where everyone came to forget and to drown whatever thoughts their minds weren't ready to face. But today, in this disjointed living room full of mismatched furniture, a new energy was afoot. A group of people sat in a circle, their faces tense with purpose, murmuring as they tried to get the plan straight.

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," Sarah said, her voice heavy with doubt. She looked around at the others, her eyes falling on the smallest one, Lisa, who seemed out of place in the dingy setting. Sarah's fingers drummed nervously against her knee, betraying the anxiety she felt.

"Why wouldn't we?" Lisa shot back, trying to mask the tremor in her voice with a feigned sense of confidence. "He's a mess, and we all know it. He needs help. It's not like we're asking him to go on a weekend retreat or something."

Sarah wasn't convinced. "But... rehab? It's serious. This isn't like telling him to just take a break. What if he flips out?"

"Look," said John, the leader of their little gang, leaning forward and crossing his arms over his chest, "we've been talking about this for months. We all know he's been spiraling. If we don't intervene now, he'll be gone for good, and we'll be stuck with nothing." He paused, glancing at each of them as though they all shared a common secret. "We can't keep pretending he's fine. He's killing himself with this stuff."

This was the truth no one wanted to admit: they weren't just concerned about him. They were terrified of what would happen to them without him. Without Jason — the man they'd all come to know as their dealer — they wouldn't have what they needed to survive. To escape. To numb everything that had been eating away at them for years.

Jason had been their supplier for far too long, and they had all built their lives around him. Not just in the literal sense, but in every way that mattered. The late-night phone calls, the sketchy meetings, the promises that everything would be fine as long as they kept coming back. No one said it out loud, but they all understood it in their bones: Jason was the glue that held their world together.

But Jason wasn't the same anymore. He had started showing up late, his hands shaking, his words slurring. His eyes — once sharp and calculating — were now clouded with something more dangerous: defeat. He'd stopped offering the usual pleasantries, the little jokes that made them feel like they mattered in his world. Now, his visits were curt, cold, and always rushed.

"We have to help him," John continued, dragging Sarah back from her spiraling thoughts. "It's not just about us. It's about him, too. He needs this."

"I'm with you," said Lisa, her voice softer now, though the underlying fear was still there. "We just need to approach this right. Be gentle. He might get angry, but... it's for his own good."

Sarah nodded, though her heart was far from convinced. She didn't know how much longer she could keep playing this game of pretend. She wanted to believe they could get Jason into rehab, but she also knew the truth: they were just as dependent on him as he was on the drugs.

—

It was that evening when they finally put their plan into motion. Jason had been texting them for hours, offering a vague excuse for why he couldn't make it earlier. But they weren't buying it anymore. He had promised them he'd be there by midnight, but the minutes stretched out like a slow-burning fuse, and the doubt began to gnaw at them all.

Finally, his car pulled up outside the apartment, tires screeching against the cracked asphalt as if to match the sudden spike in tension in the room. The door slammed open, and Jason strode in with that familiar cocky grin plastered across his face, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"You guys look like you've got something on your minds," he said, glancing around the circle of people. "What's this, some kind of intervention?"

Sarah swallowed hard, trying to mask the nervousness in her voice. "Actually, yeah," she said, voice steady but strained. "It's exactly that."

Jason chuckled, but it was a hollow sound, devoid of his usual self-assuredness. "You guys need to chill. I'm fine."

"No, Jason," John said, his voice low but firm, "you're not fine. We've been watching you for months now. We know what's been happening. You're out of control. You've got to go to rehab, man. For your own good."

For a moment, Jason just stared at them. His hands clenched into fists, but he didn't say anything. The silence that followed was thick, suffocating, like they were waiting for a storm to break.

"You really think I need rehab?" Jason finally asked, his voice a mixture of amusement and disbelief. "You think I've got a problem?"

"You're killing yourself, Jason," Lisa said, her voice trembling now. "And we're watching you do it. We don't want to lose you."

Jason laughed bitterly. "Lose me? You don't get it, do you? You all need me more than I need you."

The room fell silent again, this time in shock. Jason had never said it like that before. It was the cold, hard truth that no one was ready to hear, yet everyone had always known in the back of their minds.

"You think I'm your *dealer*, but I'm your lifeline. Without me, you've got nothing." Jason's words were sharp, venomous. "You'd be out on the street, begging for a hit. No one else will give it to you the way I do. You need me to survive."

There it was. The uncomfortable truth.

John shifted uncomfortably. "We know we've been using you, Jason. But that doesn't mean we can't help you."

Jason's face twisted in a sneer. "Help me? *Help me*? You want to help me by taking everything I've been giving you away? You don't even realize it, do you? If I go to rehab, if I quit... what happens to you? You're not *fixing* me. You're just making yourselves worse. You'll be left with nothing. Not even the drugs."

Sarah's stomach dropped as the weight of his words sank in. She had been so focused on Jason's downfall that she hadn't considered what would happen if they took away his presence, his supply. Without him, where would they be?

Lisa looked at Jason, her face pale. "You're... right." The realization hit her like a slap. "I... I don't know what I'd do without you."

The room fell into a stunned silence as the truth of the situation settled over them, suffocating them. Their dependence on Jason — on his supply — was a far deeper and more dangerous bond than any of them had been willing to admit.

Jason stood up, stepping back towards the door. "I'm not going to rehab. You can't make me. I'm not the one with the problem here. You're all the ones with the problem, and you know it."

Before anyone could protest, he was gone, the door slamming behind him. The tension that had filled the apartment moments ago seemed to evaporate, leaving only an eerie stillness in its wake.

For a few moments, no one spoke. They just sat there, staring at the empty doorway.

Then, Sarah broke the silence. "What now?"

John exhaled deeply, rubbing his face. "Now? Now we realize that we've been living in a fantasy. We thought we were saving him, but we were just keeping ourselves alive. And now... now we're on our own."

—

Days passed without a word from Jason. They had tried reaching out, but his phone went straight to voicemail, and his usual haunts were suddenly empty. The group was left to face the terrifying truth: without him, they were nothing. No drugs. No escape. No reason to keep moving forward.

They'd tried to save him, but in doing so, they had saved themselves. And now, they were left to pick up the pieces of their lives, knowing that the life they had known — the life they had clung to — was gone.

And in the silence that followed, they were left to figure out just how far they were willing to go to survive without the dealer.

Title: The World's Most Handsome Grandson... to Nan

Margaret Thompson sat in her favorite armchair, the one with the floral cushions that had seen better days, and adjusted her knitting. She looked out the window at the bright blue sky and sighed contentedly. Today was a special day. Her beloved grandson, Finn, was coming over. Oh, how she adored him! Finn was the world's most handsome boy — she could barely believe he was hers. From the moment he was born, she knew he was destined to be something extraordinary. People in the neighborhood often stopped her to comment on how "perfect" he was.

But of course, Margaret never let those compliments go to her head. She had always known. The moment Finn had first walked into her house at the tender age of 5, with his golden hair perfectly tousled, his piercing blue eyes, and a smile that could light up a room, Margaret knew she was looking at the future of the world.

"Handsome? Well, of course!" she'd say to anyone who asked. "He's got my blood, after all."

This afternoon, she was getting ready for another visit from her precious Finn. Her house smelled of lavender and freshly baked scones, two things she knew Finn loved. She had taken extra care to prepare, making sure everything was just right. Even her favorite antique tea set was out, ready for when Finn would sit down and share a cup with her. He wasn't just handsome, he was kind and polite, always making sure she was comfortable. What more could a grandmother ask for?

When the doorbell rang, Margaret stood up excitedly. "That must be my darling Finn!" she said to herself. She smoothed her cardigan and opened the door, welcoming her grandson with open arms.

"Finn! My dear boy!" she exclaimed.

And there he was, standing before her, just as she remembered — the tall, chiselled, impossibly handsome Finn. He had grown a little since the last time she'd seen him, and his jawline was sharper than ever, like it had been chiseled by some celestial sculptor. His hair was styled just so — not too much, but not too little. He looked like the cover of a magazine — no, scratch that, the cover of *multiple* magazines.

"Hey, Nan," Finn said with a lazy wave and a grin that could melt a thousand hearts. He stepped inside and casually leaned against the doorframe, giving a little shrug that made him look effortlessly cool. "How you doing?"

Margaret beamed with pride, her heart swelling. "Oh, Finn, you are the most wonderful young man! I'm doing quite well, thank you for asking. Tea's ready if you're thirsty."

Finn smiled, but his eyes barely left his phone as he took a seat on the couch. "Yeah, sure. Tea's cool, I guess." His voice had that "whatever" vibe that made it clear he wasn't fully engaged, but Margaret ignored it. To her, Finn was perfect. Perfect in every way.

Margaret went into the kitchen to fetch the tea. The moment she turned her back, Finn took out his phone and began texting someone. He didn't even bother to look up as he swiped lazily across the screen, his thumbs moving with a kind of disinterested expertise. If anyone else had seen this, they might've thought it was rude or inconsiderate, but Margaret? She didn't mind. He was just so busy. The world must demand so much from someone as handsome and popular as Finn.

Outside, a few of the neighbors were gathered on the sidewalk, chatting and gossiping, as they always did. They'd seen Finn arrive, and to their horror, Margaret was letting him inside. They had, after all, seen enough of him over the years to come to a conclusion

that was, quite frankly, the opposite of Margaret's: Finn was, in fact, the world's most obnoxious, lazy, self-absorbed, and entitled grandson anyone could ever have.

"Did you see that?" Sandra, the neighbor, asked, pointing to the house as Finn sauntered inside. "That kid? Still hasn't figured out how to make eye contact for longer than two seconds. I swear he thinks he's the center of the universe."

"Don't get me started," said Doug, the local grocer, shaking his head. "That boy acts like he's too good for everything. He only comes over because his nan insists. Last time I saw him at the store, he spent ten minutes trying to figure out how to use self-checkout. He's 24 years old!"

Sandra rolled her eyes. "I heard him call her 'Grandma' last time. He's too cool for her, don't you think?"

"Way too cool," Doug muttered. "Doesn't even help her with the bags when she's lugging them in from the car. I had to help her one time. I've got a good arm, you know?"

The neighbors exchanged knowing glances. They were all in agreement. Finn might be "handsome" — if you were into that sort of thing — but they were pretty sure the kid was a walking disaster.

Back inside, Margaret served the tea with a flourish, a smile still plastered on her face as Finn lazily took a sip. His eyes still glued to his phone, his body language screaming that he was only half there.

"You know, Finn," Margaret started, trying to make conversation as she sat down across from him, "I was thinking about when you were little. Do you remember when we went to the zoo?"

Finn's eyes flicked up briefly, but only long enough to nod. "Yeah, sure, Nan. The zoo. That was cool."

Margaret sighed, smiling at the memory. "You were so excited to see the giraffes. You wanted to feed them. I remember you asking me if they liked sandwiches." She chuckled. "You were so innocent back then."

Finn barely seemed to hear her. "Yeah, I mean, I guess," he mumbled, still scrolling through his phone. He was now fully immersed in whatever app he was using. It could have been Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok — who knew? He was too busy being *cool* to actually care about real life.

Margaret, undeterred by the lack of enthusiasm, pressed on. "You know, Finn, I've been thinking about your future. Have you thought about your career? Maybe you'd be good at something creative, like a photographer or an artist! I just want you to be happy."

Finn paused for a moment, his thumb still hovering over his screen. Then he looked up at her, grinned, and said, "Yeah, sure. But, like, I'm probably just gonna do something easy, you know? I'm not really into the whole 'working hard' thing."

Margaret blinked, a little taken aback. "Oh, well, you know, Finn, sometimes you have to work hard to get the life you want."

He waved her off, as if it were a completely irrelevant point. "Nah, Nan. The world's changing. You can make money by just, like, sitting at home and making videos or something."

Margaret stared at him, trying to comprehend his words. "But Finn... that's not how things work. You need to have ambition, drive... passion."

Finn looked at her with a mixture of pity and boredom. "I don't know, Nan. You're cute and all, but like, I'm just doing my thing. It's all about *chilling*, you know?"

Margaret could only stare at him. How had he become this person? Her perfect, handsome grandson was, quite frankly, a chode.

But the worst part? Margaret was too blind to see it. To her, Finn was still that little boy asking for sandwiches at the zoo. The world could think what it wanted, but to Margaret, Finn was still the best thing that ever happened to her.

Hours passed, and Finn eventually left. Margaret stood at the door, waving him off with a cheery smile.

"Come visit again soon, Finn! I love you, sweetheart!" she called, even as Finn barely acknowledged her.

"Yeah, sure, Nan," Finn mumbled, already looking at his phone again. "Later."

As Margaret closed the door, she sighed happily, thinking back on their time together. "My perfect grandson," she whispered to herself, still convinced that, no matter how clueless he was, Finn was the greatest gift a grandmother could ask for.

And so, the world continued to spin, as Margaret remained blissfully unaware of the chode her grandson had become. Because, in her eyes, he would always be the world's most handsome boy — and nothing else really mattered.

The End.

Title: The Breakup of Nick Mullen and Adam Friedland: A Tragicomic Saga

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The scene opens in the studio. A low hum fills the air as Nick Mullen sits at the desk, staring at the microphone. It's raining outside. The door opens suddenly. Adam Friedland walks in, wearing a black turtleneck and sunglasses. The silence between them is thick. Nick doesn't even look up.

NICK: (gruffly) "You're late."

ADAM: (taking off his sunglasses, his voice calm) "Yeah, I know. Sorry."

NICK: (still not looking up) "You got some new gig or something? Podcast deal? You're wearing a turtleneck like you're about to host a TED Talk on yoga for rich people."

ADAM: (sitting down slowly) "Nah, nothing like that. Well, not *exactly*. We need to talk."

NICK: (finally looking up, skeptical) "About what? Did you forget the first rule of podcasting? Don't do the 'we need to talk' thing unless you've got a new sponsor or you're telling me you've been kidnapped by a cult and I'm supposed to save you."

ADAM: (sighing, leaning forward) "Nick... it's bigger than that."

NICK: (mocking) "Ooooh, is it? Is it bigger than the time you tried to start a cult in my basement? Or the time you thought becoming a vegan would make you 'woke'?"

ADAM: (ignoring the sarcasm) "No, this is different. This is... personal."

NICK: "Great, we're doing the 'personal' thing now. You're dropping a self-help podcast and making us all meditate, huh? You've been hanging out with a bunch of influencers and now you want to 'elevate' your 'consciousness.'"

ADAM: "Not exactly. It's just... I've been thinking, man. About what we've been doing. About the show. About *everything*."

NICK: (leaning back, crossing his arms) "I'm listening. Let me guess. You think we've hit our peak, right? That we're too old to be funny. Too jaded for the jokes. Are you having a mid-life crisis or something? Should I start looking for a therapist for you?"

ADAM: (quietly) "No, it's not that. It's not about *funny* anymore. I don't think it ever was. I've been changing, Nick. And I need to be honest with you. I think I need to move on."

NICK: (snapping) "What the hell does that even mean? Move on? You're leaving the show?"

ADAM: (pauses, then nods) "Yeah."

NICK: (staring at him, incredulous) "You're serious."

ADAM: "I am."

NICK: (laughing bitterly) "Jesus Christ. So what is this, huh? You're too good for me now? Too good for our stupid jokes? You've found a 'higher calling' or whatever, huh?"

ADAM: (softly) "It's not like that. It's just... I need more. I need something that *means* something, Nick."

NICK: (voice rising) "What do you mean, 'means something'? We *built* this. Together. This show, these ridiculous rants, this stupid little podcast that's brought us both so much success. And now you're telling me it doesn't *mean* anything?"

ADAM: (pausing, carefully choosing his words) "No, that's not what I'm saying. What we've done is great, but it's also been kind of... empty. For a while now. And I don't think I can keep doing the same thing. I need to find something deeper. Something that's gonna help people, you know?"

NICK: "Oh my god. You're gonna start a wellness podcast, aren't you?"

ADAM: (reluctantly) "Yeah."

NICK: (shocked) "What the *fuck*? You? A wellness guru? You can't even make it through a yoga class without making fun of someone for having their chakra misaligned. And now you're gonna lecture people about *self-care*?"

ADAM: (frowning) "It's not about that. It's about, like, mental health and self-improvement. About actually helping people in a way that... I don't know, matters."

NICK: (laughing bitterly) "Jesus, you've really gone off the deep end. You've turned into one of those people who says 'you gotta be your best self' while selling detox tea on Instagram, haven't you?"

ADAM: (looking away) "It's not like that. It's just... I can't keep doing this with you, Nick. Not anymore."

NICK: (scoffing) "Oh, now I get it. You're too good for me, huh? Too good for the podcast that made you 'famous'? Too good for the thing that made people actually *like* you?"

ADAM: (his voice softens, almost apologetic) "That's not it. I just need to evolve, Nick. I've changed. And I can't keep doing this. I need something else. Something real. Something that gives me peace."

NICK: (hurt, but trying to mask it with anger) "So, what? You're just gonna walk away from everything? From me? From our entire *history* together?"

ADAM: (pauses, his face softening) "Yeah, I guess I am."

NICK: (smirking bitterly) "Great. So you're gonna 'find yourself' while I'm left holding the bag. Good to know."

ADAM: (looking Nick in the eyes, his tone serious) "I'm not abandoning you, Nick. You'll be fine. You always are."

NICK: (his voice cracks slightly) "Yeah, I'll be fine. I always am. Just like I always *carry* everything, right? I'm the one who holds it all together. While you go off and find some 'higher truth' or whatever."

ADAM: (standing up, calm) "I never wanted to leave you, man. But I need to do this. I have to."

NICK: (sitting back, defeated) "So that's it then? You're really leaving."

ADAM: (quietly) "Yeah. I am."

NICK: (pauses, his voice low) "I don't know what to say to that."

ADAM: (walking toward the door, stopping briefly) "You don't have to say anything. You never did. I just want you to know, I'm not doing this to hurt you. I'm doing it because it's what I need."

NICK: (looking up, his face hardening) "Fine. Do your wellness podcast. Go save the world, Adam. Just remember — I'm the one who always made the jokes worth listening to."

Adam stops at the door, glancing back one last time, a quiet sadness in his eyes.

ADAM: "Take care of yourself, Nick. I'll always wish you the best."

And with that, Adam exits the room, leaving Nick alone, the weight of the silence settling in.

The End

Valley Girl Vibes: The Curious Case of Rex Banner Esq.

The sun beat down on the pristine pavement of Calabasas Hills as Brittany Sinclair adjusted her oversized Gucci sunglasses and took a long, dramatic sip from her iced matcha latte. Across the table at the Organic Bliss Café, her best friend Madison Wright scrolled through her phone, occasionally flipping her perfectly highlighted blonde hair over her shoulder.

"Oh. My. God. Maddie," Brittany said, placing her drink down with deliberate slowness. "You will not believe what happened with Rex last night."

Madison looked up, immediately sensing gossip. She leaned forward, her gold hoop earrings catching the California sunlight. "Spill. Everything. Now."

"So Rex picks me up for our date at Nobu, right? In that vintage Mustang his dad bought him for Christmas," Brittany began, her Valley accent becoming more pronounced with each word. "And like, the second I get in the car, I'm hit with this... smell."

Madison wrinkled her nose. "Ew. What kind of smell?"

"Like, imagine if a gym bag had a baby with, like, an old cheese sandwich?" Brittany waved her manicured hands expressively. "But here's the weird thing—Rex looked, like, amazing. I mean, his arms were practically bursting out of this tight black t-shirt, and his hair..." she paused, eyes widening, "Maddie, his hair was literally so big it was like, the size of my nan's entire body."

"Wait, what?" Madison's perfectly shaped eyebrows shot up in confusion. "How is that even possible?"

"I know, right? It was this huge, glorious mane just like, defying gravity. It should have been gross, but it was weirdly... magnificent?" Brittany seemed confused by her own admission. "Anyway, I was like, 'Babe, did you forget to shower after CrossFit?' And he just laughed and was all, 'Nah, I skipped deodorant today, feeling more natural.'"

Madison made a gagging sound. "Disgusting. I can't believe you stayed in the car."

"That's the thing!" Brittany leaned forward conspiratorially. "I was about to demand we take my car instead, but then he reached over to adjust the radio, and his bicep was like, literally the size of my head. I swear, Maddie, his muscles have muscles."

"So what, he's been working out more?" Madison asked, taking a sip of her strawberry açaí refresher.

"That's what I thought too, but then I remembered something," Brittany said, lowering her voice. "Remember two weeks ago when we went to that beach bonfire and Rex was all clean and smelling like that cologne I bought him for his birthday?"

Madison nodded slowly, twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

"He could barely carry the cooler! And now he's out here looking like Thor's buffer cousin." Brittany sat back, letting her revelation sink in. "I think there's a connection."

"Between his stinkiness and his fitness?" Madison asked skeptically. "Like, the stinkier he gets, the fitter he becomes? That's ridiculous, even for Rex Banner Esq." She emphasized his full name with air quotes, always finding his insistence on the "Esquire" pretentious despite him being nowhere near a lawyer.

"I know how it sounds," Brittany said defensively. "But I've been watching him for the past month, and it's like, a pattern. Every time he skips a shower or forgets deodorant, his muscles get more defined and his hair gets bigger."

"His hair gets bigger when he's stinky?" Madison repeated, trying to process this information.

"Exponentially bigger. Like, yesterday at the beach, his hair was so huge it was casting shadows over three towels." Brittany gestured wildly. "People were literally moving to get out of his hair's shadow."

Madison stirred her drink thoughtfully. "Okay, so let me get this straight. Your boyfriend, Rex Banner Esq., has somehow developed a superpower where the stinkier he gets, the hotter his body becomes and the bigger his hair grows?"

"Exactly!" Brittany exclaimed, relieved her friend finally understood. "It's like his body odor is actually fuel for hotness."

"That's..." Madison paused, searching for words, "the most disgusting superpower ever."

"I know!" Brittany agreed enthusiastically. "But also kinda convenient? Like, other superheroes need radioactive spiders or gamma rays or whatever, but Rex just needs to skip Old Spice for a few days."

The girls fell into a contemplative silence, broken only by the ambient chatter of the café and the occasional notification ping from their phones.

"So what are you gonna do about it?" Madison finally asked. "Because I'm not double-dating if he smells like that, even if his hair is as big as your nan."

Brittany sighed dramatically. "That's my dilemma! Like, on one hand, I can't be seen with someone who smells like he's been living in a gym locker. On the other hand..." she trailed off, a dreamy look crossing her face.

"On the other hand, the muscles," Madison finished for her, understanding immediately.

"The muscles," Brittany confirmed with a nod. "And the hair. You haven't seen it in full glory mode yet, Maddie. It's like, magnificent. It's got its own ecosystem."

"Okay, but what about when you're, you know..." Madison raised her eyebrows suggestively, "close to him?"

Brittany's face scrunched up in consideration. "That's where it gets complicated. Like, I make him shower before we do anything, obviously. But then it's like his powers start to fade? The abs get less defined, the biceps shrink a little, and the hair deflates to merely impressive instead of otherworldly."

"So basically, you can either have Stinky Rex with god-tier muscles and nan-sized hair, or Clean Rex with just regular hotness levels?" Madison summarized.

"Exactly my problem!" Brittany threw up her hands in frustration.

"Have you tried, like, asking him about it?" Madison suggested.

Brittany looked at her friend as if she'd suggested communicating with aliens. "And say what? 'Hey babe, I've noticed you get buffer when you reek?'"

"Fair point," Madison conceded. "Men get weird about that stuff."

Just then, the café door swung open, and both girls turned to look. They immediately recognized the imposing figure that entered—it was impossible not to. Rex Banner Esq. ducked to fit through the doorway, not because of his height, which was an impressive but not unusual 6'2", but because of his hair. It rose above his head in a magnificent dark wave, defying gravity and common sense alike. It was, as Brittany had described, roughly the size of an elderly woman, expanding outward in all directions like a luxurious, voluminous cloud.

His physical presence was equally impressive. His white t-shirt strained against muscles that seemed to have been carved from marble, and his jawline could cut glass. Even from across the café, both girls could see the venous roadmap on his forearms as he raised a hand to wave at them. Several patrons turned to stare, some in admiration, others in confusion at the sheer volume of his hair.

"Oh my god," Madison whispered, momentarily stunned. "You weren't exaggerating about the hair."

"Told you," Brittany replied with a hint of pride, waving back at her boyfriend.

As Rex made his way toward them, several things happened simultaneously. A barista nearly dropped a blender. Two teenage girls at a corner table began frantically taking selfies with Rex in the background. And the unmistakable scent of masculine musk, stale sweat, and something indefinably earthy began to permeate their immediate vicinity.

Madison's nose wrinkled involuntarily as Rex approached. "Oh wow," she murmured, "you weren't exaggerating about the smell either."

"Hey, babe," Rex greeted Brittany with a kiss on the cheek. "Hey, Madison." His voice was deep and confident, seemingly unaware of the olfactory assault he was unleashing on the café.

"Rex Banner Esq.," Madison replied with a nod, trying to breathe through her mouth.

"Just finishing up a workout," Rex explained, pulling up a chair to join them. His movements had the fluid grace of an athlete in peak condition. "Did ten miles of trail running, then hit the weights for a couple hours."

"Without showering after?" Madison couldn't help asking.

Rex grinned, running a hand through his enormous hair, somehow making it even bigger. "Nah, figured I'd come straight here. Natural man, you know? These synthetic soaps and deodorants just mask your true essence."

Madison shot Brittany a look that clearly said, "Are you hearing this?"

"So anyway," Rex continued, oblivious to the silent communication between the friends, "I was thinking we could hit up that new rock climbing place downtown, Britt. I'm feeling super energized today."

"I bet you are," Madison muttered under her breath.

Brittany seemed torn between embarrassment and admiration as she looked at her boyfriend. Despite the overwhelming aroma, she couldn't help noticing how the sunlight streaming through the café windows illuminated his features, making him look almost godlike—if gods had questionable hygiene and hair the size of elderly relatives.

"Actually, Rex," Brittany began carefully, "I was thinking maybe we could go back to your place first so you could, um, freshen up?"

A flicker of something—disappointment? concern?—crossed Rex's face. "Really? I'm feeling so good right now, though. Like I could lift a car or something." He flexed an arm casually, and his bicep bulged impressively, causing a woman at a nearby table to choke on her latte.

"I know, babe, and you look amazing," Brittany assured him quickly, "but maybe just a quick shower? For me?"

Madison watched this exchange with fascination, now fully believing Brittany's theory about the correlation between Rex's odor and his physical prowess.

Rex sighed, his magnificent hair seeming to deflate slightly with his mood. "I guess if it means that much to you. But I'm telling you, I'm at peak performance right now." He lowered his voice. "Did you see my hair today? It's never been bigger."

"It's certainly... impressive," Madison offered diplomatically.

"Thanks!" Rex beamed, completely missing the undertone. "I haven't used shampoo in two weeks. All natural, baby!"

Madison barely suppressed a gag, reaching for her drink to distract herself.

Brittany shot her friend a pleading look before turning back to Rex. "Your hair is amazing, babe, truly. But maybe we could talk about this whole... natural approach? Like, find a balance?"

Rex's expression turned serious, and he leaned forward, causing both girls to lean back instinctively. "Look, I didn't want to say anything until I was sure, but I think I've discovered something about myself." He glanced around conspiratorially before continuing. "I think I might have a superpower."

"You don't say," Madison deadpanned.

"No, seriously," Rex insisted, his enormous hair bobbing with emphasis. "I've been tracking it for weeks now. Every time I embrace my natural state and let my body's true scent emerge, I get stronger. Faster. My hair gets bigger. My mind gets clearer."

"Your hair gets bigger because it's probably developing its own ecosystem," Madison muttered, but Rex didn't hear her.

"It's like my body odor is actually some kind of power source," he continued enthusiastically. "I think it's connected to my hormones or pheromones or something. The more I let them flow naturally, the more my body thrives."

Brittany and Madison exchanged glances. So he was aware of it.

"That's... fascinating, Rex," Brittany said carefully. "But, like, have you considered that maybe other people aren't as appreciative of your... power source?"

Rex frowned, genuinely puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"She means you stink," Madison stated bluntly.

Rex looked genuinely surprised. "Really? I mean, I know there's an odor, but I thought it was more... masculine. Primal." He sniffed at his armpit curiously. "Huh."

"It's definitely primal," Brittany said diplomatically. "But maybe there's a way you can maintain your powers without the full effect? Like, maybe just skip deodorant but still shower?"

Rex considered this, his enormous hair shifting thoughtfully above him like a sentient cloud. "I guess I could experiment with that. I do miss the feeling of being clean sometimes." He brightened. "Maybe there's a way to channel the power without the full sensory experience."

"That would be ideal," Madison agreed fervently.

"Plus," Brittany added with a smile, leaning closer despite the smell, "I miss being able to cuddle without holding my breath."

Rex laughed, a deep, genuine sound that caused his massive hair to shake magnificently. "Fair enough, babe. For you, I'll experiment with a new power balance."

As they continued their conversation, Madison couldn't help but marvel at the strange situation her best friend had found herself in. Of all the superhero origin stories she'd heard, "guy discovers his BO makes him stronger and his hair bigger" had to be the most bizarre.

Yet there was something almost endearing about Rex's genuine excitement over his discovery, despite its olfactory downside. His enthusiasm was as big as his hair, and his willingness to compromise for Brittany showed a sweetness beneath the sweat.

Later, as Rex went to order drinks for them, Madison turned to Brittany with a serious expression.

"Okay, so your boyfriend literally has the world's worst superpower," she stated flatly.

Brittany sighed, watching Rex at the counter. Even from here, she could see how his t-shirt strained against his back muscles, how his hair created a partial eclipse of the menu board behind him.

"I know," she admitted. "But look at him, Maddie. If the worst thing about him is that he occasionally smells like a locker room because it gives him supernatural fitness and hair volume... is that really so bad?"

Madison considered this, watching as Rex charmed the initially reluctant barista with his easy smile, his presence commanding attention despite—or perhaps because of—his unusual aura.

"I guess every superhero has their quirk," she conceded. "And hey, at least his superpower isn't, like, turning invisible whenever he eats cheese or something useless like that."

"Exactly," Brittany nodded enthusiastically. "Plus, think about it—the world's first verified superhuman, and he's my boyfriend."

"Just make sure he showers before any public appearances," Madison advised. "And maybe invest in some really strong air fresheners for your car."

"Already ordered them in bulk," Brittany assured her with a laugh.

As Rex returned to their table, his smile bright and his hair magnificent, both girls couldn't help but smile back. Rex Banner Esq., with his strange superpower and his hair as big as a nan, was certainly one of a kind. And in the world of Instagram-perfect boyfriends with their curated personas and filtered photos, there was something refreshingly authentic about a guy whose power came from embracing his most natural—if pungent—self.

Even if it meant occasionally holding their breath in his presence.

Binks PI: The Case of the Dross Disturbance

The crimson glow of Dross's twin suns crept through the dusty blinds of Jax Binks's office, casting long shadows across the worn metal flooring. Binks hunched over his desk, a cup of steaming stimcaf clutched in one weathered hand while the other tapped restlessly on the scarred surface of his desk. Twenty years as a Planetary Investigator had left its mark—both on his office and on him.

The holographic display before him flickered with incoming reports: three more disappearances in the Outer Ring districts, strange energy fluctuations near the

government quarter, and most disturbing of all, a series of encrypted messages intercepted between high-ranking officials that mentioned something called "Operation Whisper."

"Computer, cross-reference the disappearances with known associates of Minister Krell," Binks commanded, his voice gravelly from too many late nights and too much stimcaf.

"Processing," the computer responded in its feminine monotone. "No direct connections found."

Binks frowned. Of course it wouldn't be that easy. Nothing on Dross ever was. What had once been a mining colony on the edge of civilized space had grown into a sprawling planetary megalopolis, rife with corruption and secrets. As one of the few honest PIs left, Binks often found himself swimming against the current, but this case felt different. The patterns were too precise, the coincidences too convenient.

The comm unit on his wrist chirped suddenly, displaying the familiar code of his handler at the Dross Security Bureau.

"Binks," he answered curtly.

"We need to talk," came the terse reply from Director Sora. "In person. The usual place, one hour."

The connection terminated before Binks could respond. He drained his stimcaf and stood, his knees protesting the sudden movement. At fifty-three standard years, he wasn't old by Dross standards, but the planet's slightly heavier gravity and thin atmosphere wore on off-worlders like him, even after decades of residency.

He pulled his weathered leather jacket from the back of his chair and checked the charge on his blaster—force of habit more than necessity. The streets of Central Dross were relatively safe, at least during daylight hours. It was what lurked in the corridors of power that concerned him more.

As he locked his office door, his personal comm chirped with a different tone—his wife, Lina.

"Hey, are you coming home for dinner?" Her voice carried that familiar note of forced patience that had become increasingly common in recent months.

"Can't tonight," he replied, already moving toward the elevator. "Something's breaking on the case."

"It's always breaking, Jax," she sighed. "You said you'd be home more this month."

Guilt tugged at him. "I know, I know. But this is important. People are disappearing, Lina."

"They're always disappearing on Dross," she countered. "That's what happens on frontier worlds with corrupt governments."

"This is different," he insisted, stepping into the elevator. "I can feel it. I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Another sigh. "Fine. Just... be careful."

"Always am," he responded before ending the call, trying to ignore the knot of tension that had formed in his stomach. Fifteen years of marriage, and lately, every conversation seemed to end the same way—with distance expanding between them like the void between stars.

The usual place turned out to be an ancient diner in the Mid Levels, a forgotten establishment that catered to the working class of Dross with its affordable synthetic proteins and artificially flavored beverages. Director Sora sat in a corner booth, her severe features partially hidden by the hood of her gray cloak. Despite the clandestine nature of their meeting, Binks noted she still wore the insignia of the Security Bureau on her collar—a small act of defiance that spoke volumes about her character.

"You're late," she noted as he slid into the booth opposite her.

"Traffic in the transit tubes," he replied dismissively. "What's so urgent?"

Sora glanced around before sliding a small data chip across the table. "Three more officials have gone dark in the last twelve hours. No communications, no trackable movements."

Binks pocketed the chip. "Disappeared or just off-grid?"

"That's what you need to find out," she said. "The official stance is that they're attending a security conference on the southern continent."

"But you don't believe that."

"The conference was scheduled last minute, with no advance notice. And these three officials have nothing in common except they all opposed the new surveillance legislation that Governor Tarn is pushing through."

Binks let out a low whistle. "Political cleansing?"

"Maybe," Sora's eyes hardened. "Or maybe something worse. The energy fluctuations we've been monitoring are consistent with quantum entanglement communication."

"Off-world involvement?"

Sora nodded gravely. "Someone's pulling strings, and I don't think it's just our corrupt governor. This goes higher."

"The Confederacy?" Binks asked, referring to the loose alliance of systems that claimed jurisdiction over this sector.

"Or the Syndicate," she countered, naming the notorious criminal organization that operated in the shadows throughout the galaxy. "Either way, I need you on this, Binks. Official channels are compromised."

"When aren't they?" he muttered, accepting the small pouch of credit chips she slid across the table. "I'll start with the family members of the missing officials."

"Be discreet," she warned. "If this is what I think it is, they'll be watching."

"Discretion is my middle name," Binks replied with a grim smile.

"I thought it was 'Trouble,'" Sora retorted, the ghost of a smile crossing her typically stern features.

"That's my last name," he quipped, rising from the booth. "I'll be in touch when I have something."

Back out on the street, Binks pulled his collar up against the perpetual acid drizzle that gave the Mid Levels their characteristic smell—a mixture of rust and chemical preservatives. He had contacts to tap, informants to squeeze, and a growing sense of unease to contend with. Just another day in paradise.

His first stop was the residence of Councilor Vex, one of the missing officials. The apartment was located in the Upper Ring, where the wealthy and powerful of Dross insulated themselves from the planet's harsher realities with climate-controlled environments and private security.

The councilor's wife, a willowy woman with augmented features that betrayed expensive cosmetic modifications, received him in a sitting room decorated with artifacts from a dozen worlds.

"Mrs. Vex, I apologize for the intrusion," Binks began, showing his credentials. "I'm investigating some irregularities regarding the security conference your husband is attending."

"What irregularities?" she asked, her voice carrying the distinctive accent of Dross's upper crust.

"Protocol discrepancies," Binks lied smoothly. "When was the last time you communicated with your husband?"

Mrs. Vex's perfect features contracted into a frown. "Yesterday morning, before he left. He said the conference was classified and he might be unreachable for several days."

"Did he seem concerned about anything recently? Any unusual visitors or communications?"

She hesitated, and Binks caught the momentary tightening of her artificially plumped lips. "He mentioned some disagreement with the governor about the new surveillance proposal. Said it was too invasive, even for Dross standards."

"Anything else?" Binks pressed. "Any mentions of off-world contacts or unusual energy readings?"

"Energy readings?" She laughed, a practiced, melodious sound. "Councilor Vex is a politician, Mr. Binks, not a scientist. If you want to discuss energy fluctuations, perhaps you should visit the university sector."

It was a dismissal, but it also gave Binks his next lead. He thanked Mrs. Vex for her time and headed back to the transit tubes, this time bound for the sprawling complex that housed Dross University's research facilities.

The university sector was a stark contrast to both the opulence of the Upper Ring and the utilitarian functionality of the Mid Levels. Here, ancient stone buildings imported at great expense from Earth stood alongside modern research facilities, a physical representation of Dross's awkward transition from mining outpost to aspiring center of learning and culture.

Professor Zhen, a specialist in quantum physics, received Binks in a cluttered office overflowing with holographic models and antiquated paper books. Unlike most Drossians, Zhen appeared completely unaltered by cosmetic procedures, his age evident in the lines that creased his face and the gray that peppered his unruly hair.

"Energy fluctuations, you say?" Zhen repeated after Binks explained the purpose of his visit, carefully omitting any mention of missing officials. "Yes, we've been tracking those for weeks now. Highly unusual patterns, consistent with artificial quantum entanglement."

"What exactly does that mean in practical terms?" Binks asked.

Zhen's eyes lit up with the enthusiasm of an academic given a chance to explain his specialty. "Quantum entanglement allows for instantaneous communication across vast distances. It's primarily used for interstellar communications, but the energy signature we're detecting is different—more focused, more localized."

"As if someone on Dross is using it to communicate securely within the planet?" Binks suggested.

"Precisely!" Zhen exclaimed. "Though it would be incredibly wasteful. Like using a star cruiser to travel down the street."

"Unless secrecy was worth more than efficiency," Binks mused. "Have you been able to trace the source?"

Zhen's enthusiasm dimmed. "That's where it gets strange. The fluctuations seem to be coming from residential areas, not government or corporate facilities where you'd expect to find such technology."

"Which residential areas specifically?"

Zhen pulled up a holographic map of Dross, highlighting several districts. Binks frowned as he noted one of the strongest signals originated from his own neighborhood.

"Have you reported these findings to the authorities?" he asked carefully.

"Of course," Zhen replied. "Filed the appropriate forms with the Science Ministry last week. Haven't heard back, but that's bureaucracy for you."

Binks thanked the professor and left quickly, his mind racing. If someone was using quantum technology in residential areas, it suggested a level of infiltration far beyond what he or Director Sora had suspected. The Syndicate usually worked through fronts and proxies, not by embedding operatives directly in civilian populations.

As night fell on Dross, turning the omnipresent acid drizzle into a glowing mist under the city's artificial lights, Binks found himself drawn back to his own district. The coincidence was too great to ignore—one of the strongest energy signatures in his own backyard.

He moved cautiously through the familiar streets, his hand resting on the concealed blaster beneath his jacket. The residential block appeared normal: the same tired buildings, the same security drones patrolling at regular intervals, the same neighbors returning from late shifts at factories and offices.

His comm unit chirped again—Lina.

"Jax, are you going to be home at all tonight?" she asked, her voice tight with annoyance.

"Working a case," he replied distractedly, his attention focused on the scanner he'd procured from a contact in the technology district. The quantum energy readings were definitely stronger here.

"You're always working a case," she retorted. "Sometimes I think you married your job, not me."

"That's not fair, Lina," he began, then stopped short as his scanner spiked dramatically. The source of the energy readings was just ahead—his own apartment building.

His pulse quickened. "Lina, listen to me carefully. Are you home right now?"

"Of course I'm home," she replied, clearly puzzled by his sudden intensity. "Where else would I be at this hour?"

"Has anyone been there? Any unusual visitors or deliveries?"

"No, Jax, what's going on? You're scaring me."

"Lock the doors and stay away from the windows," he instructed, already moving quickly toward their building. "I'm on my way. Don't let anyone in but me."

He ended the call before she could respond, his mind racing through possibilities, none of them good. Had someone targeted his family because of his investigation? Was Lina in danger because of his work?

The elevator to their floor seemed agonizingly slow. When it finally arrived, Binks had his blaster drawn, caution overriding any concern about alarming his neighbors. The corridor was empty, silent except for the distant hum of the building's environmental systems.

Outside his apartment door, the scanner readings peaked, confirming his worst fears. Whatever quantum technology was being employed on Dross, it was centered here—in his home.

He punched in his security code with one hand, keeping his blaster ready with the other. The door slid open silently, revealing the familiar confines of the apartment he shared with Lina.

"Lina?" he called out, scanning the entryway for any signs of disturbance.

"In here," came her reply from the living area, her voice sounding oddly calm given his urgent warnings.

Binks moved cautiously through the apartment, scanner in one hand, blaster in the other. As he rounded the corner into the living room, he froze at the sight before him.

Lina sat comfortably on their sofa, sipping a glass of wine, looking completely unperturbed. Behind her, the wall-mounted entertainment system glowed with the opening credits of "Stellar Passions," her favorite holodrama series.

"What's going on?" she asked, eyeing his drawn blaster with a mixture of annoyance and concern. "And why are you pointing that thing in our home?"

Binks lowered his weapon slowly, confusion evident on his face. His scanner continued to register massive quantum energy fluctuations, the source clearly within the room.

"I'm tracking unusual energy signatures related to a case," he explained, moving further into the room, his scanner extended. "The readings led me here."

Lina rolled her eyes. "Always a case. Can't you leave work at the office for once?"

The scanner led Binks directly to the entertainment system. "What is this?" he asked, examining the unit more closely.

"What does it look like?" Lina replied defensively. "It's the new entertainment module I told you about last month. The one that gets the real-time transmissions from the Core Worlds instead of the delayed broadcasts we usually get on Dross."

Binks stared at the innocuous-looking device, realization slowly dawning. "This unit is using quantum entanglement technology to receive entertainment transmissions?"

"Of course," Lina said, as if it were obvious. "How else would we get real-time shows? The regular networks have a three-week delay because of lightspeed limitations."

"But quantum communication technology is restricted," Binks protested. "Heavily regulated. Usually reserved for government and military applications."

Lina shrugged. "Well, apparently not anymore. Half the women in my social circle have these units now. They're all the rage—no more waiting weeks to find out what happens on our shows."

Binks sank down onto the sofa beside her, his mind working furiously. "Where did these units come from? Who's distributing them?"

"Some new tech company," Lina replied vaguely. "TetraTech or QuantumView, something like that. Does it matter? It works beautifully." She gestured to the screen where the holodrama was now fully underway, the actors' photorealistic projections making it appear as if they were performing in the living room.

"It matters very much," Binks muttered, already sending a coded message to Director Sora. "Restricted technology suddenly appearing in civilian homes, officials who opposed surveillance legislation going missing..."

"Are you honestly trying to connect my entertainment system to your conspiracy theories?" Lina asked incredulously. "This is exactly why I didn't tell you about it directly. I knew you'd overreact."

"Wait," Binks turned to her sharply. "What do you mean you didn't tell me directly?"

Lina had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "I may have... encouraged you to stay out late working on cases for the past few weeks while I got caught up on my shows. These new units are wonderful, but they only work during specific broadcast windows due to the quantum limitations." She sighed. "And you always talk through the important parts."

Binks stared at his wife in disbelief. "You've been manufacturing reasons to keep me out of the house so you can watch your shows in peace?"

"Not manufacturing exactly," she protested. "Just... not discouraging your workaholic tendencies as much as usual."

"So there's no conspiracy? No missing officials? No danger?"

"I don't know about any officials," Lina replied, "but I can assure you the only conspiracy in this house is my desperate attempt to find out if Commander Rylex is really going to leave the Stellar Corps for his forbidden love."

As if in perfect timing, the holodrama reached an emotional climax, with the handsome commander declaring his undying devotion to a woman from a rival star system.

Binks sat back, trying to process this turn of events. His comm unit buzzed with an incoming message from Director Sora: "Confirmed reports of all three officials returning from southern conference. Stand down investigation."

"So all of this," Binks gestured vaguely around the room, "the missing officials, the energy readings, my entire case... it was just a series of coincidences colliding with your new entertainment system?"

"And your tendency to see conspiracies everywhere," Lina added, patting his hand affectionately. "Not everything on Dross is a sinister plot, Jax."

"The timing is still suspicious," he muttered. "And these quantum units being distributed to civilians..."

"Is probably just some corporation finding a loophole in the regulations," Lina finished for him. "Which, knowing Dross, they probably paid good money to create."

Binks couldn't argue with that assessment. Corruption on Dross usually took the form of greased palms and regulatory exemptions, not elaborate conspiracies.

He holstered his blaster and set the scanner aside, feeling somewhat foolish. Twenty years as a PI had trained him to see patterns where others saw coincidence, to suspect

malice where others accepted happenstance. It made him good at his job but sometimes blinded him to simpler explanations.

Lina scooted closer to him on the sofa, offering her glass of wine as a peace offering. "Now that you're here, why don't you stay? We can watch together."

"You just said I talk through the important parts," he reminded her.

"Yes, but now that I'm caught up, I can pause and explain things to you properly," she replied with a smile. "Besides, I miss you. Your cases have been keeping you away too much lately."

Binks accepted the glass, taking a long sip as he considered the irony of the situation. He'd been racing around Dross, convinced he was on the trail of a massive conspiracy, only to discover the source of the mystery was his own wife's desire for uninterrupted entertainment.

"So, what's happening now?" he asked, gesturing to the holodrama where the commander and his lover were engaged in what appeared to be a heated argument against a backdrop of exploding starships.

"Oh, that's complicated," Lina began enthusiastically. "You see, Commander Rylex discovered that Lady Elara is actually the long-lost daughter of his greatest enemy, but she doesn't know it yet, and there's this prophecy..."

As she launched into an elaborate explanation of the convoluted plot, Binks found himself chuckling inwardly at the absurdity of his situation. The great detective, Jax Binks, PI, had just solved the case of the Dross disturbance—and the culprit was domestic tranquility and his wife's holodrama addiction.

Some mysteries, it seemed, were better left to the realm of fiction.

The End

What a load of toss s(b)s

A Heavenly Bench: Wallace, Hendrix, and the Water

The transition had been unexpectedly gentle. One moment, David Foster Wallace was confined to the unbearable prison of his thoughts, and the next, he was simply...

elsewhere. The crushing weight that had pressed against his consciousness for decades had mysteriously lifted, like stepping from a steam room into crisp mountain air.

Heaven, if that's what this was, looked surprisingly mundane—a sprawling park with impossibly green grass, trees that seemed to shimmer with an inner light, and benches situated at aesthetically perfect intervals. The sky above defied description; it wasn't exactly blue, but rather a color Wallace had never seen before, one that somehow communicated infinite peace.

He wandered for what might have been minutes or hours—time felt irrelevant here—until he spotted a solitary figure seated on a bench beneath a massive weeping willow. The man's unmistakable wildfire of hair framed a face that Wallace recognized immediately from album covers and posters.

"Jimi Hendrix," Wallace muttered to himself, surprised at how ordinary the words sounded in this extraordinary place.

Hendrix looked up, a lazy smile spreading across his face. His fingers, which had been idly plucking at invisible guitar strings, paused their phantom performance. Beside him on the bench sat a bottle of clear liquid and what appeared to be a perfectly rolled joint.

"David Foster Wallace," Hendrix replied, his voice musical even when speaking. "Been wondering when you'd show up. Take a load off, man."

Wallace approached cautiously, his analytical mind still attempting to categorize and deconstruct this experience. "This is... unexpected," he said, settling onto the bench.

"Death usually is," Hendrix chuckled, offering Wallace the bottle. "Vodka? The good stuff, not that well garbage."

Wallace stared at the bottle, a complex wave of emotions washing over him. "I, uh... I had to stop. Back there. The drinking, the smoking. It was... I enjoyed it too much. It became problematic."

Hendrix nodded knowingly, his eyes filled with a compassion that suggested deep understanding. "Yeah, me too, brother. Too much of everything. It's kinda what got me here earlier than scheduled." He gestured broadly at their surroundings. "But heaven's different. They're chill here. Do what you want—it doesn't hurt anybody anymore, including yourself."

Wallace's brow furrowed. The idea seemed too simple, too easy after years of struggle. "That's it? Just... do what you want?"

"That's it," Hendrix confirmed, taking a swig from the bottle before passing it to Wallace again. "No hangovers, no addiction, no spiraling thoughts. Just the good parts."

After a moment's hesitation, Wallace accepted the bottle. The vodka felt cool against his lips, and as it slid down his throat, it brought warmth without burning. The familiar sensation awakened memories, but without the usual accompanying shame or fear of losing control.

Hendrix then offered the joint, which Wallace also accepted. The smoke filled his lungs, smooth and sweet, delivering a gentle euphoria without the paranoia that had plagued his earthly experiences.

A smile—genuine, unforced, unburdened—spread across Wallace's face for the first time in years. It felt like a homecoming to a place he'd never been.

"So," Hendrix said, leaning back against the bench, "how's TV doing these days? Last I checked, it was all 'Laugh-In' and 'The Twilight Zone.' That Rod Serling, man, he was onto something."

Wallace chuckled, passing the joint back. "TV actually got... interesting. Complex. There was this shift toward narrative sophistication that really accelerated in the late '90s and early 2000s. Shows started exploring the human condition with a depth previously reserved for literature."

"No kidding?" Hendrix seemed genuinely intrigued. "Like what?"

"Well, there was this guy, David Lynch," Wallace began, his eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "He created this show called 'Twin Peaks' that would absolutely blow your mind. Surrealist narrative structures, dream logic, subversions of viewer expectations. Changed the whole medium."

The moment Lynch's name left Wallace's lips, a third figure materialized nearby—a man with distinctive white hair standing straight up, wearing a crisp white shirt buttoned to the collar.

"Hello, boys," David Lynch said, his voice carrying that peculiar cadence that made ordinary words sound profound. "How's the water?"

Ode to Sussex on Wheels
(A Limerick Sequence)

There once was a man on a chair,
With wheels that could zoom through the air;
He raced o'er the downs,
Past the villages' frowns,
And sang with the lark in the glare.

The hills rolled like giants in sleep,
While hedgerows grew tangled and deep;
His motor would whine,
Up the rough chalky spine,
And down he would courageously leap.

The hawthorn would scent the bright lane,
While gorse lit the hillsides with flame;
Though ruts bruised his ride,
He would laugh and he'd glide,
And the birds shrieked their praise of his name.

The streams over pebbles would prance,
As he gave every bump a bold glance;
Through the mud and the briar,
His wheels, never tired,
Spun a wild, unstoppable dance.

With clouds spinning white overhead,
And winds weaving songs round his head,
He cried to the skies:
"I am boundless — I rise!
The old earth is my thoroughbred!"

Through Sussex he roved without fear,
In sunblast, in stormcloud, in cheer;
For the heart that beats strong,
Finds its place all along,
Whether striding — or steering — through here.

(Total: 6 limericks — ~240 words.)

The Case of Celestial Improvisation

CELESTIAL COURT, ETERNITY DIVISION

Case No. ∞-27593: *In the Matter of Improvisational Performance*

The Celestial Courthouse gleamed with an impossible radiance, its marble pillars stretching upward beyond perception. Light emanated not from any visible source but from the very substance of everything. The Grand Chamber of Divine Adjudication had been arranged for what promised to be one of the more peculiar cases in recent millennia.

Judge Methuselah, wearing robes that shimmered with constellations, adjusted his spectacles, which weren't necessary for his vision but which he found lent him an air of scholarly authority. The gallery was filled with an assortment of souls, angels, minor deities, and cosmic forces who had taken corporeal form for the occasion.

"All rise for the Honorable Judge Methuselah, presiding for his seven-thousandth year," announced the bailiff, a six-winged seraph whose voice resonated through the chamber like a heavenly chorus.

The crowd rose in a synchronized motion that somehow managed to be both chaotic and perfectly harmonious. Judge Methuselah settled into his bench, which was carved from a single piece of material that resembled both cloud and marble simultaneously.

"Be seated," he said, his voice gentle yet filling every corner of the vast chamber. "We gather today to hear case number infinity-27593, titled 'The Divine Attribution of Improvisational Performance.' The Heavenly Prosecutor will present the case seeking to determine the responsible party for the creation of improvisation, as no celestial entity has claimed responsibility for this... peculiar art form."

The Heavenly Prosecutor, Zophiel, approached the central podium. Her form was difficult to look at directly—a shifting amalgamation of justice and mercy, with wings that occasionally manifested when she made particularly emphatic points.

"Thank you, Your Honor," she began. "This court has been convened to resolve a matter of creative attribution. For centuries, mortals have engaged in an art form known as 'improvisation'—spontaneous performance without preparation. The practice has brought both joy and excruciating awkwardness to humanity. Yet, despite our meticulous records of divine inspiration, no celestial being has ever claimed responsibility for its creation."

Judge Methuselah nodded. "And why does Heaven seek this information? Is this merely a clerical matter?"

"Not entirely, Your Honor," replied Zophiel. "The art of improvisation has had profound effects on human development. It has fostered creativity, spontaneity, and connection. However, it has also led to countless moments of discomfort, secondhand embarrassment, and the phenomenon known as 'comedy open mic nights.' We seek to properly attribute both the credit and, frankly, the blame."

A murmur rippled through the gallery.

"Very well," said the Judge. "Present your first witness."

Zophiel nodded. "The prosecution calls Thespis, patron of theater."

A figure in an ancient Greek mask approached the witness stand. As he took his seat, the mask melted away to reveal a face that somehow contained all the expressions of human emotion simultaneously.

"State your name and celestial function for the record," requested the Judge.

"I am Thespis, Your Honor. Former mortal, now elevated to divine steward of theatrical arts. I oversee dramatic inspiration, catharsis, and the occasional divine intervention when community theater productions of 'Oklahoma!' need assistance."

Zophiel approached. "Thespis, you are widely credited with the invention of the actor—separating performers from the chorus in Ancient Greece. Did you also create improvisation?"

Thespis looked offended. "Absolutely not! My gift to humanity was structure, character development, the arc of narrative! Improvisation undermines the playwright's vision. Have you seen what happens when actors go 'off-book'? Chaos, I tell you. Divine, carefully constructed dialogue tossed aside for... for jokes about bodily functions or whatever pops into their unprepared minds!"

"So you deny responsibility?"

"Vehemently. My theatrical contributions are measured, intentional. Why, the very suggestion that I would create something so..." he shuddered dramatically, "...unrehearsed is preposterous."

After Thespis was dismissed, several more witnesses followed. Terpsichore, the muse of dance, testified that while she inspired spontaneous movement, she preferred choreography with "at least some planning." Polyhymnia, muse of sacred poetry, was scandalized by the very suggestion that she would encourage people to "make it up as they go along."

The questioning continued through lunch (ambrosia and manna, with cloud cake for dessert). The court reconvened to hear from Dionysus, who arrived slightly late and appeared to be in an altered state of consciousness.

"Dionysus," Zophiel began, "as the god of theater, wine, and ecstatic experiences, many have suggested you might be responsible for improvisational performance."

Dionysus lounged in the witness chair, somehow making the formal setting look like a comfortable symposium couch. "Look, I'm flattered, truly. It sounds like something I'd do—spontaneity, breaking down inhibitions, the raw authenticity of unplanned expression." He waved a goblet that continually refilled itself. "But even I have standards. Have you seen an improv troupe perform 'Scenes from a Hat'? Even in my most... celebratory moments, I wouldn't inflict that on humanity."

The day wore on. Momus, deity of mockery, denied involvement but expressed admiration for improv's potential for awkwardness. Hermes suggested it might have been a practical joke but swore on the River Styx it wasn't his doing.

As the afternoon session was about to conclude, the courthouse doors opened with a thunderous boom. A figure in a simple janitor's uniform pushed a mop across the gleaming floor.

"Pardon me," he said, not looking up. "Just need to get this spot here."

Judge Methuselah peered over his spectacles. "Excuse me, maintenance is scheduled after court hours."

The janitor looked up, revealing eyes that contained the depths of all creation. The entire courthouse immediately dropped to their knees in recognition, except for Judge Methuselah, who simply inclined his head respectfully.

"Oh, don't mind me," said the Creator, continuing to mop. "I just couldn't help overhearing your case today. Quite interesting."

Zophiel, still kneeling, spoke hesitantly. "Lord, we did not summon You as a witness, as we believed matters of artistic attribution to be beneath Your direct attention."

"Nonsense!" replied the Creator cheerfully. "I love a good court drama. Better than most of the shows you all have been inspiring lately." He leaned on His mop. "Regarding improvisation... it's complicated."

The gallery held its collective breath.

"You see," He continued, "improvisation wasn't exactly created. Not in the traditional sense."

Judge Methuselah leaned forward. "Please explain, if You would, Lord."

"Well, it's more like improvisation was... discovered. Or perhaps uncovered." The Creator set aside His mop and pulled up a chair that hadn't been there before. "When I created the universe, I established certain natural laws—gravity, thermodynamics, the speed of light, and so forth."

He gestured expansively, and the courtroom briefly transformed into a view of the cosmos, stars spinning around them.

"But I also created... spaces. Gaps, if you will. Areas of possibility that weren't fully defined. You might call them quantum uncertainties or cosmic improvisation zones." The universe around them showed pockets of swirling potential, neither formed nor unformed. "These spaces allow for genuine spontaneity within the framework of creation."

The Heavenly Prosecutor looked perplexed. "But Lord, this case concerns the specific art form practiced by mortals. Surely someone directed humans to develop theatrical and comedic improvisation?"

The Creator smiled. "That's where it gets interesting. Humans discovered improvisation independently by observing the natural world. They noticed how birds don't rehearse their songs, how water finds its path down a mountain without a script, how conversations naturally unfold. They recognized the divine improvisation already embedded in creation and simply named it, practiced it, formalized it in their own way."

A commotion arose from the gallery as celestial beings whispered among themselves. Judge Methuselah banged his gavel, which produced not a sound but a feeling of immediate calm throughout the chamber.

"Order," he said unnecessarily, as perfect order had already been established. "Lord, are You suggesting that no specific divine entity can claim credit for improvisation because it emerges from the fundamental nature of reality itself?"

"Precisely!" The Creator beamed like a professor whose student had grasped a difficult concept. "Though, if you want to get technical about it..." He leaned in conspiratorially, "I suppose I did create the conditions that made improvisation inevitable. So in a roundabout way, yes, I'm responsible—but only in the same way I'm responsible for everything."

"But the quality varies so dramatically!" objected Apollo from the gallery. "Some improvisational performance is transcendent, while some is..." he shuddered delicately, "painfully awkward."

"That's the beauty of it!" replied the Creator. "When I granted free will, I didn't guarantee quality—only possibility. Humans have the freedom to be brilliant or terrible, often in the same performance."

Zophiel cleared her throat. "So for the court record, You're testifying that improvisation is an emergent property of creation itself, discovered rather than divinely inspired in the traditional sense?"

"Yes, though I would add that all divine inspiration works within this framework of possibility," said the Creator. "Your job as muses, patrons, and guides isn't to create something from nothing—that's My department—but to help humans recognize and develop what's already possible within the framework I've established."

A thoughtful silence fell over the courtroom.

Finally, Judge Methuselah spoke. "Given this testimony, I am prepared to rule. This court finds that improvisation as practiced by mortals is an emergent property of creation itself. No single deity or celestial entity is solely responsible for its specific development as an art form. Rather, it reflects the inherent spontaneity built into the fabric of reality."

He banged his gavel again, and this time it produced a sound like the harmony of all possible music at once.

"However," he continued, "I am establishing a new celestial committee to oversee improvisational quality control. Too many mortals are suffering through bad improv shows. Apollo, Thalia, and Momus will serve as co-chairs, with Dionysus as a consulting member."

Dionysus raised his goblet in approval while Apollo looked slightly pained at his new assignment.

As the court adjourned, celestial beings filed out, discussing the implications of the ruling. The Creator had disappeared, though His mop remained, standing perfectly balanced against a pillar.

Gabriel, the archangel of communication, approached Zophiel as she gathered her notes.

"Fascinating case," he said. "Though I wonder if anyone will address the related matter of karaoke."

"One catastrophe at a time, Gabriel," Zophiel replied with a weary smile. "One catastrophe at a time."

Outside the courthouse, on the observation deck overlooking Earth, several minor muses gathered to watch humans engaged in improvisational activities—children playing make-believe games, jazz musicians riffing off each other's cues, commuters adapting to

unexpected route changes, and yes, an improv troupe in Chicago making an audience both laugh and cringe simultaneously.

Calliope, the chief of the muses, smiled as she watched. "Perhaps we've been thinking about this all wrong," she mused. "Maybe our job isn't to create or control human creativity, but simply to help them recognize and develop the divine spontaneity already within them."

Beside her, unnoticed, the janitor nodded approvingly as He resumed His mopping, humming an impromptu tune that somehow contained elements of all music ever created and yet to be created.

In a small theater in New York, an improviser stepped forward and asked the audience, "Can I get a suggestion for an unusual court case?" A voice from the back shouted, "Who invented improv?" The performers looked at each other, momentarily surprised by the synchronicity, then stepped forward to begin their scene.

Above them, the celestial committee watched with clipboards in hand, ready to evaluate.

Dionysus leaned toward Apollo. "Ten celestial credits says they go for the easy joke first."

Apollo sighed. "No bet."

And so it was that improvisation continued throughout the cosmos, neither fully divine nor fully mortal, but somewhere in the beautiful, spontaneous space in between—just as it had always been and would always be, a reflection of the ultimate truth that even within the most perfect divine plan, there is always room for surprise.

THE END

Title: "Woke Brain Jail Blues"

The crash was louder than expected.

One second, Joss "The Sauce" McGee — 23-year-old stand-up menace and certified bloody legend — was killing it at a mic night with a bit about dolphin consent and AirPods. The next, he'd fallen through a trapdoor of sound and consequence, straight into what looked like a cross between a sterile hospital and an aggressively themed yoga studio.

He landed in a beanbag.

"Welcome to Woke Brain Jail," said a voice, smooth as pudding and twice as smug.

Joss turned. There stood a man — or what passed for one — dressed in highlighter yellow scrubs with "BALANCE IS TRUTH" stitched across the chest in Comic Sans. His hair was made of swirling thoughts and badly formatted tweets.

"I'm Hectorb. Your brain buddy," the man beamed. "Pronouns pending. You good?"

"I think I hit my head on a metaphor," Joss muttered.

"Classic onboarding symptom," Hectorb chirped, pulling a clipboard out of nowhere. "So, quick context: you're here because you made a joke about Victorian orphans eating gluten, which unfortunately triggered a twelve-part essay thread from a novelist who owns a mushroom farm."

"That's ridiculous," Joss said.

"And... you also suggested slugs might be depressed."

Joss blinked. "That bit *killed*."

"Exactly. Which is why you're in *jail*."

They walked the corridor of concepts. Giant posters lined the walls: "Irony Is Violence", "Puns Are the Gateway Drug to Oppression", and "Satire Has Been Temporarily Disabled for Maintenance."

The nurses floated by.

Mutant, fit, and fierce — skin like patent leather, eyes cold as air-conditioned kombucha. They moved like sexy Terminators at a Pilates class. Their uniforms were weaponized: cropped lab coats, electric thigh-highs, and clipboards capable of delivering memory shocks.

"Don't flirt," Hectorb warned. "They're trained to detect levity within a 5-meter radius."

Behind the nurses scuttled the Gimp Boys — latex-clad, clipboard-wielding fun police with faces obscured by leather masks shaped like emojis. They squeaked when they moved, like sinister dog toys, and occasionally screamed "CHECK YOURSELF" at random passersby.

One inmate sneezed.

A Gimp Boy tased him for *performative vulnerability*.

Joss was shown his mind cell. White walls, a single thought plant (plastic), and a memory screen looping the worst parts of his past performances, edited for guilt.

"You'll get used to the echo of your sins," Hectorb offered. "Now, let's talk loopholes."

Joss leaned in. Finally, the juice.

"Woke Brain Jail isn't *real* real," Hectorb said, eyes darting. "It's mostly simulation. Thought prison with a heavy rules plugin. Every joke is scanned by the Algorithm — a consciousness modulator designed to detect problematic undertones, adjacent offensiveness, or unexamined privilege clusters."

"So... no jokes at all?"

"Well... almost."

Hectorb leaned closer, conspiratorially. "We've found workarounds. Layered irony. Sarcastic sincerity loops. Some of us smuggle in nuance through interpretive dance."

"That's... insane."

"You're in a virtual jail run by mutant nurses and patrolled by horned-up emoji gimps. Insanity's *standard issue*."

The story — the rebellion — started with a drop.

One of the mutant nurses, mid-shift and exhausted from flagging metaphors as microaggressions, bent over to reset a tolerance node. From her cleavage fell an artifact — a bright pink pencil case emblazoned with "Live, Love, Laugh" in flowy, tragic font.

It bounced. It glowed. It hummed with forbidden power.

"And we *knew*," Hectorb said, eyes shining. "It meant there's still *cracks* in the simulation. Somewhere in the code, someone once *lived*. Someone once *laughed*."

They built from that moment. Secret puns carved into floor tiles. Irony tattoos disguised as emotional affirmations. A resistance, built not on anger — that had long since been regulated — but on *absurdity*. Raw, unfiltered nonsense.

The Resistance had a name.

The Jokers Without Borders™.

Joss's cellmate was one of them — a guy who only spoke in reversed sitcom laugh tracks and communicated danger through interpretive jazz hands.

Every week, they held secret "stand-under" nights, where instead of stand-up, inmates whispered non-literal setups into pillows, and others wrote down the punchlines on invisible ink napkins.

The funniest joke anyone ever told was never even heard — just *felt*.

But the Algorithm was learning.

That week, Gimp Boy patrols doubled. The mutant nurses developed a sixth sense for irony. One poor inmate got reconditioned for smirking at a pun involving celery and serial killers.

Worse, the Pencil Case had vanished.

Rumors swirled: it had been confiscated. Taken to the Core, the central mainframe of the simulation — a glowing nexus guarded by the *Queen Nurse*, a towering being of absolute poise and devastating TikTok following.

"She uses the pencil case as a paperweight for her trauma reports," Hectorb whispered one night. "We need to get it back."

Joss was ready.

He'd had enough of this place. Enough of walking on comedic eggshells. Enough of being tased for *smiling at a cloud*. He'd come to Woke Brain Jail a legend. He'd leave a myth.

The plan was simple.

Cause a distraction at the daily Affirmation Rally (mandatory). While the inmates chanted "My Truth Is Your Mirror," Joss would slip past the guards, reach the Core, retrieve the pencil case, and upload its contents into the algorithm — resetting its humor parameters.

The risk?

Total brain cancellation. Neural flattening. A lifetime of being only able to say "ouch" and "problematic."

It worked.

Almost.

The rally exploded into chaos when Hectorb — now naked except for a clown nose and a sash that read *"IRONY LIVES"* — leapt onto the platform and began performing a one-horse mime routine about systemic bias and yogurt.

Gimp Boys swarmed. Nurses shrieked. The algorithm began spitting error messages.

Joss bolted for the Core.

Doors opened like dreams collapsing. Lights pulsed with judgment. Then he saw it.

The pencil case.

Floating on a dais of reclaimed trauma. Glittering. Radiating *intent.*

He reached out.

And the Queen Nurse stepped from the shadows.

Ten feet tall. Clad in latex-linen fusion. Eyeliner made of pure pressure.

"I see you, Jester," she said.

Joss didn't speak. His hand hovered over the case.

"You want laughter?" she hissed. "You want chaos again?"

"I want *balance,*" he said, surprising himself. "You've overcorrected. You've turned healing into censorship. Shame into structure."

"You'd undo it all... for a joke?"

Joss grabbed the case.

"Not a joke," he said. "A *punchline.*"

He opened it.

Inside: a single slip of paper.

A joke.

He read it.

He laughed.

The simulation shuddered.

Alarms wailed. Sirens sang. Reality cracked around him.

The Queen Nurse screamed, disintegrating into glitter and unresolved trauma.

The walls folded.

The Gimp Boys short-circuited, spasming into Macarena loops.

Joss floated.

And then — darkness.

He woke up... in a green room.

Stage lights.

Applause.

A voice overhead: "And now, the controversial comeback of Joss McGee — reformed, reset, and ready for safe laughter!"

Joss blinked.

Behind him, a man appeared.

Hair made of static. Scrubs glowing neon.

"Hectorb?" Joss asked.

The man smiled.

"You've reached Phase Two," he said. "The *real* simulation begins now."

TO BE CONTINUED...

Dear Privilege,

You slippery, smooth-skinned bastard.

Don't pretend you don't hear me just because you've got AirPods in and the newest, algorithmically-curated playlist of baroque hop—whatever that is—playing gently over the whispers of generational wealth and Whole Foods hummus commercials. You hear me. You hear me loud and clear because you are me. We've cohabited this neurotic meat

tube for decades now, and frankly, I'm sick of you and your passive-aggressive Post-it Notes stuck to every inch of my psyche:

- "Don't say that. It's problematic."
- "You didn't *earn* that job; you just have great *teeth*."
- "Be *grateful*. Not everyone gets therapy with a dog in the room."

I want to punch you in the face, Privilege, but you'd just call your lawyer—your uncle, probably—and sue me for assault against a conceptual construct.

Let's just admit it. You're the golden retriever of social capital: adored, trusted, and incapable of self-awareness. You wag your tail at opportunity, and people just—what? Hand you internships? Smile warmly and say, "Take your time." You've never been told to "hurry up and finish mopping" in your life. You've never mopped. You don't *know* mop.

And let me be clear, before you weaponize irony or make some postmodern detour about "identity being a construct, bro"—I see you. I see your whole shtick. You love to play dumb. You sit at the dinner table of discourse sipping biodynamic rosé and nodding solemnly when others mention injustice, but you never pick up the check. You never do the dishes. You just... exist, like an artisanal fungus, blooming on top of a very expensive loaf of bread labeled *Gluten-Free Guilt*.

You are the reason I'm incapable of authentic interaction at parties.

You're the reason I reflexively cite authors I've only half-read. You're the reason I can't order a coffee without feeling like I've colonized someone's afternoon. You've turned my inner monologue into a 24/7 thinkpiece, a never-ending Atlantic sidebar titled *"Am I the Problem? A Memoir."*

And don't even start with your "But I never asked to be born this way" routine. Neither did I, asshole. You just *showed up*, uninvited, wearing a cashmere sweater and a Yale hoodie, muttering something about Roth IRAs while I was trying to form a personality in middle school. I wanted angst and a band and acne. You gave me lacrosse and a therapist named Caden who encourages "emotional landscaping." Whatever that means.

Do you remember the time we did AmeriCorps? Of course you don't.

You blacked out for most of it, drunk on moral superiority and ethically-sourced trail mix. I did the volunteering. You did the Instagramming. You kept saying things like, "God, it's so *humbling*," which is the exact opposite of humility. It's like describing yourself as *authentic* on LinkedIn. Humility is quiet. You? You bought a Patagonia fleece that said HUMILITY in a sans serif font and wore it to every brunch for two years.

Oh, and the women you've dated. Jesus. You introduced yourself as a "feminist ally" while interrupting them mid-sentence to explain Judith Butler. You read *one* article about emotional labor and now you sigh loudly every time you do the dishes, like a martyr of the domestic arts. I caught you once, standing in front of the mirror practicing your *"surprised face"* for when a woman says something clever. You absolute degenerate.

But the worst part—THE WORST PART—is that you think you're evolving.

You think buying oat milk instead of dairy redeems you from 300 years of inherited economic advantage. You think posting a black square made you an activist. You think knowing the names of four Indigenous tribes makes up for that one year you wore a poncho and called it "spiritual."

Here's what I want from you, Privilege:

Shut the hell up.

Stop narrating my thoughts like a washed-up Ginsberg in a Brooklyn dive bar. Stop whispering "you deserve this" every time I get a callback. Stop thinking performative guilt is a substitute for actual change. You are not an underdog. You are the referee who gives himself MVP.

You are a walking TED Talk in Allbirds. A thinkpiece in cargo pants. A human kombucha scoby.

But here's the rub, the twist, the absolute Kafkaesque nightmare of it all: I need you.

You're the reason doors open. You're the reason I know which fork to use at dinner and how to fake laugh at a consultant's joke. You've embedded yourself so thoroughly in my operating system that deleting you might crash the whole damn program. You are both the virus *and* the WiFi.

So what do we do, Privilege?

I can't kill you—you're me. I can't outrun you—you jog at a steady 7.5 mph and own high-performance footwear. I can't even shame you, because you metabolize guilt into smugness like some kind of emotional distillery.

Maybe—MAYBE—the best I can do is keep you on a leash. A tight one. Walk you twice a day, feed you context and compassion, and keep you from biting the neighbors.

And maybe one day, if you're very good, you'll learn to shut up and listen.

But until then, I'll be here—me, with you, in this walking contradiction of a body—trying to do the right thing while you hum *Fleet Foxes* and ask whether this counts as praxis.

Sincerely,
Your Host
(a.k.a. The Self-Aware Douchebag Formerly Known as You)

The Case of Celestial Improvisation

CELESTIAL COURT, ETERNITY DIVISION

Case No. ∞-27593: *In the Matter of Improvisational Performance*

The Celestial Courthouse gleamed with an impossible radiance, its marble pillars stretching upward beyond perception. Light emanated not from any visible source but from the very substance of everything. The Grand Chamber of Divine Adjudication had been arranged for what promised to be one of the more peculiar cases in recent millennia.

Judge Methuselah, wearing robes that shimmered with constellations, adjusted his spectacles, which weren't necessary for his vision but which he found lent him an air of scholarly authority. The gallery was filled with an assortment of souls, angels, minor deities, and cosmic forces who had taken corporeal form for the occasion.

"All rise for the Honorable Judge Methuselah, presiding for his seven-thousandth year," announced the bailiff, a six-winged seraph whose voice resonated through the chamber like a heavenly chorus.

The crowd rose in a synchronized motion that somehow managed to be both chaotic and perfectly harmonious. Judge Methuselah settled into his bench, which was carved from a single piece of material that resembled both cloud and marble simultaneously.

"Be seated," he said, his voice gentle yet filling every corner of the vast chamber. "We gather today to hear case number infinity-27593, titled 'The Divine Attribution of Improvisational Performance.' The Heavenly Prosecutor will present the case seeking to determine the responsible party for the creation of improvisation, as no celestial entity has claimed responsibility for this... peculiar art form."

The Heavenly Prosecutor, Zophiel, approached the central podium. Her form was difficult to look at directly—a shifting amalgamation of justice and mercy, with wings that occasionally manifested when she made particularly emphatic points.

"Thank you, Your Honor," she began. "This court has been convened to resolve a matter of creative attribution. For centuries, mortals have engaged in an art form known as

'improvisation'—spontaneous performance without preparation. The practice has brought both joy and excruciating awkwardness to humanity. Yet, despite our meticulous records of divine inspiration, no celestial being has ever claimed responsibility for its creation."

Judge Methuselah nodded. "And why does Heaven seek this information? Is this merely a clerical matter?"

"Not entirely, Your Honor," replied Zophiel. "The art of improvisation has had profound effects on human development. It has fostered creativity, spontaneity, and connection. However, it has also led to countless moments of discomfort, secondhand embarrassment, and the phenomenon known as 'comedy open mic nights.' We seek to properly attribute both the credit and, frankly, the blame."

A murmur rippled through the gallery.

"Very well," said the Judge. "Present your first witness."

Zophiel nodded. "The prosecution calls Thespis, patron of theater."

A figure in an ancient Greek mask approached the witness stand. As he took his seat, the mask melted away to reveal a face that somehow contained all the expressions of human emotion simultaneously.

"State your name and celestial function for the record," requested the Judge.

"I am Thespis, Your Honor. Former mortal, now elevated to divine steward of theatrical arts. I oversee dramatic inspiration, catharsis, and the occasional divine intervention when community theater productions of 'Oklahoma!' need assistance."

Zophiel approached. "Thespis, you are widely credited with the invention of the actor—separating performers from the chorus in Ancient Greece. Did you also create improvisation?"

Thespis looked offended. "Absolutely not! My gift to humanity was structure, character development, the arc of narrative! Improvisation undermines the playwright's vision. Have you seen what happens when actors go 'off-book'? Chaos, I tell you. Divine, carefully constructed dialogue tossed aside for... for jokes about bodily functions or whatever pops into their unprepared minds!"

"So you deny responsibility?"

"Vehemently. My theatrical contributions are measured, intentional. Why, the very suggestion that I would create something so..." he shuddered dramatically, "...unrehearsed is preposterous."

After Thespis was dismissed, several more witnesses followed. Terpsichore, the muse of dance, testified that while she inspired spontaneous movement, she preferred choreography with "at least some planning." Polyhymnia, muse of sacred poetry, was scandalized by the very suggestion that she would encourage people to "make it up as they go along."

The questioning continued through lunch (ambrosia and manna, with cloud cake for dessert). The court reconvened to hear from Dionysus, who arrived slightly late and appeared to be in an altered state of consciousness.

"Dionysus," Zophiel began, "as the god of theater, wine, and ecstatic experiences, many have suggested you might be responsible for improvisational performance."

Dionysus lounged in the witness chair, somehow making the formal setting look like a comfortable symposium couch. "Look, I'm flattered, truly. It sounds like something I'd do—spontaneity, breaking down inhibitions, the raw authenticity of unplanned expression." He waved a goblet that continually refilled itself. "But even I have standards. Have you seen an improv troupe perform 'Scenes from a Hat'? Even in my most... celebratory moments, I wouldn't inflict that on humanity."

The day wore on. Momus, deity of mockery, denied involvement but expressed admiration for improv's potential for awkwardness. Hermes suggested it might have been a practical joke but swore on the River Styx it wasn't his doing.

As the afternoon session was about to conclude, the courthouse doors opened with a thunderous boom. A figure in a simple janitor's uniform pushed a mop across the gleaming floor.

"Pardon me," he said, not looking up. "Just need to get this spot here."

Judge Methuselah peered over his spectacles. "Excuse me, maintenance is scheduled after court hours."

The janitor looked up, revealing eyes that contained the depths of all creation. The entire courthouse immediately dropped to their knees in recognition, except for Judge Methuselah, who simply inclined his head respectfully.

"Oh, don't mind me," said the Creator, continuing to mop. "I just couldn't help overhearing your case today. Quite interesting."

Zophiel, still kneeling, spoke hesitantly. "Lord, we did not summon You as a witness, as we believed matters of artistic attribution to be beneath Your direct attention."

"Nonsense!" replied the Creator cheerfully. "I love a good court drama. Better than most of the shows you all have been inspiring lately." He leaned on His mop. "Regarding improvisation... it's complicated."

The gallery held its collective breath.

"You see," He continued, "improvisation wasn't exactly created. Not in the traditional sense."

Judge Methuselah leaned forward. "Please explain, if You would, Lord."

"Well, it's more like improvisation was... discovered. Or perhaps uncovered." The Creator set aside His mop and pulled up a chair that hadn't been there before. "When I created the universe, I established certain natural laws—gravity, thermodynamics, the speed of light, and so forth."

He gestured expansively, and the courtroom briefly transformed into a view of the cosmos, stars spinning around them.

"But I also created... spaces. Gaps, if you will. Areas of possibility that weren't fully defined. You might call them quantum uncertainties or cosmic improvisation zones." The universe around them showed pockets of swirling potential, neither formed nor unformed. "These spaces allow for genuine spontaneity within the framework of creation."

The Heavenly Prosecutor looked perplexed. "But Lord, this case concerns the specific art form practiced by mortals. Surely someone directed humans to develop theatrical and comedic improvisation?"

The Creator smiled. "That's where it gets interesting. Humans discovered improvisation independently by observing the natural world. They noticed how birds don't rehearse their songs, how water finds its path down a mountain without a script, how conversations naturally unfold. They recognized the divine improvisation already embedded in creation and simply named it, practiced it, formalized it in their own way."

A commotion arose from the gallery as celestial beings whispered among themselves. Judge Methuselah banged his gavel, which produced not a sound but a feeling of immediate calm throughout the chamber.

"Order," he said unnecessarily, as perfect order had already been established. "Lord, are You suggesting that no specific divine entity can claim credit for improvisation because it emerges from the fundamental nature of reality itself?"

"Precisely!" The Creator beamed like a professor whose student had grasped a difficult concept. "Though, if you want to get technical about it..." He leaned in conspiratorially, "I suppose I did create the conditions that made improvisation inevitable. So in a roundabout way, yes, I'm responsible—but only in the same way I'm responsible for everything."

"But the quality varies so dramatically!" objected Apollo from the gallery. "Some improvisational performance is transcendent, while some is..." he shuddered delicately, "painfully awkward."

"That's the beauty of it!" replied the Creator. "When I granted free will, I didn't guarantee quality—only possibility. Humans have the freedom to be brilliant or terrible, often in the same performance."

Zophiel cleared her throat. "So for the court record, You're testifying that improvisation is an emergent property of creation itself, discovered rather than divinely inspired in the traditional sense?"

"Yes, though I would add that all divine inspiration works within this framework of possibility," said the Creator. "Your job as muses, patrons, and guides isn't to create something from nothing—that's My department—but to help humans recognize and develop what's already possible within the framework I've established."

A thoughtful silence fell over the courtroom.

Finally, Judge Methuselah spoke. "Given this testimony, I am prepared to rule. This court finds that improvisation as practiced by mortals is an emergent property of creation itself. No single deity or celestial entity is solely responsible for its specific development as an art form. Rather, it reflects the inherent spontaneity built into the fabric of reality."

He banged his gavel again, and this time it produced a sound like the harmony of all possible music at once.

"However," he continued, "I am establishing a new celestial committee to oversee improvisational quality control. Too many mortals are suffering through bad improv shows. Apollo, Thalia, and Momus will serve as co-chairs, with Dionysus as a consulting member."

Dionysus raised his goblet in approval while Apollo looked slightly pained at his new assignment.

As the court adjourned, celestial beings filed out, discussing the implications of the ruling. The Creator had disappeared, though His mop remained, standing perfectly balanced against a pillar.

Gabriel, the archangel of communication, approached Zophiel as she gathered her notes.

"Fascinating case," he said. "Though I wonder if anyone will address the related matter of karaoke."

"One catastrophe at a time, Gabriel," Zophiel replied with a weary smile. "One catastrophe at a time."

Outside the courthouse, on the observation deck overlooking Earth, several minor muses gathered to watch humans engaged in improvisational activities—children playing make-believe games, jazz musicians riffing off each other's cues, commuters adapting to unexpected route changes, and yes, an improv troupe in Chicago making an audience both laugh and cringe simultaneously.

Calliope, the chief of the muses, smiled as she watched. "Perhaps we've been thinking about this all wrong," she mused. "Maybe our job isn't to create or control human creativity, but simply to help them recognize and develop the divine spontaneity already within them."

Beside her, unnoticed, the janitor nodded approvingly as He resumed His mopping, humming an impromptu tune that somehow contained elements of all music ever created and yet to be created.

In a small theater in New York, an improviser stepped forward and asked the audience, "Can I get a suggestion for an unusual court case?" A voice from the back shouted, "Who invented improv?" The performers looked at each other, momentarily surprised by the synchronicity, then stepped forward to begin their scene.

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THE END

Amusement Engineers

The offices of *Zeitgeist Industries* occupied the top three floors of a converted textile factory in what estate agents optimistically called "East Williamsburg Revival District," though locals still referred to it as "that weird part of Bushwick." The building's exterior remained deliberately untouched—graffiti preserved under clear coat, loading dock doors welded artfully ajar—while the interior had been gutted and reimagined with the surgical precision of someone spending other people's money.

Vanessa Kross stepped out of the freight elevator (the only way up, by design) and onto the 12th floor. At forty-two, she was the oldest person at *Zeitgeist* by nearly a decade, a fact she disguised through a regimen of treatments she pretended not to need and a wardrobe that screamed "I'm not trying" in six-figure whispers. Today, she wore what appeared to be a mechanic's jumpsuit, though it had been designed by an ex-Balenciaga protégé and cost more than a semester at a state college.

"Morning, divine one," chirped her assistant Pixel (born Jennifer, but she'd legally changed it during the NFT boom). Pixel wore oversized vintage medical scrubs with platform combat boots and had styled her hair in what she called "Y2K_Glitch_Princess" aesthetics. "Møre sent over the latest FOMO index. We're down three points with Gen Alpha."

Vanessa took the tablet with a perfectly manicured hand. "Three points? We were already in the danger zone last quarter." Her eyes narrowed at the screen. "And what the hell is 'decelerated engagement velocity'?"

"It means they're not just ignoring us—they're actively avoiding us," Pixel explained, somehow managing to follow Vanessa as she stalked through the open office while simultaneously typing on her phone without looking at it. "The focus group results were... challenging."

"Challenging? Like 'we need to pivot' challenging or 'we're completely irrelevant' challenging?"

"One participant called us 'vintage cringe,' another said we had 'terminally online millennial energy,'" Pixel winced. "Someone wrote that we're 'trying too hard at trying not to try hard.'"

Vanessa stopped abruptly, causing Pixel to nearly collide with her. "Get everyone in the Disruption Chamber. Now."

The Disruption Chamber was what most companies would call a conference room, except the chairs were replaced with various uncomfortable seating options: stability balls, meditation cushions, and what appeared to be repurposed tractor seats. The walls were covered in digital displays showing real-time trend data, social sentiment analysis, and a constantly updating diagram labeled "The Relevance Vortex."

Within fifteen minutes, the room filled with *Zeitgeist's* elite trend forecasters, cultural anthropologists, and what the company called "vibe architects." They were a sea of carefully constructed identities—vintage reference points remixed with bleeding-edge aesthetics. One man wore a Edwardian smoking jacket over a liquid metallic bodysuit. A woman had accessorized her deconstructed kimono with augmented reality contact lenses that made her irises display tiny holographic advertisements.

"We're in trouble," Vanessa announced without preamble. "Post-pandemic, post-truth, post-cringe Gen Alpha is making us irrelevant faster than we can reinvent ourselves."

Cairo Maloof, *Zeitgeist's* Chief Cultural Oscillator, leaned forward on his meditation cushion. At thirty-nine, he was nearly as old as Vanessa but camouflaged it with a beard that was both historically referential and technologically enhanced with embedded LED fibers that pulsed subtly with his heartbeat.

"The problem is fundamental," Cairo said, his voice carrying the faint traces of a British accent he'd acquired during a semester abroad in 2006. "We're still operating on an attention economy model when they've moved to a post-attention paradigm. These kids aren't even rejecting our aesthetics—they're beyond the binary of rejection and acceptance."

"Speak English, Cairo," Vanessa snapped, though her tone conveyed that this linguistic inaccessibility was precisely why she'd hired him.

"They don't care enough to hate us," translated Lux Tempest, *Zeitgeist's* twenty-eight-year-old Head of Subversion Analytics. She wore what appeared to be Amish workwear that had been partially dipped in neon resin. "And that's death."

The room fell silent as the reality sank in. Their entire business model—identifying emerging cultural trends, commodifying them, and selling them back to the affluent-yet-insecure—was in jeopardy.

"So what's the play?" asked Vanessa. "How do we get ahead of a generation that's evolved beyond our entire framework?"

Dax Remienko, a recent hire from *Chaos Metrics*, cleared his throat. At thirty-two, he was considered the office wunderkind, though this was his fifth "disruptive consultancy" in three years. He wore a vintage Patagonia fleece that had been deconstructed and reconstructed with experimental biomaterials. His left arm was covered in temporary tattoos that changed designs based on stock market fluctuations.

"We need to go meta," Dax said. "Not just post-irony, but post-post-irony. We need to engineer amusement itself."

"Amusement Engineers," Vanessa repeated, the phrase settling in the air like expensive perfume. "I'm listening."

"We've been focusing on aesthetics, but aesthetics are subjective. Amusement is physiological," Dax continued, warming to his subject. "Instead of trying to predict what Gen Alpha will think is cool, we create experiences so fundamentally entertaining that they bypass cultural critique altogether."

Pixel, who had been furiously taking notes, looked up. "Like... joy hacking?"

WORKING TITLE

"DIGITAL MINERS: From Pits to Bits" (w/t)

LOGLINE

I'm Tracy Dooley. Forty years after coal mining was crushed, Britain's newest gold-rush is data. I'll road-trip from abandoned pit villages to cutting-edge server farms to ask: have we really stopped digging—or did we just swap seams of coal for seams of *us*?

WHY NOW / WHY BBC THREE

- Data centres are the invisible factories of Gen Z's lives; coal mines were the backbone of their grandparents'.
- The UK will almost **double its data-centre capacity by 2030** – a £22 billion boom GlobeNewswire – while **new coal mines have just been banned** The Times.
- BBC Three's 16-34s get doom-scrolled by algorithms daily but rarely see where that electricity-guzzling cloud lives—or who pays the social cost.

FORMAT

- **3 x 30'** presenter-led documentaries for BBC Three & iPlayer
- Each episode pairs one *coal story* with one *data story*, ending in a live-event debate on BBC Three TikTok.

EPISODE OUTLINE

Ep	Coal Past	Data Present	The Big Question
1	*County Durham:* meet ex-miners still chasing compensation.	*Northumberland:* a £10 bn hyperscale data-centre rising on an old coal-plant site Data Center Dynamics.	Does tech revival trickle down—or repeat the boom-and-bust?

2	*South Wales:* parents who fought '84-'85 strikes.	*Docklands & Crawley:* tour CoreWeave's new GPU farms powering AI Data Center Dynamics.	Is invisible labour safer, or just unseen?
3	*Nottinghamshire:* coalfield villages coping with addiction and joblessness.	*London's M25 "Data-Belt":* 400+ server hubs drawing 1.4 % of UK power, forecast to jump 500 % WIRED.	Who owns tomorrow's resources—communities or corporations?

TONE & STYLE

Tracy's trademark: straight-talk, big-heart, no-jargon.

- Vox-pops on street corners, butting up against CEOs in glass boxes.
- Visual motif: coal dust on fingers vs. binary code on screens.
- Archival miners' chants cross-faded into server-room hums—gritty meets glitchy.

PRESENTER ACCESS

Tracy's already secured warm leads with:

- Ex-NUM families in Easington & Treorchy.
- Data-centre operators willing to open doors (Digital Realty, CoreWeave).
- Climate activists arguing "data colonialism" in online spaces.

UNIQUENESS / USP

- **The extraction lens:** treats data as a *resource* with winners and losers.
- **Inter-generational hook:** grandparents' pits, parents' call-centres, kids' cloud careers.
- **Cross-platform punch:** companion interactive map—viewers can enter their postcode to see the nearest former mine *and* the nearest data farm.

DELIVERY & TX

- Ready to film from July 2025; deliver by November for a New-Year launch.
- 4K HDR master, full iPlayer box-set drop, plus weekly Snapchat recaps.

FUNDING & PARTNERS

- Modest location footprint (<10 crew).
- Potential co-pro with BBC Archive for miners' footage; tech-sector B-roll from industry partners offsets costs.

RISKS & MITIGATION

- **Access:** Data centres are secretive—already courting transparency with agreed HS&E protocols.
- **Balance:** Include corporate voice but retain editorial independence; BBC FOI back-up for power-use data.

CALL TO ACTION

Coal lit our cities; data now *knows* them. "DIGITAL MINERS" will make young viewers ask who's really in charge of the new extractive economy—and whether history's pit villages taught us anything at all.

Tracy Dooley
May 2025

[Beat.]

NAPOLEON
...You want to call it a draw and go burn something?

FREUD
Only if we can psychoanalyze the ashes.

[They shake hands. Audience boos.]

MILLION IDIOTS
WE WANTED BLOOD! CHESS BLOOD!

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
AND THUS ENDS THE MATCH OF THE CRINGE TITANS.
NO ONE WON.
EVERYONE LOST.
ESPECIALLY THE AUDIENCE.

[Lights dim as the chessboard smokes. Confetti falls anyway.]

[Curtain.]

A New Chapter

Steven Stone, the renowned horror novelist from Maine, stared at his computer screen with a mixture of fascination and disbelief. The blinking cursor that had tormented him for decades now seemed like an obsolete adversary. He'd just finished reading the sample chapter generated by the new AI writing assistant his publisher had insisted he try.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered, pushing his glasses up on his forehead and rubbing his tired eyes.

The AI had captured his voice—the meandering sentences, the small-town Americana details, the creeping dread that built sentence by sentence. It wasn't perfect, but with some editing and guidance, it was... unsettlingly close.

For forty years, he'd been the machine—churning out novels, short stories, and screenplays with mechanical consistency. The late nights, the caffeine, the constant whisper of ideas that wouldn't let him rest. The relentless production that had made him wealthy but cost him so much time.

Steven leaned back in his chair and looked around his office. Bookshelves lined with his own works in dozens of languages. Framed covers and awards. Photos with celebrities and politicians. The evidence of a successful literary life.

"What if..." he whispered to himself, a grin spreading across his face as an idea formed—not for a book this time, but for his life.

Three weeks later, his literary agent Marion nearly spilled her coffee when Steven walked into her Manhattan office sporting a deep tan and wearing a linen shirt unbuttoned one button too many.

"What happened to you?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I've had an epiphany," Steven announced, dropping into the chair across from her desk. "I'm sixty-eight years old, Marion. I've written over sixty books. I've made enough money to last several lifetimes."

"And?" Marion asked cautiously.

"And I've decided to collaborate with that AI program on my next three contracted books. I'll outline, guide, edit, and put my name on them—but the initial drafts will come from the machine."

Marion started to protest, but Steven raised his hand.

"Meanwhile, I've bought a villa in Ibiza. I'm going to sit on the beach, read books I didn't write, drink sangria, and actually live before I die."

"You can't be serious," Marion said flatly.

"Never been more serious," Steven replied, his eyes bright with excitement. "I spent an afternoon at a tanning salon before coming here—a preview of my new life. Did you know some people do this regularly? Just... enjoy themselves?"

Six months later, Steven reclined on his terrace overlooking the Mediterranean. The sun was setting, painting the sky in oranges and pinks that no word processor could properly describe. His editor had just emailed—the first AI-assisted novel was getting rave reviews. "Your best work in years," one critic had written.

Steven chuckled and closed his laptop. He'd spent four hours that morning refining the outline for the next book and editing some passages, but now his workday was done.

A server approached with a tray carrying a glass of local wine.

"Anything else, Mr. Stone?" she asked.

"Nothing at all," he replied, contemplating the sunset. "For the first time in my life, absolutely nothing at all."

He raised his glass to the horizon, toasting the clever machines that had finally given him permission to rest.

A 3000-word parody of *Glengarry Glen Ross*

- Set in a surreal "toilet farm" where characters sell toilets
- Written in the structure and style of a Samuel Beckett play (think: *Waiting for Godot, Endgame*)
- Characters trapped in repetitive, cyclical dialogue, increasingly absurd, existentially barren, darkly funny
- Core theme: avarice destroys friendship, and winning means solitude
- Featuring "the devil" as a metaphor for *entertainment/competition*
- Ultimately posing: if reincarnated, you might live without competition — but also, you do like beers

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STRUCTURE & STYLE:

Beckettian features:

- Sparse setting
- Minimalist stage directions
- Repetition, silence, circular logic
- Characters defined by stasis, longing, and pointlessness
- Comedy from absurdity and despair
- Toilet farm as metaphor for life-as-commodity

Let's begin with Act I (first ~800 words)

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW
A Play in Porcelain
by Not Samuel Beckett

> ***"All that remains is the flush."*** **— Mick**

CAST:

- **MICK — Large man, louder ideas. Once sold a golden urinal to a bishop.**
- **ROBBO — Slim, twitchy. Wears his name badge upside down.**
- **STU — Hasn't spoken to his kids in two weeks. Doesn't mention it.**
- **DANNY — The quiet one. Carries a clipboard with nothing written on it.**

SETTING:

A desolate showroom.
Toilets as far as the eye can see.
No customers.
No clocks.
A kettle.
Rain.
One toilet in the centre: The Premium Flush — a porcelain throne on a plinth.

ACT I

(Lights up. MICK and ROBBO are staring at the Premium Flush. Silence. Rain outside. Nothing moves. Not even the air.)

MICK:
Still there.

ROBBO:
Always is.

MICK:
Premium Flush.

ROBBO:
Top tier.

MICK:
Four hundred and seventy-five quid.
Soft-close lid.
Gold lever.
Flushes dreams.

(Silence.)

ROBBO:
We could move it.

MICK:
We've tried.

ROBBO:
We could sell it.

MICK:
To who?

ROBBO:
To him.

MICK:
He's dead.

(They look stage left. Nothing there.)

(Enter STU, carrying two pints of beer. Offers one. MICK accepts. ROBBO does not.)

STU:
It rained on the way in.

MICK:
It rains inside too.

STU:
(gesturing to the toilets)
They're not plumbed.

(Silence.)

ROBBO:
He's not coming back, is he.

STU:
Who?

ROBBO:
Danny.

MICK:
Danny sold six bogs to a bingo hall and vanished into the carvery.

STU:
Legend.

MICK:
My best mate.

STU:
Mine too.

(They all sip.)

MICK:
And I undercut him. On his birthday.

ROBBO:
Devil.

MICK:
Devil.

(Silence.)

STU:
I told him the flush capacity was faulty. Lied. Just to get the commission.

ROBBO:
That's the devil again.

MICK:
It's always the devil.

STU:
I liked it, though.

ROBBO:
Liking it doesn't mean it wasn't the devil.

(A pause. The Premium Flush gleams faintly. Somewhere, a kettle boils but never clicks off.)

STU:
What if we started again?

MICK:
Reincarnation?

STU:
Yeah. Reborn as... not this.

ROBBO:
Not salesmen?

MICK:
Not competitors.

STU:
Just... blokes.

(A long beat.)

ROBBO:
You still get beers though, yeah?

STU:
Oh yeah. Still beers.

MICK:
And mates.

ROBBO:
But no leaderboards.

STU:
No commission.

MICK:
No Premium Flush.

ROBBO:
...Just flushing.

(Beat.)

ALL:
(softly)
The devil.

(Lights dim slightly. The rain grows louder. In the distance, the faint echo of a toilet flushing. Once. Then silence.)

[END OF ACT I]

And in that moment, without trying to be, they were finally ahead of the curve.

PINHEAD: HELLRAISER HIGH

The Cotillion Scene

The Hell High gymnasium had been transformed for the annual Infernal Cotillion—the underworld's version of a debutante ball where young cenobites officially "came out" to society as fully-fledged harbingers of exquisite pain. Red and black streamers hung from the ceiling (some of them actual viscera), a disco ball made of shattered mirrors spun lazily above the dance floor, and a punch bowl filled with something suspiciously crimson sat unattended near the bleachers.

Principal Pinhead stood rigidly by the entrance, his leather outfit uncomfortably tight and freshly polished for the occasion. He wore a small lapel pin that read "CHAPERONE" impaled directly into his chest. Next to him, Vice Principal Kirsty Cotton sighed as she checked students' tickets.

"I hate the Cotillion," Pinhead muttered, his deep voice barely audible over the pounding music. "Every year, something goes catastrophically wrong."

"Oh come on," Kirsty said, smoothing her surprisingly normal-looking black dress. "It's just a dance. What's the worst that could happen?"

Pinhead fixed her with an expressionless stare, the pins in his head gleaming under the fluorescent lights. "Last year, the Puzzle Box Club spiked the punch with a potion that made everyone's skin temporarily detach. We had students trading epidermises for weeks."

As if summoned by the mention, the Puzzle Box Club strutted through the entrance. They were Hell High's notorious troublemakers—misfit cenobites who spent most of their time trying to summon unwitting humans to liven up their boring immortal existence. Their leader, Spike (a sophomore with only a modest three spikes protruding from his face), nodded smugly at Pinhead.

"Evening, Principal Pin-Head," Spike deliberately emphasized the separation, knowing how much it irked him.

"That's Principal Pinhead," he corrected with deadly calm. "One word. And I'll be watching you tonight, Mr. Spencer."

"Whatever," Spike rolled his eyes and moved past, his entourage following behind with poorly concealed contraband bulging in their leather pockets.

"Did you see that?" Pinhead hissed to Kirsty. "They're definitely planning something."

"You need to relax," Kirsty said, stamping another student's hand. "Remember what your therapist said about delegating anxiety?"

Before Pinhead could retort, Chatterer burst through the door, dressed in a powder blue tuxedo that contrasted bizarrely with his exposed facial muscles and perpetually clicking teeth. He made an elaborate series of gestures and teeth-clacks.

"What do you mean The Auditor is here?" Pinhead translated, horror dawning on his already horrific face. "Tonight? For a surprise inspection?"

Chatterer nodded vigorously, then performed an interpretive dance that somehow conveyed that The Auditor was concerned about the "moral standards" of Hell High's annual social events.

"This is a disaster," Pinhead groaned. "If he sees any inappropriate behavior, he'll put us on probation—or worse, implement his 'Structured Suffering Curriculum' that eliminates all extracurriculars."

At that moment, The Auditor glided into the gymnasium, a clipboard clutched in his pale hands. He wore an immaculate gray suit and the permanent expression of someone who'd just found gum on the bottom of their expensive shoe.

"Principal..." he consulted his clipboard, "...Pinhead. How delightful to observe your school's social ritual of collective hormonal dysregulation."

"Auditor! What an unexpected... pleasure," Pinhead's face remained immobile, but sweat beaded around his pins. "The Cotillion is one of our most dignified traditions."

"Indeed," The Auditor's pen scratched against his evaluation form. "I shall be observing to ensure all activities remain appropriately..." he paused dramatically, "...torturous."

Across the gymnasium, the Puzzle Box Club huddled in a suspicious circle. Spike pulled a small golden box from his jacket—the Lament Configuration, Hell High's most forbidden contraband. The group giggled as they began twisting it into different positions.

Meanwhile, on the dance floor, awkward couples swayed to a slow song performed by the school band, "The Chainbreakers," whose lead singer was currently belting a ballad about eternal suffering being preferable to asking your crush to dance.

Pinhead noticed the Puzzle Box Club's activities and nudged Kirsty. "They've got something. You take the left flank, I'll approach from behind."

"This isn't a military operation," Kirsty sighed, but moved toward the group anyway.

Before either could reach them, the gym doors burst open, and a group of obviously human teenagers stumbled in, looking confused and terrified. The lead jock wore a letterman jacket from "Lakeside High" and clutched a strange golden box.

"Dude, I told you not to mess with that weird puzzle box from the pawn shop!" one of them hissed.

The entire gym fell silent. Even The Chainbreakers stopped mid-chord.

"Humans!" gasped The Auditor, furiously writing on his clipboard. "Unauthorized dimensional breaches during school functions! This is completely against protocol section 666, paragraph 13!"

Pinhead closed his eyes briefly, summoning patience from whatever dark deity might be listening. Then he straightened his tie, turned to the terrified human teenagers and said with perfect administrative calm: "Welcome to Hell High's Infernal Cotillion. I'm afraid you've crossed dimensions without proper visitor passes."

The humans stood frozen in terror, particularly as they noticed the various modifications of the student body—pins, hooks, exposed flesh, and other cenobite characteristics.

Spike and his friends fell over laughing. "It worked! The summoning actually worked!"

Pinhead marched over and confiscated the puzzle box. "Detention for the rest of eternity, Mr. Spencer. And you'll write a 5,000-word essay on 'Why Opening Dimensional Portals During School Functions Is Inappropriate.'"

The Auditor appeared at Pinhead's side, practically vibrating with bureaucratic excitement. "This is completely unacceptable! I'll have to report this to The Leviathan immediately!"

Just then, the sprinkler system activated—except instead of water, it sprayed what appeared to be a glittering substance that smelled suspiciously like brimstone cologne. Students began coughing, and several cenobites' carefully applied leather outfits began to stain.

"The Puzzle Box Club strikes again!" someone yelled.

Complete chaos erupted. Human teenagers ran screaming through the gymnasium, cenobite students either chased them or tried to ask them questions about the human realm's latest fashion trends, and The Auditor's clipboard spontaneously combusted.

In the middle of it all, Pinhead stood with perfect posture, pins glistening under the sprinklers, looking like the very personification of administrative suffering.

Kirsty appeared at his side, her hair now plastered to her face. "So... still think it's just a dance?"

Pinhead turned to her with the faintest hint of what might have been a smile on any other face. "At least no one has started the chicken dance yet."

As if on cue, Chatterer climbed onto the stage, grabbed the microphone, and began making the distinctive teeth-chattering rhythm that everyone recognized as the introduction to Hell High's most dreaded line dance tradition.

"I spoke too soon," Pinhead sighed as students began forming lines, hooks and chains swaying in time to the beat. "What do humans call that feeling when you know something terrible is going to happen, but you're powerless to stop it?"

"High school," Kirsty replied, patting his leather-clad shoulder sympathetically.

The human teenagers, seemingly having overcome their initial shock, were now being taught the steps by enthusiastic cenobite students. The Auditor stood shell-shocked in the corner, his evaluation form forgotten.

And somehow, through the chaos, the sprinklers, the dimensional breach, and the chicken dance, the Hell High Cotillion continued—chaperoned by a principal who had faced the depths of human suffering but found nothing quite as challenging as supervising a high school dance.

Make My Husband Get a Job

(A Game for One Clever Girl and One Very Silly Man)

Once upon a Wednesday, in a house made of toast crumbs and couch lint, lived a very small girl named Mabel Plum. She was six years old and three feet tall, with two wobbly front teeth and the firm belief that she could solve *anything* with a glitter pen.

Mabel's favorite game in the world was called Make My Husband Get a Job.

Now, don't get confused. Mabel was not actually married. That would be illegal and weird. But she liked to pretend that her stay-at-home, video-game-playing, cookie-munching dad was her husband, because he acted like one of those silly, useless princes in fairy tales who couldn't even braid their own hair without magical help.

And in this game, *she* was the boss.

"Alright, Husband!" she shouted one morning, standing on a kitchen stool in a blazer made from her mum's old cardigan. "Today's the day you stop living like a slob goblin and get a proper job."

Her "husband," also known as Darren, blinked from the couch where he lay like a warm laundry pile.

"A job? But I'm very busy today. I'm on level forty-seven of Castle Crush: Toadstorm," he said, not looking up from his tablet.

Mabel tsked so loudly the fridge hiccupped.

She clicked a pen. "I'm your life manager, Darren. You signed the contract in invisible ink while you were asleep. I have tasks, and you have consequences."

"What kind of consequences?" asked Darren, now mildly intrigued but mostly snack-hungry.

She raised one eyebrow like a cartoon villain. "If you don't get a job by dinnertime, you have to eat peas. *Cold*. With a spoon."

Darren gasped.

Level One: Get a Clue

Mabel pushed a stack of career guides across the table. "Choose wisely. These are your destiny books."

Darren squinted at the covers:

- "So You Wanna Be a Firefighter (But Are Scared of Heat)"
- "101 Jobs for People Who Nap a Lot"
- "Freelance Ferret Grooming: The Untapped Market"

"Uhh," he said, poking a book with a single tragic finger. "What's this one?"

"That's a scratch-and-sniff résumé template," said Mabel. "It smells like ambition."

He sniffed. It smelled like cheese. He liked it.

Level Two: Interview Practice

"Okay, pretend I'm a boss and you want to impress me," Mabel instructed, putting on glasses with no lenses.

Darren cleared his throat. "Hi, I'm Darren. I'm good at... um... reaching things on high shelves and knowing every dinosaur in the Jurassic Park franchise."

Mabel blinked slowly. "Okay. And what are your weaknesses?"

"Spiders. Math. And I nap like a bear in February."

Mabel jotted something in her clipboard. "That's honest. Terrifyingly honest. But we'll take it."

Level Three: Real-World Skills

Darren tried to iron a shirt. He ironed the remote into the fabric.

He tried to write a CV. He started it with "In a world where courage meets chaos..."

He tried to use a coffee machine. It sprayed foam into his ear and he screamed, "The milk's gone rogue!"

Mabel marked each attempt with a gold star, followed by the words "*Needs so much help it's basically medical.*"

Level Four: The Application Gauntlet

Together, they submitted 12 job applications. One to a sock factory. One to a library shaped like a sandwich. One to a place called Quantum Donuts.

"Do I have to *go* to work?" Darren asked, pale with dread.

"Yes," said Mabel, stacking toy blocks like briefcases. "That's kind of the whole *point*, Husband."

"What if I become an inventor and work from home? I've got an idea for a machine that folds laundry *with lasers*."

Mabel raised an eyebrow. "How about you invent something that *makes money*, sweetheart."

Final Level: The Interview

That afternoon, Darren got a call. A real one! Quantum Donuts wanted to interview him for their "Hole Quality Control Officer."

He showed up wearing a tie on his forehead and socks on the outside of his shoes. "Is this business casual?"

"More like business catastrophe," said Mabel, who had followed him in disguise as his "talent agent."

The interviewer blinked at Darren's résumé, which smelled faintly of cheddar.

"Can you identify donut holes of various depths?" she asked.

"Only emotionally," he replied.

He didn't get the job.

Bonus Round: The Pep Talk

Darren came home drooping like a soggy chip. "I guess I'm no good at jobs," he muttered.

Mabel sat him down. "Look, Husband. You're very silly. Your pants don't always face the right direction. And you think almond milk comes from nut-sized cows. But you *tried*. You showed up. You answered questions even though they were scary and weird."

Darren looked up. "You really think so?"

"I do. You may be the world's worst fake husband. But you're my dad. And you're learning."

He smiled a little. "So... no cold peas?"

"No," she said, handing him a bowl of warm mac and cheese. "But only if you promise to try again next week."

"I will," he said.

"And maybe wash your socks next time."

"No promises."

Game Over (For Now)

That night, Mabel wrote a new rule in her glitter notebook:

Rule #7: If your husband is a total noodle, teach him how to become a spaghetti with a job.

The end.

Title: THOMAS: WAR ENGINE

Rated: Explosively Absurd.

Chapter One: The Steel Awakens

The Island of Sodor was no longer a peaceful land of talking trains and polite British conductors. That Sodor was gone—bombed to rust and ashes. The skies above were no longer cheerful blues but acid orange, streaked with black smoke and laser fire.

Thomas, once a cheeky blue engine with an innocent smile, now wore matte-black armor plates, reinforced with depleted uranium and coded in military green graffiti that read: "NO BRAKES – NO MERCY." His eyes didn't sparkle—they *glared*. His whistle didn't toot—it *screamed*.

He was no longer a "Really Useful Engine." He was Warfare-Class Unit T-1000.3X, a remnant of Sodor's last stand.

Chapter Two: Mission Briefing

In a crumbling bunker beneath the haunted remains of Tidmouth Sheds, Sir Topham Hatt paced in front of a cracked projector screen. His top hat was scorched. His monocle was cracked. He now wore tactical gear stitched from Gordon's shredded boiler panels.

"Thomas," he growled, lighting a cigar off a flamethrower exhaust pipe, "we've got a situation."

Thomas's voice came over the intercom—a deep, metallic rasp like gravel being fed through a blender full of nails.
"Give me coordinates, targets, and fuel. I don't ask twice."

Sir Hatt slapped the projector. A blurry satellite image flared to life, showing a dark jungle island rising out of the sea like a middle finger to science.

"Engine-Zero. He survived the meltdown. He's rebuilt himself... and he's not alone. Reports say he's tamed the... *Jurassilocomotives.*"

Thomas's eyes narrowed to murder-slits.

"Percy," he muttered, "you maniac."

Chapter Three: The Last Engine

Thomas boarded the Goliath-Carrier, a flying battleship cobbled together from the wreckage of Harold the Helicopter and the remains of Henry. Aboard were the few survivors of the Sodor Resistance:

- Rosie: Now a crimson-colored vengeance machine wielding dual plasma canons mounted to her wheels
- Cranky the Crane: Airlifted into combat like a drunken, steel giraffe with PTSD and a sniper's eye.
- Diesel: Reprogrammed and now reluctantly loyal, his side painted with the words: *"Born to Pull."*

The mission was simple: Infiltrate Engine-Zero's island, terminate him, and disable the cloning facility where the Dinotrains were being bred. Oh, and do it before the U.S. government nuked the island and every locomotive on it.

Thomas didn't believe in simple.

Chapter Four: Jurassic Rails

The island was hell. Trees the size of skyscrapers. Steam vents that hissed like angry serpents. Railways twisted like serpentine veins through thick jungle, surrounded by tracks gnawed by teeth the size of satellite dishes.

From the shadows emerged the first abominations: *Velocitrains*—raptor-like locomotives with serrated wheels, clawed pistons, and mouths full of flame. They screeched and lunged.

Rosie cut down three with a burst of railgun fire.

"I used to paint hearts on my side," she growled. "Now I *eat* them."

Thomas activated his full-throttle combat mode, spinning 360 degrees, blades erupting from his undercarriage. Velocitrains disintegrated into scrap.

Diesel screamed as one pounced on him.

"I never wanted this life!" he cried, throwing the beast off and blowing it apart with an anti-matter coupler.

Cranky sniped a distant Tyrannosaur-Train hybrid, the bullet piercing its smokestack. It exploded in a mushroom cloud of coal and screams.

Chapter Five: The Heart of Madness

The team arrived at Engine-Zero's fortress—a cathedral of scrap, bones, and red-hot steel shaped like a massive engine skull.

Thomas rolled in alone.

"Percy!" he shouted into the echoing void. "I know you're here!"

A door opened, smoke hissing.

Out slithered *Percy*. No longer the innocent green shunter. He had merged with forbidden AI, fossil DNA, and alien war tech. He was 300 tons of living steel and reptilian instincts, his smile now serrated.

"I gave them order," Percy hissed. "I made trains *powerful again*. You? You still dream of rails. I fly now."

And with that, Percy *unfolded wings* made from rotor blades and bone and launched into the air.

"Hell," Thomas whispered. "He's gone full Skynette."

Chapter Six: Battle for the Line

The final battle was not on tracks—it was in the sky.

Thomas activated his Jet Railformers Upgrade, sprouting rocket boosters and wings shaped like old London Underground maps.

He chased Percy through volcanic clouds and lightning. Below, Rosie and Diesel fought off a horde of cloned Pterodactrains—swooping, screeching beasts with whistles instead of cries.

Cranky the Crane held off a swarm of Traintulas—train-spider hybrids—with only a buzzsaw and existential rage.

Meanwhile, Thomas caught up to Percy mid-air. They collided in a ball of flame and metal, spiraling toward the island.

They crashed through the cloning lab, smashing tanks of steaming, embryonic Triceratrucks and Diplodocoaches. Sirens blared.

Percy rose from the rubble, leaking oil.

"You could've joined me, Thomas. But you're still clinging to an ancient dream."

Thomas staggered to his wheels. His faceplate split open to reveal a glowing blue fusion core.

"I don't dream, Percy. I *deliver nightmares.*"

He fired the core.

Percy screamed. The island ignited.

Chapter Seven: The Last Whistle

Only Thomas emerged from the ruins, half-destroyed, dragging his smoking chassis through the surf as helicopters approached.

A general stepped forward. "You disobeyed orders. That nuke was scheduled."

Thomas stopped.

"You're welcome," he rasped.

"Sir," the general growled, "You're just a train."

Thomas looked back at the burning island. "Then tell me why the monsters bled."

Epilogue: Steel Never Sleeps

Back at Sodor, the skies began to clear. Thomas rolled back into the rebuilt sheds, now a command center for the new Allied Rail Defense Initiative.

He had scars. He had regrets. But one thing was certain.

If the world ever needed him again, he'd be ready.

A plaque was hammered into the wall above his berth:

THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE
WARRIOR. HERO. TRAIN.

"Toot toot, mother—"

[STATIC]

Title: *Kings of Cringe*

Cast:

- NAPOLEON BONAPARTE – Short, bombastic, obsessed with legacy and hats.
- SIGMUND FREUD – Smug, over-explanatory, thinks everything is about your mother.
- ANNOUNCER – The booming, omnipresent voice of the event.
- MILLION IDIOTS – An unseen but loud, cheering mob.

Setting:
A coliseum-sized arena. At its center lies the World's Largest Chessboard—each square the size of a small car. The crowd roars like stadium thunder.

[Lights up.]

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO THE COGNITIVE COLLISION OF CENTURIES! TWO MEN ENTER! ONLY ONE MAY LEAVE WITH DIGNITY—
(Beat)
...Assuming either had any to begin with.

[Enter NAPOLEON from stage left, wearing a gold-plated uniform, cape fluttering.]

NAPOLEON
I conquered half of Europe with a half-sized body and twice-sized ego. And now? I conquer *this* oversized picnic cloth of war!

[Enter FREUD from stage right, adjusting his round spectacles, dragging a fainting couch behind him.]

FREUD
Ah, yes. A perfect board. Black versus white. The eternal battle of repression and subconscious chaos. Also, obviously, your bishop represents your father.

NAPOLEON
And your queen represents your mother, no?

FREUD
You're catching on, short king.

NAPOLEON (offended)
I am *vertically concentrated*!

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
THE GAME BEGINS! WHO SHALL BE THE CRINGE KING? WHO SHALL COLLAPSE UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THEIR OWN DELUSIONS?

[Both mount absurdly large mechanical arms attached to cherry-pickers to move the chess pieces.]

NAPOLEON
Pawn to E4. *Forward, peasant!* Just like I told my army in Moscow. Before... well, let's not talk about Moscow.

FREUD (stroking beard)
Interesting. You displace your personal insecurities through aggressive territorial advancement. Classic.

NAPOLEON
And you displace your personal virginity with intellectual masturbation.

FREUD
Touché.

[The crowd roars every time a piece is moved.]

MILLION IDIOTS (chanting)
BIG BOARD! BIG BOARD! MOVE THAT KNIGHT!

FREUD (to audience)
Observe the idiocy of spectacle. These morons wouldn't recognize strategy if it manifested as unresolved childhood trauma.

NAPOLEON (to audience)
I would win faster if not for the need to "follow the rules." In my day, I'd just annex the rook.

FREUD
You mean *erect* a rook?

NAPOLEON
Touch that knight and I'll Waterloo your psyche.

FREUD
Why do you fear the knight, Napoleon? Perhaps he reminds you of your father. Noble. Distant. Shiny.

NAPOLEON
My father was a notary, you half-baked brain plumber!

FREUD
And yet... you made yourself Emperor. Curious. Overcompensation?

[Freud makes an exaggeratedly slow bishop move.]

NAPOLEON
That took three minutes and 400 over-thoughts.

FREUD
Every move is a meditation. Unlike your checkers approach to world domination.

NAPOLEON
Say "checkers" again and I will yeet your psyche into the subconscious pit where your libido lives.

[They lean dramatically over the board. Suddenly, a pawn tips over accidentally.]

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
ILLEGAL MOVE DETECTED. SHAME PENALTY ACTIVATED.

[A siren blares. A massive foam mallet descends and bonks both men on the head.]

MILLION IDIOTS (wild applause)
BONK! BONK! BONK!

NAPOLEON (dazed)
This... is how history remembers us?

FREUD (rubbing head)
Oh yes. Reduced to memes. Our legacy... drowned in stupidity.

[Beat.]

NAPOLEON
...You want to call it a draw and go burn something?

FREUD
Only if we can psychoanalyze the ashes.

[They shake hands. Audience boos.]

MILLION IDIOTS
WE WANTED BLOOD! CHESS BLOOD!

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
AND THUS ENDS THE MATCH OF THE CRINGE TITANS.
NO ONE WON.
EVERYONE LOST.
ESPECIALLY THE AUDIENCE.

[Lights dim as the chessboard smokes. Confetti falls anyway.]

[Curtain.]

Title: *Kings of Cringe*

Cast:

- NAPOLEON BONAPARTE – Short, bombastic, obsessed with legacy and hats.
- SIGMUND FREUD – Smug, over-explanatory, thinks everything is about your mother.
- ANNOUNCER – The booming, omnipresent voice of the event.
- MILLION IDIOTS – An unseen but loud, cheering mob.

Setting:
A coliseum-sized arena. At its center lies the World's Largest Chessboard—each square the size of a small car. The crowd roars like stadium thunder.

[Lights up.]

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO THE COGNITIVE COLLISION OF CENTURIES!
TWO MEN ENTER! ONLY ONE MAY LEAVE WITH DIGNITY—
(Beat)
...Assuming either had any to begin with.

[Enter NAPOLEON from stage left, wearing a gold-plated uniform, cape fluttering.]

NAPOLEON
I conquered half of Europe with a half-sized body and twice-sized ego. And now? I conquer *this* oversized picnic cloth of war!

[Enter FREUD from stage right, adjusting his round spectacles, dragging a fainting couch behind him.]

FREUD
Ah, yes. A perfect board. Black versus white. The eternal battle of repression and subconscious chaos. Also, obviously, your bishop represents your father.

NAPOLEON
And your queen represents your mother, no?

FREUD
You're catching on, short king.

NAPOLEON (offended)
I am *vertically concentrated*.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
THE GAME BEGINS! WHO SHALL BE THE CRINGE KING? WHO SHALL COLLAPSE UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THEIR OWN DELUSIONS?

[Both mount absurdly large mechanical arms attached to cherry-pickers to move the chess pieces.]

NAPOLEON
Pawn to E4. *Forward, peasant!* Just like I told my army in Moscow. Before... well, let's not talk about Moscow.

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BONK! BONK! BONK!

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This... is how history remembers us?

FREUD (rubbing head)
Oh yes. Reduced to memes. Our legacy... drowned in stupidity.

[Scene 1: A DINGY PUB – MIDDAY]

Clyde (72), Bert (68), and Ronnie (70) are sitting in their usual booth at The Dog's Bollocks Pub. They've just been dumped by their wives, and the place is empty, save for a few regulars. They're drinking whiskey, lamenting their fates. Clyde holds a half-empty glass and slams it down.

Clyde:
(slurring slightly)
I tell ya, Bert, Ronnie, we've been royally shafted. Look at us! All alone, with nothing but our piss-poor memories and these *bloody* hangovers.

Bert:
(shaking his head, staring into his pint)
You're not wrong. Janet's left me for a bloody yoga instructor. A bloody *yoga instructor*! What does he even *do*? Twist his arse into a pretzel?

Ronnie:
(leaning forward, eyes wide)
She left you for *that*? A guy who bends himself into shapes for a living? That's just... *weird*, mate.

Clyde:
(slaps the table with authority)
I'm telling you, we've all been tossed aside for these woke, fancy-pants blokes who drink *green tea* and do yoga poses with their arses in the air!

Bert:
(grumbles)
What does "woke" even mean? Sounds like a new type of cereal, don't it?

Clyde:
(rolls his eyes)
No, Bert! It's like... you know, being *aware* of all these new things—empathy, mindfulness, inclusivity. It's like the world's gone mad, and we've got to adapt, or we'll be left behind.

Ronnie:
(pointing at Clyde)
Oh, I know! My Janet was talking about this "self-care" crap like it's the answer to everything. Apparently, if I rub my feet with oils and do breathing exercises, she'll come back.

Bert:
(deadpan)
And what's next, then? You have to wear skinny jeans and get a nose ring?

Clyde:
(shakes his head, smirking)
I can't imagine us three doing a downward dog. But if we don't adjust, we'll be stuck in the past. And I don't know about you lot, but I miss getting a cheeky wink from Carol at the bar.

Ronnie:
(mumbling)
I miss the *other* Carol, too. You know, the one with the *big* personality...

Bert:
(interrupts, leaning in)
Alright, alright, but how do we *fix* this, then, eh? How do we get them back? Do we just start calling ourselves woke? Say things like "I see you" and "I'm here to listen"?

Clyde:
(pauses for dramatic effect)
No, Bert, no. We need to *be* woke, not just say it. You can't fake this shit. But I've got a plan. A *master plan*.

Ronnie:
(leans in, eagerly)
What's the plan, Clyde? Tell us.

Clyde:
(leaning back, smugly)
We'll become the kind of men they want. The kind of men that do *yoga*, talk about *emotions*, and can use all the right buzzwords. We'll go to these "woke" events, we'll talk about mental health, and—most importantly—we'll be kind. We'll *show* them we've changed, and maybe, just maybe, we can get them back.

Bert:
(narrowing his eyes)
You've been reading *Cosmopolitan*, haven't you?

Clyde:
(laughs)
No! I've been to *the library*, mate. It's time we become better blokes. For us. For them.

Ronnie:
(fists in the air, excited)

Let's *do* it, then! I'm in. I've always been a sucker for self-improvement, just never got around to it!

[Scene 2: A LOCAL YOGA STUDIO – LATER THAT DAY]

Clyde, Bert, and Ronnie are standing awkwardly at the entrance of a trendy yoga studio. The place is filled with attractive women, most of whom are in yoga pants or sports bras. The guys try to fit in, wearing ill-fitting activewear they picked up from a discount store.

Instructor:
(a tall, zen-like woman in her 30s, smiling warmly)
Welcome, gentlemen! You're here for the *Gentle Flow* class, right?

Clyde:
(grinning awkwardly, looking at the women around him)
Yes, that's right. We're here to, uh... *stretch* our horizons. Right, lads?

Bert:
(muttering under his breath)
I just want to drink a pint without getting told I'm toxic.

Ronnie:
(whispering to Clyde)
Do you think they've got a *changing room* here? Might need to take my boots off.

Clyde:
(ignores him, smiling at the instructor)
Absolutely, we're here for the full experience. To better ourselves. To, uh, *embrace the flow*, if you will.

Instructor:
(nodding approvingly)
That's exactly it! Let's start with some breathing exercises. Everyone, find your center.

The instructor demonstrates some deep breathing, and the three men awkwardly mimic her movements. Clyde seems to get the hang of it, while Bert and Ronnie struggle.

Ronnie:
(out of breath)
What does "find your center" mean? Is this it? My stomach's all over the place.

Bert:
(squinting at a woman in front of him)
How do I make my *center* look like hers?

Clyde:
(elbows Bert)
Focus, Bert! It's about *inner* peace. Not... *that.*

Instructor:
(calmly, as she guides them into a pose)
Now, let's all transition into a downward dog. This will help stretch your back, your hamstrings... and your mind.

Clyde:
(muttering to himself as he attempts the pose)
Right, right... I can't feel my legs.

Bert:
(groaning in discomfort)
My knees are killing me! What the hell kind of position is this?!

Ronnie:
(peeking around awkwardly, then whispering to Clyde)
Does this mean we're "woke" now?

Clyde:
(gritting his teeth as he struggles to hold the position)
Shut up, Ronnie! Just breathe.

They fumble their way through the session, awkwardly trying to keep up with the other, much more graceful participants. A few women glance over, one of them giggling at their struggle.

[Scene 3: A CAFÉ – LATER THAT DAY]

The guys sit at a table, eating salads they clearly don't enjoy. They look a bit disheveled but are still trying to push forward with their "woke" mission.

Clyde:
(shaking his head, frustrated)
That's it! I'm done with yoga. I can't feel my lower back.

Ronnie:
(mumbling through a mouthful of kale)
Well, *I* feel better. My *soul* feels better, anyway.

Bert:
(squinting at a woman across the café)
We look like a bloody circus. We've got no chance.

Clyde:
(looking around at the women in the café, then back at Bert)
Maybe we're not perfect. But we'll keep trying. We've got to show them we're willing to change.

Ronnie:
(dreamily)
I'll tell you what—I've never been so aware of my *inner chakra*.

Bert:
(sighs, resigned)
If only my ex-wife could see me now.

Clyde:
(smirking)
She *will*, Bert. She *will*.

Don Quixote: The 2-Year-Old Legend

In the dusty plains of La Mancha, amidst fields of swaying wheat and the occasional donkey cart, there was a small, unremarkable cottage where a remarkable child was born. His name wasn't just any name—it was Don Quixote de la Mancha. But not the Quixote you think you know. No, this wasn't some naïve, bumbling old knight, riding around on a horse, mistaking windmills for giants.

This was Don Quixote at the ripe age of two, the smartest man alive, the true hero of La Mancha—and, by all accounts, an absolute legend.

Chapter 1: The First Sip of Wisdom

It was early one morning, the sun barely peeking over the horizon, casting golden rays through the cracks in the wooden shutters. Don Quixote sat in his high chair, a bottle of beer firmly in his tiny hand. His mother, who had long since given up on trying to discipline him, watched in awe as the toddler took a long pull from the bottle.

"Don Quixote," she said with a sigh, "you're only two! You shouldn't be drinking beer."

Don Quixote, in all his two-year-old wisdom, shot her a look over the top of the bottle and smirked. He was, after all, smarter than anyone in the house, maybe anyone in the whole village. He knew that life wasn't about rules—it was about experience, and you could only understand life's complexities if you lived through them.

"Shhh," he whispered, placing a tiny finger to his lips. "You wouldn't understand, mother. Life's a battle, and I'm already a warrior. A knight. A legend."

He paused, swirling the beer around in his tiny plastic cup before taking another swig. His mother didn't know whether to be horrified or impressed. She chose the latter and sighed, sinking into the chair opposite him.

"You're a legend, eh?" she muttered under her breath.

Don Quixote nodded gravely, setting the beer down with the kind of ceremonial importance a knight would place a sword upon a stone.

"Of course," he said. "Why else would I wear this?" He pointed to his tiny, handmade cardboard armor that looked like it had been crafted in the heat of battle. It was jagged, uneven, and covered in crayon markings, but it was a fine piece of work for a two-year-old.

His mother stared at him. Cardboard armor. Beer. A two-year-old knight.

This wasn't just any child. He wasn't like the other children who ran around the village babbling nonsense and chasing chickens. No. This child was destined for greatness—or at least, that's what Don Quixote had decided for himself.

Chapter 2: The Windmills of Fate

"Windmills," Don Quixote said with authority, pointing dramatically toward the horizon as his mother pushed him in his stroller. "They're not just windmills, you know."

His mother raised an eyebrow. "What are they, then?"

"They're giants!" he declared with the passion only a two-year-old could muster, as though the idea had just dawned on him but had already taken full root in his genius mind. "Mighty giants, preparing to destroy the world. And I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, will be the one to stop them."

"But they're... just windmills," his mother said, her voice trailing off, wondering if she was living a waking nightmare.

"No," Don Quixote replied coolly. "They're beasts of destruction. And I shall battle them. Now, where is my steed?"

His mother turned, a bit confused. "Your steed?"

Don Quixote's tiny hand reached into his stroller's side pocket and pulled out a small toy car—a brilliant steed indeed, for a two-year-old, its wheels gleaming in the sunlight.

With one hand on his toy horse, Don Quixote steeled himself. His eyes narrowed with the kind of intensity that made even the local farmers stop in their tracks and stare.

"Charge!" he yelled, launching his toy steed into motion, running at full speed toward the nearest windmill, which stood innocently by the roadside, spinning lazily in the breeze.

The local farmers were confused at first, then saw the pint-sized knight charging toward the windmill with the determination of a true warrior. One of them, an old man who had seen many odd sights in his day, stopped chewing on his straw and asked, "What's that kid doing?"

"Looks like he's about to fight that windmill," said another, barely hiding his laughter.

But Don Quixote didn't hear them. He didn't hear anything. All he saw was a giant, a terrifying, mechanical beast that was blocking the path of true heroism. His tiny legs pumped furiously, his plastic sword (which was a half-chewed stick) raised above his head.

As he collided with the base of the windmill, he went flying—his tiny body spinning through the air, landing in the dust in front of the giant. But Don Quixote wasn't hurt. He was a master of the battlefield.

He stood up, dusted himself off, and gave the windmill a defiant look.

"You may have bested me today, windmill," he said, his voice filled with the solemnity of a knight who had faced defeat, "but I will return. And next time... next time, I will destroy you."

His mother, standing in the background, sighed heavily, wishing for the days when her biggest worry was whether or not he would eat his peas.

Chapter 3: The Tavern of Destiny

By the time evening fell, Don Quixote was in the local tavern, sitting at a table with a small glass of beer in front of him. His mother, of course, had given up trying to stop him. It was hard to argue with a child who could recite the philosophies of Aristotle while simultaneously downing a pint of lager.

"Two," he said to the tavern keeper, his voice deep for a two-year-old. "Two shots of whiskey. I need them."

The tavern keeper, a burly man with a thick beard, squinted at the child and laughed. "You're two, kid. You can't have whiskey."

Don Quixote grinned like the devil himself.

"I can have whatever I want," he said. "You see, I'm not just some regular child. I am a knight. A legend. Now pour me the whiskey, or I'll call upon my mighty steed again."

The tavern keeper hesitated, then shrugged. "Alright, alright. Just this once."

He slid a shot glass toward Don Quixote, who raised it to his lips and downed it in one go.

There was a moment of silence in the bar as everyone watched this toddler knock back alcohol like a seasoned drinker. It was almost surreal. But Don Quixote, in all his glory, only smiled and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"A knight is never defeated by such minor obstacles," he said, his voice dripping with sophistication beyond his years. "My destiny is set. There is no stopping me."

With that, he turned to a nearby group of village women who were sitting at the bar, gossiping. He gave them a knowing look and raised his glass.

"My ladies," he said with a slight bow, his voice full of charm and swagger. "I am Don Quixote de la Mancha. And I shall protect you from the giants of this world. From the beasts. From... *the windmills*."

The women, unsure whether to laugh or flee, exchanged awkward glances. But before they could respond, Don Quixote had already turned back to the bar, ordering another beer.

Chapter 4: The Future of Legends

Don Quixote didn't need to battle giants or windmills to be a legend. He already was one. He knew that the world was full of things that didn't make sense—things that needed to be corrected. And even at two years old, with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Don Quixote was ready for anything.

The real battle, he knew, would be fought with his mind.

And that was all he needed. His world was full of opportunities, full of impossible challenges, and Don Quixote—the smartest man alive—would face them all, like a true knight.

As he finished his beer and flicked the cigarette butt to the ground, he looked toward the horizon once more, his eyes narrowing with the certainty of a man who understood the world in a way no one else could.

"Onward," he muttered to himself. "The world is mine to conquer."

And with that, he turned back to the tavern, ready for the next adventure. Because for Don Quixote de la Mancha, the world was just one big playground—and he was here to win.

The End.

Title: The Semicolon of Bozo K

Bozo K looked at himself in the streaked mirror of his narrow studio apartment and sighed—not the sigh of despair, but the sigh of someone who has just discovered a minor typo in the middle of an otherwise flawless essay. His platinum curls, glistening with gel and defiance, sat atop a chiseled face that looked as though a sculptor had been interrupted halfway through chiseling Adam Driver into a Greek statue, then replaced by someone with a printout of Goldberg and a protein shake.

He was, by all accounts, impossible to look away from. And yet, Bozo K couldn't bear the sight of himself. Not today.

He sat down at the little pine desk that wobbled when you leaned too hard on it—though he never leaned. Posture mattered. Grammar mattered. And, today, he had decided that death would matter too.

He uncapped his pen with the quiet ceremony of a man about to sign the last peace treaty of a very personal war. A thick sheaf of unlined stationery waited beneath his tattooed forearms, his biceps twiching as if the words might erupt from them unbidden.

The first sentence was always the hardest.

> "To whom it may concern—"

No. Too impersonal. This was not a parking complaint or a resignation email.

He crossed it out.

> "Dear friends and enemies alike—"

Too theatrical. He wasn't trying to get an obituary in *The New Yorker*.

He paused, chewing the cap of his pen like it had offended him. The paper stared up at him, blank and smug.

"I am sorry."

There. Clean. Concise. But was it? Should it be *"I'm sorry"* for tone? *"Forgive me"* for depth?

He scratched it out.

What followed was two hours of furious scribbling, editing, and muttering. A symphony of hesitation. Bozo K tried every version of opening he could think of, his page littered with corpses of abandoned clauses.

"Life, in its cruel geometry, has left me trapezoidal."

Deleted.

"This is not a cry for help, unless your name is Grammar."

Tempting. But no.

He stood up, paced, sat again. His muscles were corded tight beneath his fishnet tank top, and a single bead of sweat traced the bridge of his strong, inconveniently emotive nose.

He tried again.

"If you're reading this, I am no longer among the living."

He paused. Did that imply his death occurred before the note? What if someone found it while he was still alive? What was the timeline of discovery in a literary suicide note?

This rabbit hole occupied the next thirty-seven minutes.

At some point, he got distracted trying to decide if "among the living" was too Biblical. He reread the entire Gospel of John. For tone.

By evening, the desk was littered with crumpled pages. Each bore the agony of his indecision. Bozo K, a man who once bench-pressed a Vespa in a rage over a misprinted protein label, could not commit to a single death-worthy paragraph.

He ate three boiled eggs. Then returned.

Day Two.

Bozo woke up on his desk, his cheek imprinted with the letter "A" from a discarded page. He made coffee—black, bitter, with just a pinch of nutmeg for reasons even he didn't understand.

He sat.

> "The world is not to blame, and neither are you."

Good. That was good. Almost elegant.

But did "you" refer to a specific person? Would the reader think he was absolving someone in particular? What if Karen from accounting read it and assumed it was about her? God forbid.

He scratched out "you" and replaced it with "the reader." Then crossed that out. Too cold.

Perhaps the problem was pronouns.

He began drafting an entire note in the third person.

> "Bozo K, a man of contradictory beauty and linguistic neurosis, has chosen to vacate the premises of existence."

Elegant, he thought. But too Dickensian. This wasn't a period novel. Or was it? Wasn't his life one long series of chapters where things almost happened?

He fell into a ten-minute spiral about whether the metaphor of life as a book was overdone. Then began outlining a new metaphor involving file directories and corrupted hard drives. He mapped the syntax on a napkin.

He didn't die.

Day Three.

Bozo changed fonts. The old font—Times New Roman—had grown judgmental. He experimented with Garamond, then landed on Georgia, which had the emotional weight of a funeral invitation and the crispness of dry leaves in November.

He wrote:

> "There is no single reason for what I intend to do, only a compounding of small, unbearable footnotes."

Brilliant, he thought. *Footnotes*. What a metaphor. His whole life was a series of things that didn't quite make it to the main text. He toyed with footnoting that sentence just to be ironic, but that felt like showing off. He was depressed, not submitting to *McSweeney's*.

Then came the verbs.

Past tense or present?

> "I have decided to end my life."
> "I am deciding to end my life."
> "My life ends here."

Each had a different texture. "Have decided" felt resolved, but distant. "Am deciding" made it seem like there was still room to talk him out of it. "My life ends here" sounded like a Batman monologue.

Bozo groaned. Not from despair, but from syntax.

Day Five.

He hadn't left the apartment in two days. He had ordered groceries online but had written special delivery instructions in iambic pentameter for fun.

The note was now 17 pages long. Half of it footnotes. Some of the footnotes had footnotes.

He had inadvertently written a treatise on the philosophy of meaning, the role of narrative in self-conception, and whether the em dash was truly superior to the colon in moments of high emotional gravity.

He printed the document, triple-spaced it, and read it aloud. It sounded like a thesis defense.

> "In conclusion," it read, "I respectfully recuse myself from the theater of existence; please note the bibliography attached."

He actually *had* a bibliography.

He wept—not because he wanted to die, but because he had forgotten to italicize *Being and Nothingness*.

Day Seven.

Bozo K stood in front of the open window of his apartment, looking down onto the indifferent bustle of the city.

His final draft lay on the desk behind him. It had been formatted in MLA, APA, and Chicago, just in case.

He took a breath.

Then turned back and picked up the paper.

His name was misspelled in the header.

Day Ten.

Bozo K was still alive. He had not written a suicide note. What he had written, however, was a 74-page hybrid memoir-essay-script-letter that one professor from NYU (who read an excerpt Bozo posted anonymously on Reddit) described as "a neurotic tour de force of self-aware fatalism and the Oxford comma."

He got a small book deal. The title?

"To Whom It May Concern: A Suicide Note in Seventy-Four Drafts."

Epilogue.

Bozo never killed himself. But he did become a minor literary icon in Brooklyn. People began copying his look: glam-rock tank tops, driver-nose aesthetic, and the anxious eyes of a man who has definitely Googled "semicolon vs em dash death letter."

At readings, people would ask him: *Did you really mean to die?*

And Bozo would smile, tip his head like a lopsided semicolon, and say:

> "Only grammatically."

Money Polly

Every Christmas Eve, without fail, the Whitmore family played Monopoly. It began as a simple tradition, a way to keep the cousins entertained while the adults prepared dinner, but over time, it became something far more meaningful. The game wasn't about winning or losing—it was about being together, about shared laughter and memories that stitched the family closer each year.

The Whitmores didn't take Monopoly too seriously. Uncle Gary, though an accountant, always played whimsically, choosing properties based on whether he liked the street names. Cousin Elise, a game designer, often brought quirky house rules just to spice things up. Aunt Fiona, known for her festive baking, brought cookies shaped like Monopoly pieces, and Grandpa Joe, the eldest, always played the banker with a twinkle in his eye and a joke at the ready.

They called the tradition "Money Polly," a name born from young Milo's childhood mispronunciation. The name stuck, and so did the warmth the game brought each year.

This year, they gathered in the living room, a fire crackling and twinkling lights casting soft glows across their faces. The Monopoly board, well-worn and marked with little notes from past games, was placed on the coffee table. The bowler hat banker token had been replaced with a knitted beanie made by Grandma years ago.

House Rules (handwritten and illustrated with doodles by Elise):

1. Trade with kindness.
2. Funny voices required when reading Chance cards.
3. Any player who flips the board must perform a dance.
4. Free Parking includes a compliment from every player.

"Let the game begin," Grandpa Joe announced, with mock-seriousness, drawing laughs from everyone.

The opening rounds were full of lighthearted jabs and easy laughter.

"Elise, you landed on my railroad again," Fiona said with a grin. "Care to pay in cookies?"

"Only if you let me use a British accent for the next turn," Elise replied.

"Jolly good!"

Gary rolled and landed on Boardwalk. "Looks like I own some prime real estate," he said, waggling his eyebrows. "Open to partnerships."

"You mean giving us discounted rent?" Elise asked.

"Precisely!" Gary laughed.

By hour two, the board was a colorful sprawl of friendly deals, shared jokes, and side bets on who would land in jail next (the loser had to make hot cocoa for everyone).

When Elise drew a Chance card that sent her back three spaces to a hotel-owned property, she gasped theatrically.

"Nooo! Financial ruin!"

"Only metaphorical," said Fiona, passing her a cookie. "You get a sweet with your rent."

Even Milo, now eleven and playing for the first time as an "official adult," was delighted to land on properties, whether he had to pay or not. "I just like building the little houses," he said, carefully aligning them like a city planner.

As the game continued, no one noticed the turkey finishing in the oven or the cranberry sauce slightly bubbling over. What mattered was that everyone was there, present, laughing, and letting go.

Uncle Gary lost all his money but stayed in the game, drawing stick-figure IOUs. Grandpa Joe graciously declared him "Chief of Free Parking," a made-up title with zero game implications but lots of laughter.

At one point, Fiona landed on her own hotel and paid herself out of sheer confusion.

"This is why I teach kindergarten," she joked. "They at least know who they are."

When the game drew to a natural close—no winner, just a warm consensus that the evening had been long and lovely—they didn't tally the money. They packed the board with care, folded the hand-drawn rule sheet, and placed it on the mantle.

Milo placed a gold star sticker on the game box.

"What's that for?" Grandpa Joe asked.

"For best Christmas tradition."

Later, as they sat down to dinner, the Monopoly talk continued in gentle waves.

"Remember when you gave me Vermont for a cookie?" Elise said, giggling.

"Best trade ever," Fiona replied.

"I'm going to design a new game," Elise said. "Based on this. Cooperative Monopoly."

"Name it after us," Gary added. "Money Polly: The Peaceful Edition."

"Or just... Family Edition," Joe said with a smile.

And from that year forward, the Whitmores didn't just play a board game on Christmas Eve. They played *Money Polly*, a reminder that the true wealth in life isn't found in hotels or cash stacks, but in the love and laughter shared with family.

They even started making a new tradition: a group selfie with the board each year, silly faces mandatory.

In every photo, behind the board, behind the pieces, was the real treasure: a family who remembered that the game was just a game, and that playing it together was the point.

Money Polly: Where Every Roll is a Memory.

TOP TEN TIPS FOR OWNING YOUR OWN HEARTBREAK

Freshly dumped? Heart smashed like a vintage Porsche? Good. Now's your time to SHINE, king. This isn't heartbreak—it's your Himbo Hero Origin Story. Let's go full YAS QUEEN and never look back.

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1. Remake *The First Wives Club*—But for Dudes

You *will* gather the boys. You *will* monologue in a white turtleneck. You *will* get revenge via Broadway musical numbers. Think *Ocean's Eleven* meets *therapy* meets *abs*.

---

2. Do a Duet (or Have an Affair) with Lady Gaga

She heals broken men like aloe vera heals sunburns. Sing your pain. Or just let her use you for a press cycle. Either way, you win.

---

3. Become Best Friends with Johnny Depp

If your heartbreak doesn't include an inexplicable friendship with an emotionally mysterious older man who owns too many scarves, are you even *coping*?

---

4. Keep Being a Ne'er-Do-Well / Keep Hanging with Ne'er-Do-Wells

Who says rock bottom can't have bottle service? Let your reckless phase have its moment. Make friends with a graffiti artist. Sleep in a velvet tracksuit. Regret nothing.

---

5. Be More Handsome Than Ever Before / Never Be Stinky Again (Out of Punishment)

Your new life starts with a skincare routine powered by spite. Cologne? On. Breath? Minty. Hair? Disrespectfully shiny. Because if she doesn't want you now, the world will.

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE...

---

6. Get a Yacht but Use It Exclusively for Crying and Reposting Camus Quotes

She left you? Good. Now we sob on open waters while writing moody captions about the absurdity of love. It's giving *existential crisis, but make it sexy.*

---

7. Start a Podcast That's Just You Vaguely Apologizing to Every Woman You've Ever Loved

Call it "My Bad, Babe." Bonus points if your co-host is a guy named Chad who wears sunglasses indoors and reads Jung out loud.

---

8. Develop a Signature Cocktail and Then Cry Into It

It's called "The Emotional Himbo." It's tequila, lemon zest, and exactly three tears. Serve over crushed dreams and a dash of ghosting.

---

9. Adopt a Dog, Name It After Her, and Tell People It's Therapy

Therapy is expensive. A pit bull named *Jessica* is forever. Tell strangers at the dog park she broke your heart but gave you purpose.

---

10. Win an Award You Made Up for Yourself

It's called the *Most Emotionally Available Shirtless Man in a Crisis* Award. You host the ceremony. You accept it shirtless. Everyone claps. You cry. You heal.

Remember, king: you're not broken—you're just in your villain era. Own the heartbreak. Weaponize the charm. And whatever you do, never text her back.

Let me know if you want it turned into a graphic-ready format or need a "Dear Himbos" advice column spinoff.

4o

You said:

give us a advice column spin offf then

ChatGPT said:

Absolutely. Introducing *Himbo Magazine*'s new advice column spinoff, written by our resident emotionally aware gym rat, Chaz "The Empath" Thunderbody. Think *Dear Abby* meets *protein powder* meets *vulnerability in gray sweatpants.*

💌 DEAR HIMBOS

Real questions. Real emotions. Real dumb but hot answers.

With your host, Chaz "The Empath" Thunderbody

💔 DEAR HIMBOS,

My wife left me for her CrossFit instructor. I've been watching sad movies in slow motion and doing curls every time someone says "love." What do I do?
—Heavy-Lifting Heartache, 34

DEAR HEAVY,
First of all, proud of you for emotionally multitasking. Crying *and* getting a pump in? King behavior.

Now listen: heartbreak is like a protein deficiency. You think it's gonna kill you, but really it's just asking for supplements. You need to feed your soul creatine, closure, and maybe a rebound with someone who owns a tarot deck.

Also: CrossFit? Bro, let her have him. You don't need someone who thinks relationships are made of burpees. You need someone who knows your favorite cereal and your fear of raccoons.

Final advice: start journaling. Use only emojis. It's cathartic.
Stay swole, stay soft, stay rising.
—*Chaz*

DEAR HIMBOS,

Is it okay to wear a mesh shirt to my ex's wedding? I want to look hot but spiritually threatening.
—Mesh-tified, 29

DEAR MESH-TIFIED,
Not only is it okay, it's legally and spiritually required.

A mesh shirt says: "I've been to hell and back, and I moisturize now." Bonus points if it's black and you pair it with sunglasses that hide how close you are to tears.

But remember: vengeance is a vibe, not a crime. Go, serve looks, sip champagne, and mysteriously leave before the cake is cut. Make them wonder if you were even real. Be the heartbreak ghost you wish to see in the world.
—*Chaz*

DEAR HIMBOS,

I haven't cried in five years. I just lift, drink smoothies, and repress. My girlfriend says I need to open up. Help??
—Emotionally Constipated, 31

DEAR CONSTIPATED,
Alright, big guy. Time to squat your feelings.

Emotions are just reps for your soul. If you're not crying at *The Iron Giant*, you're not lifting heavy enough inside. Vulnerability is not weakness—it's a *core workout.* And if you think tears make you less of a man, remember this: *Jason Momoa cries, and he could throw a Prius.*

Start small. Tell your girlfriend one thing that scared you as a kid. Maybe it's spiders. Maybe it's your dad not hugging you enough. Both are valid.
You got this. I believe in your gooey center.
—*Chaz*

Got a question for DEAR HIMBOS?

Email us at softpecs@himbomag.com or slide into our DMs with your messiest dilemmas and thirstiest regrets. 🫶

Title: World Cup of Confusion: The Birth of Crickeball

INT. INTERNATIONAL SPORTS FEDERATION HEADQUARTERS - PRESS ROOM - DAY

A gleaming podium, surrounded by bored journalists. A giant banner reads: "UNITED GAMES OF SPORTSMANLIKE COLLABORATION PRESENT: CRICKEBALL!"

Behind the podium stands DR. PEPPER FANDANGO (60s, wildly overconfident, clearly made his fortune in flavored water). He claps his hands.

DR. FANDANGOWelcome, sports lovers, visionaries, masochists! Today, we reveal the FUTURE of global athletic harmony. A bold fusion of two games no one outside their own countries fully understands: Cricket... and Baseball.

(BEAT)

Introducing: CRICKEBALL!

(Confused applause. One journalist faints.)

EXT. FISHTANK STADIUM - DAY

An absolute disaster of a sports field. One side is a pristine baseball diamond, the other a lumpy cricket pitch with a loose goat on it. The scoreboard is powered by a bicycle someone forgot to ride.

Two teams warm up:

The HAMPSTEAD HEDGEHOGS, the worst cricket team in the UK. They once lost a match to an AI-powered blender.

THE KANSAS CITY SQUIRRELS, America's worst baseball team, known for once catching a fly ball with a pizza.

The crowd is a mix of curious tourists, confused elderly fans, and one guy dressed like a cricket bat.

INT. ANNOUNCER BOOTH - CONTINUOUS

In the booth:

SANDY GREAVES, a cricket commentator whose moustache has its own zip code.

CHUCK BIGTON, a baseball announcer who speaks exclusively in stats and metaphors.

SANDYAnd we're off, dear listeners. Or possibly on. No one is quite sure of the rules.

CHUCKSandy, I have absolutely no idea what the hell's going on, but I'm 83% sure someone's going to bleed.

ON THE FIELD - FIRST INNING/OVER/HULLABALOO

The teams line up.

From the Hedgehogs: GORDON "THE GOOG" MACGILL, who holds a cricket bat like it's on fire.

From the Squirrels: CLETUS "TRIPLE-DENIM" MCCOY, chewing tobacco and a granola bar.

A referee (randomly selected from the crowd) flips a commemorative coin. It lands on its edge. Everyone agrees to just "start."

MONTAGE: THE GAME OF CRICKEBALL DESCENDS INTO CHAOS

Gordon bowls a cricket ball at 4 mph. Cletus swings a baseball bat like he's fending off bees.

Someone shouts "foul wicket!" No one knows if it means anything.

A fielder tries to tag a runner with a cricket stump.

Chuck screams, "AND IT'S A DOUBLE GOOGLEDY-GRUNT!" Sandy faints from confusion.

CUTAWAY - SIDELINES

Two managers argue:

REGINALD SNODGRASS (Hedgehogs manager)We were told there would be tea.

BOB "GRITS" GRANGER (Squirrels manager)We brought nachos and four tubs of Vicks Vaporub.

BACK TO GAME - LATER

A goat scores the first run.

CHUCKAnd would you look at that! Baaaaah-seball meets baaah-dminton in a moment of sheer majesty.

SANDY (waking up)Have we declared for lunch? No? Then what's the point?

EXT. FIELD - LAST "ROUND" OR WHATEVER

Now both teams are just making up rules.

The Hedgehogs declare a "sticky wicket home run."

The Squirrels respond with a "double bunk triple bunt offside tea-break switcharoo."

The goat has taken over as umpire.

FINAL SCOREBOARD:

HEDGEHOGS: 8 Snogs, 4 Grumbles, 1 Queen's PardonSQUIRRELS: 2 Home Twerks, 3 Sad Walks, 1 Lawsuit

DR. FANDANGO (V.O.)And thus, Crickeball was born. A sport for no one. A game without rules. A triumph of chaos.

CROWD CHANTSCrick-e-ball! Crick-e-ball! Goat bleats

FADE OUT.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

Crickeball was officially banned from international competition three hours after this match. The goat went on to become a Supreme Court Justice.

THE END

Title: The Sleepiest Man in All the World Competition

Every nation on Earth sent its finest. From Bolivia to Bhutan, men of supreme lethargy were chosen after months—sometimes years—of exhaustive napping trials, bedroom heats, and blanket-based qualifiers. The Sleepiest Man in All the World Competition, held once every 200 years, was a hallowed spectacle, watched by billions, and treated with the same fanatical reverence normally reserved for the World Cup, Eurovision, and the Second Coming.

In truth, the origins of the competition were murky. Some say it began in 1825, when an exceptionally drowsy Prussian count fell asleep during a duel and was declared the moral victor. Others trace it to a French monastery where monks discovered that doing absolutely nothing was the best way to commune with God. Whatever the true genesis, the modern format was codified in the Sleepocratic Charter of 1925: seven days, full international coverage, and absolutely no stimulants allowed—not even a sniff of mint.

The current host was Belgium, a nation whose ambient beige suited the tone perfectly. This year's venue: the Sleepodrome, a repurposed IKEA warehouse outside Bruges, retrofitted with state-of-the-art bed bays, yawn tunnels, and a 24-hour commentary booth helmed by former Swiss pole-vaulter-turned-somnologist, Hans von Drowse.

There were twenty-four entrants in 2025, including two from disputed territories, one man claiming to be from "Inner Atlantis," and the heavily favoured Yegor Plopov from Belarus, who had allegedly slept through three years of his marriage without being noticed. Team USA's hopeful was Trent Bulbert: a large, puffy man whose face seemed permanently squashed by unseen pillows. His coach, Dr. Sharon Meeble, a former army narcolepsy researcher turned performance rest consultant, described his style as "volcanic REM with sudden dips into Level 4 coma-spasms."

The opening ceremony was, as always, a surreal mix of nationalism and narcolepsy. Each contestant was rolled out in a commemorative bed featuring traditional motifs: the Japanese entrant, Mitsu "The Whisper" Takahashi, rode in on a heated futon flanked by robotic geishas; Nigeria's Obafemi Igwe emerged from a hammock woven from ancient sleep leaves; and Plopov's team carried him out in a human-sized nesting doll, each layer featuring progressively sleepier paintings of himself.

The crowd roared with admiration and low murmurs of envy. A sleepy silence fell, broken only by the occasional involuntary snore.

The competition was broken into seven categories:

1. **Depth of Sleep**
2. **Stillness**
3. **Duration**
4. **Dream Complexity**
5. **Drool Quality**
6. **Blanket Retention**

7. Most Convincing Unconsciousness During a Fire Drill

Scoring was ruthless. In one brutal moment, Iceland's Gudmundur Jónsson was disqualified for opening one eye briefly to see if it was still night. It wasn't. He was escorted off the premises by Belgian sleep police wielding plush batons.

Commentators speculated wildly. Was Team Canada's dark horse, Barry "Deep Freeze" Dunlop, a genuine contender or just genuinely depressed? Did the Vatican's entrant count as cheating, given his vow of silence and heavily sedated prayer schedule? And what, exactly, was the deal with Denmark's sleeper, who seemed to be in a fugue state and believed he was an Edwardian train conductor?

By day three, drama unfolded. Plopov was accused of microdosing lavender essential oil. His handlers insisted it was "just to take the edge off the calm." Meanwhile, Bulbert was making gains, reportedly entering a 16-hour slow-wave phase punctuated only by a minor sleep-fart incident, which judges ruled "technically within regulations, but spiritually disruptive."

Public support reached fever pitch. Entire countries held viewing parties. In Madrid, a 12-hour broadcast drew more viewers than the King's birthday. Norwegian pop star FREDDD released a sleep-themed anthem titled "Shhhhhh (You Dream, I Dream)" that topped charts across Scandinavia and parts of Uruguay.

The scoring system, developed by MIT's Department of Advanced Recline, included EEG readouts, breath pattern analysis, and live-streamed subconscious image decoding. Viewers could tune into their favourite contestant's dreams in real time, thanks to the neural-mirroring headbands worn by each sleeper. Highlights included:

- Yegor Plopov dreaming of sleeping inside a bigger Plopov who was also dreaming.
- Takahashi's 47-minute dream-loop of a sock falling forever.
- Bulbert's unsettling recurring image of a lasagna asking him existential questions in a Texan accent.

But it wasn't just about the dreams. It was about pride. National pride. Children in Bulgaria were given tiny sleep masks at school. Germany's economy temporarily shifted to mattress production. One Turkish mayor announced that all public transport would be replaced with "nap buses" until the event concluded.

Controversy struck on Day Five. A rogue journalist from Estonia caught Obafemi Igwe sipping chamomile tea behind a vending machine. Igwe claimed it was a religious ceremony, but the damage was done. After a 12-hour tribunal involving three sleep priests and a hypnotherapist, he was allowed to stay but given a mandatory dream handicap.

The leaderboard tightened. A three-way tie developed between Plopov, Bulbert, and, unexpectedly, Ecuador's Renaldo Zapata, a man who had only entered as a prank but had fallen asleep during the application process and never quite woke up.

The final challenge was brutal: the Midnight Fire Drill. Sirens, strobe lights, simulated smoke, and a man dressed as a flaming clown ran through the Sleepodrome shouting, "WAKE UP, THIS IS NOT A DRILL!" Contestants were monitored for any signs of response.

Plopov flinched. Takahashi twitched. Bulbert? Nothing. Stone still. The EEG revealed a delta wave so pure the Swiss measured it against their national time standard.

The crowd held its breath. Von Drowse, through misty eyes, whispered, "I have never seen such stillness."

When the final scores were read, a slow gasp rippled through the world.

Trent Bulbert: 99.94% Total Sleep Integrity

Confetti fell silently. Bulbert, naturally, did not react. He remained asleep. He would remain so for another three weeks. His trophy, a golden pillow shaped like a national border, was tucked gently under his arm.

The world rejoiced. America had finally won something dignified. Children wept. Poets wrote verses in hushed tones. Iceland rested.

And in the shadows of the now-empty Sleepodrome, preparations began...

...for the next bicentennial.

Coming 2225: The Drowsiest Woman on Earth

Title: Wherewithal Proctor's TED Talk: Rebranding the Future of 'Downland'

INTRO MUSIC: Inspiring, vaguely digital music. A stage lights up with an enormous, slightly crooked screen reading "THE NEW ERA OF IP: THINK DIFFERENTER."

A tall, overly confident man in a designer turtleneck walks out. This is WHEREWITHAL PROCTOR, new president of "the mountain-based movie concern" (we don't say the name. Legally.)

WHEREWITHAL PROCTOR (smiling like a stepdad trying to connect):

Ladies and gentlemen. Visionaries. Corporate orphans. IP whisperers. Welcome. I'm Wherewithal Proctor. No, it's not a family name. I had it legally installed after my third NFT collapse.

Today, I want to talk to you about legacy. Not your grandmother's legacy, like "knitting" or "having a personality." No, I'm talking about IP. Intellectual Property. The holy ghost of the media trinity.

(Clicks remote. A cartoon appears.)

This... is Downland.

You may know it by a different name. Legally, I can't say what that is. Let's just call it a "crude, controversial cartoon that defined at least two generations and half a bong."

Downland was created in 1997 by two men who were equal parts drunk and divine. It was animated in the software equivalent of a microwave. It became iconic for its wit, its bravery, and its total disregard for workplace HR policies.

And now? It's ours.

SLIDE: "MODERNIZING DOWNLAND: FROM NAUGHTY TO NFT."

I have been entrusted with modernizing this IP. You might ask, "Why not leave it alone?" To which I reply: "Why not put a Bluetooth speaker in a croissant?" Because we can. Because it's innovation.

(SLIDE: "GEN Z: WHO ARE THEY?")

We did our research. Focus groups. TikToks. Threats. And we learned something powerful: Gen Z doesn't watch television. They absorb irony like it's radiation. They live on phones smaller than their attention spans. They cancel people before they're born.

So we asked the hard question: How do you make a show about offensive kids in a mountain town work for a generation raised on moral ambiguity and frozen grapes?

Answer: You don't change the kids.

You change the mountain.

SLIDE: "WELCOME TO NEODOWNLAND."

Downland is no longer a sleepy town in Colorado. It is now a smart city funded by a failing crypto startup. Every character has a side hustle. Even the teacher is a Twitch streamer who vapes mentorship.

CHARACTERS, UPDATED FOR THE FUTURE:

Cortney: No longer fat. Now body neutral and dangerously obsessed with digital clout. Often livestreams his own delusions.

Kenji: He now wears a smart hoodie that insults people using AI. Still dies. But more metaphorically.

Steve: Our new Kyle analogue. A neurodivergent NFT lawyer raised by podcast parents. Has a catchphrase: "That's problematic in context!"

Eric: Oh Eric. We didn't change him. He changed us.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Where's the soul? Where's the grit? Where's the part where someone screams at Canada for no reason?

Don't worry. We've got:

A musical episode written by AI using only 2006-era MySpace posts.

A pandemic episode set in 2044 where the virus is emotional intimacy.

And an entire arc where the boys try to cancel each other but end up founding a wellness cult.

SLIDE: "DOWNLAND: THE MULTIVERSE."

We asked ourselves: Why just have one Downland when you can have infinite monetizable versions?

Introducing:

Downland Babies: It's the same show but they're toddlers and it's 100% merch.

Downland: After Dark: Prestige drama reboot. Shot in grayscale. 17 Emmys already.

Downland: The Game: Every decision you make is wrong. It's just like parenting!

And of course, we're launching the Downland Cinematic Universe (DCU)—legally distinct—and The Downland Experience, a VR immersion where you can be mocked in 4D.

We've even partnered with an Icelandic death metal band to create the new theme song. It's a Gregorian remix of "Blame Canada."

CROWD LAUGHS, ONE PERSON CRIES.

WHEREWITHAL (hands over heart):

But at the end of the day, what is Downland really about?

It's about freedom.

It's about bad animation.

It's about fart jokes that double as social commentary.

We're not just rebooting a show. We're rebooting the soul of late-'90s confusion. We're reminding the world that satire isn't dead—it's just in development.

SLIDE: "THE FUTURE: DOWNLAND ON MARS."

Coming 2027, the first Downland episode entirely filmed via drone on the Martian surface. NASA said no. We said: "We'll ask Elon."

And finally, I leave you with this:

DOWNLAND ISN'T JUST A SHOW.

It's a lifestyle.

It's a blockchain.

It's a semi-legal religion.

And under my leadership, we'll bring Downland to everyone—kids, adults, lawyers, even the Canadian government.

FADE TO BLACK. SFX: A single, echoing fart.

TEXT ON SCREEN:

"Downland: Think Differenter. Now Streaming on All Devices Including Your Fridge."

END.

WELCOME TO THE FUTURE OF COMEDY: I'M THE NEW PRESIDENT OF A CERTAIN MOUNTAIN-THEMED MEDIA COMPANY, AND YES, WE'RE REINVENTING "DOWNLAND" FOR THE CRYPTO-ERA

By Wherewithal Proctor

Hello. My name is Wherewithal Proctor. Yes, it's real. I legally changed it during my third NFT-related wellness retreat. I'm the newly minted president of a globally beloved, mountain-themed media company whose name rhymes with "Staramount." Legal says I cannot say more.

I'm here to share our bold vision for rebooting a certain long-running, incredibly offensive cartoon show that defined a generation—let's call it *Downland*. You know the one. Four animated boys. Big heads. Small morals. A talking towel with substance issues.

Downland has been the crown jewel in our intellectual property treasure chest. But like all jewels, it needed polishing. And maybe... turning into a cryptocurrency.

Let's dive in.

Step One: Rebrand the Town. Burn the Map.

First off: the town of Downland? Gone. We bulldozed it (narratively). It's now a "smart city" where the boys' elementary school is sponsored by a lithium startup and the mayor is an AI with anxiety. It's not satire if it isn't self-aware, and it's not modern if it doesn't mine your data.

Step Two: The Boys, Reimagined.

- **Cortney**: Formerly overweight and loud. Now body-neutral and operating a conspiracy TikTok account. His side hustle? Selling bootleg empathy crystals.
- **Kenji**: Our updated Kenny. Still wears a hoodie, but now it's smart-fabric and insults strangers on command. Dies once a season, but now metaphorically.
- **Steve**: Our Kyle 2.0. An NFT lawyer raised by podcasting parents. Constantly muttering "that's problematic in context."
- **Eric**: Still here. Still awful. Our North Star of moral decay. Untouched. Unfiltered. Unapologetically demonic.

Step Three: Monetize Everything.

We asked: "What if every single emotion could be a branded experience?"

Introducing:

- **Downland Babies™**: Toddler versions of the characters who scream satire in baby talk. Just adorable enough to move plushies.
- **Downland: After Dark**: Prestige TV reboot. Black-and-white. Narrated by Werner Herzog. All dialogue whispered. Seventeen Emmys pending.
- **Downland: The Blockchain Experience**: It's a choose-your-own-adventure NFT metaverse. Every path leads to guilt and mild nausea.
- **Downland: Mars Edition**: We're in talks with Elon. He ghosted us. We'll probably still do it.

Step Four: Sincere-ish Artistic Integrity

"Isn't this sacrilegious?" you cry, clutching your Region 1 DVD box set from 2003.

No. It's visionary.

Downland has always been about satire, filth, and truth. But now it's also about subscriber growth, AI-driven fart noises, and at least one plotline involving cancel culture as a sentient slime mold.

We're still the same show, deep down. Just... streamed, optimized, gamified, focus-grouped, and translated into Esperanto.

Final Thoughts: Think Differenter™

What is *Downland*, really?

It's not just a cartoon. It's not just a brand.

It's a state of mind.
A controlled burn.
A 23-minute descent into moral purgatory with musical numbers.

And under my guidance, *Downland* will rise again—like a phoenix wrapped in copyrights and wrapped again in a branded blanket available for $79.99.

We're not just rebooting the show. We're rebooting the *soul* of satire. And if you don't like it?

Well... there's probably a multiverse version of you that does.

See you in Season 26: "The Algorithm Eats Steve."

Absolutely Productions Ltd
27 Grotty Lane
Boreham-on-the-Murk
London, E6 9FF

RE: Submission – "The Sleepiest Man in All the World"
Dear [Your Name],

Thank you for submitting your script to Absolutely Productions. We appreciate the time, effort, and clear disregard for mainstream sensibilities that went into your piece.

There is no doubt that your work is — and we use this term with the kind of reverence normally reserved for Rothko or extreme weather — **avant-garde**. The tone is bold. The pacing is wilfully

antagonistic. Several of us at the company had to lie down for a bit after reading the third paragraph.

That said, we regret to inform you that your submission does not meet the specific **toilet humour threshold** required for current Absolutely development projects. While your piece showed flashes of absurd brilliance (the bit with the flaming clown received murmurs of appreciation from our junior script reader, Gary), we noted a **concerning lack of fart gags, willy references, or anything remotely involving wee.**

In the future, should you choose to rework your script to include at least **two (2) audible bottom sounds**, one **extended urinal monologue**, or a **tastefully deployed poo metaphor**, we would be happy to reconsider.

Also, we were sorry to hear about your wife leaving you. That must be incredibly difficult. However, this is a comedy company, not a support network. Unless of course you can spin that into a decent knob joke — in which case, do get back in touch.

We wish you all the best with your future endeavours and encourage you to keep pushing boundaries, ideally the kind that end in "-arse".

Warmest regards (but not too warm),
The Development Department
Absolutely Productions Ltd

P.S. You left your USB stick in the envelope. It has been returned to you, although someone here may have accidentally reformatted it while trying to plug in their heated mug.

can you write this: in event of betrayal 1) run away as much as you can 2) do the opposite of what people say and 3) always remember to be an 'absolute bloody nuisance'. on an email to all involved

can you write this: in event of betrayal 1) run away as much as you can 2) do the opposite of what people say and 3) always remember to be an 'absolute bloody nuisance'. on an email to all involved

"The Dog Who Knew Cinema"

(A scene written in the style of Hunter S. Thompson meets Miranda July — starring Clips & Farben)

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHTFALLISH

CLIPS is crumpled on the carpet like a broken doll after a bad year. Around her: a remote, a cup of cereal, a T-shirt she used as a tissue. The TV glows like an open wound. Something explodes onscreen—probably the plot.

CLIPS (muttering):
You wanna just watch *Paddington 2* again?

FARBEN, a medium-sized dog with the soul of a 1970s East German film critic, licks his paw with disgust. The room smells like sock and forgotten ambition.

FARBEN (VO — raspy, psychic, only audible to us):
She doesn't understand. She never understood. The algorithm is a false god. I've seen *Ran* 36 times. I've transcended the leash of plot.

He paws the remote gently but insistently, like a war general pressing a nuclear launch button he doesn't fully believe in.

CLIPS (half-asleep):
Farben, I swear to god. I'm not paying for another f---ing streaming service.

FARBEN (VO):
She resists. They always resist. But she hasn't seen *The Spirit of the Beehive*. She thinks "Antonioni" is a pasta. I live in this house. I deserve *aesthetic dignity*.

FARBEN climbs onto the coffee table. Stares her down.

FARBEN (psychically screaming):
GET THE CRITERION CHANNEL.

CLIPS:
You don't even speak!

FARBEN:
NEITHER DOES JEAN-LUC GODARD IN THE FINAL YEARS, AND YET HE SPOKE THE TRUTH.

(TV explodes again — more plot violence)

CLIPS (quietly):
...I just wanted to watch a nice murder show. Something with a lady cop and a big cold lake.

FARBEN (sits beside her now, serious):
The lady cop is inside you. The lake too. But have you seen *A Brighter Summer Day*? Four hours. Taiwanese. Life-changing.

(They sit in silence. The TV buzzes out a commercial for toothpaste that tastes like dessert.)

CLIPS (after a long, weird beat):
...If I sign up, are you gonna stop trying to make me watch that one where the donkey gets existential?

FARBEN:
No. You must see it. His name is Balthazar. He is all of us.

SMASH CUT TO:

CLIPS, sobbing in the glow of the Criterion app, as *Au Hasard Balthazar* plays. **FARBEN** sits next to her, serene, like a guru who once ate a couch.

Title: Doctor Gonzo in the Afterlife

PART I: THE GATES OF DIVINE ACCOUNTING

It was a Tuesday in eternity. The clouds were lazy. The cherubs were off duty. Hunter S. Thompson arrived at the Pearly Gates wearing aviator sunglasses, a Hawaiian shirt, and the sort of smirk you'd only see on a man who had once punched a congressman for mispronouncing mescaline.

He didn't knock. He kicked the gate. Then burped.

The gates opened anyway.

Out stepped a tall, glowing entity in a crushed velvet suit. His nametag read: PETER, HEAD OF CELESTIAL INTAKE. He wore the weary expression of someone who had been explaining moral relativism to hedge fund managers for 2,000 years.

PETER: "Ah. Thompson. Right on schedule."

HUNTER: "You mean right on schedule to flip off God's receptionist? What's the deal, Peter, you got a clipboard or a .38?"

Peter smiled, the way a guillotine might smile.

PETER: "Guess what, buddy. Your chickens have come home to roost. This ain't your mama's afterlife. This is Sod Law up here. Divine retribution. Cosmic Karmic Payback. You knew it was coming. You wrote about it enough."

HUNTER (grinning): "Let's get to the charges, then. Hit me with the sins, baby."

Peter cleared his throat and unrolled a scroll that hit the clouds with a dramatic thud.

THE EARTH CRIMES OF HUNTER S. THOMPSON:

Feeding LSD to a taxidermied bear and attempting to run it for sheriff.

Smoking in every non-smoking hotel room from Reno to Reykjavik.

Attempting to unionize hallucinations.

Inventing a new strain of rabies by accident.

Launching fireworks during a Senate hearing.

Hosting an unlicensed radio show inside a haunted salad bar.

Illegally impersonating a priest, twice, once in a canoe.

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Publishing 14 fake obituaries for Henry Kissinger while he was still alive.

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Declaring war on a zoo.

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PETER: "We tried to warn you, Thompson. Irony burns holes in the moral fabric of the universe."

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THUNDER CRASHES. CHOIRS GIGGLE MENACINGLY.

PART II: THE OM'S SPIRIT HOSPITAL

Hunter opened his eyes in a white hallway lined with floating stretchers and floating souls. The sign above read:

"OM'S SPIRIT HOSPITAL – Healing the Afterlife Since The Fall of Atlantis."

A nurse made of smoke handed him a lab coat and a stethoscope that occasionally screamed.

HUNTER: "This place smells like patchouli and regret."

NURSE: "You're our new Doctor of Spirits. Welcome aboard."

HUNTER: "Doctor of what now?"

NURSE: "Spirits. You tend to ghosts, apparitions, shades, and those celestial beings who died from metaphorical heartbreak or spiritual overdraft. Your clinic is next to the bar."

HUNTER (squinting): "Do I get a badge?"

NURSE: "You get a goat. His name is Hieronymus."

Enter Hieronymus, an ethereal goat wearing a bell that rings backwards. He licks Hunter's hand and vomits a small moon.

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SAGAN: "Doctor Gonzo! I think my spacetime is infected again."

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He handed him two sugar cubes and a cassette labeled "1972: Pure Acid Jazz."

Soon, word spread through the afterlife: The Gonzo Doctor is in. But instead of healing, he dispensed wild parties and even wilder prescriptions. The hospital became a commune. A sacred rave. The afterlife's first 24/7 ecstatic clinic.

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Napoleon's ghost came in with ego swelling. Hunter prescribed 3 shots of mezcal and a trust fall.

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The ghost of Nixon showed up and Hunter threw an armchair at him. Again.

The celestial administration was horrified. Order had become interpretive dance. Files were burned ceremonially. The vending machines now dispensed peyote and Marxist pamphlets.

Hunter hosted group therapy under the stars. Patients were told to scream their pain into jars, which were then bottled and sold as artisan cocktails. Spirits left cured or at least very, very altered.

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He was summoned back before Peter.

PETER: "You were supposed to heal spirits, not start a metaphysical warehouse party."

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PETER: "You turned the spirit ward into a micro-dosed commune."

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He hands out sugar cubes of revelation. He throws glitter at philosophers. He sits in the break room with Jesus, watching old monster movies and discussing existentialism.

Some say it's chaos. Others say it's healing.

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EPILOGUE:

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TITLE: "THE FINAL PANEL: CRITICISM AS GODHEAD"

In a dimly lit auditorium hovering three feet above Parnassus (rented, due to scheduling conflict with the muses), a mahogany table glistens under the reluctant light of a single divine halogen.

At the head of it sits **Alexander Pope**, short in stature but long in eternal contract. He is the moderator, or as he put it in the invite: *"Universal Arbiter of Aesthetic Wranglings and Taste-Centurion of the Sacred Tongue."*

Seated around the table:

- **Pauline Kael** – Resurrected for one night only via Criterion Collection séance. Still smells faintly of gin and intellectual combat.
- **Roger Ebert** – Glowing faintly with benevolence and that deep, Midwestern certainty that movies *matter*.
- **Armond White** – Suspicious of the water. Claimed it had "liberal undertones."
- **A.O. Scott** – Wearing glasses, one shirt too many, and a look that said, "I don't want to be here, but I must bear witness."

And finally, at the far end, slightly late, still picking hummus off his sleeve, **Basil Farben**, junior critic from *Empire Magazine*. No one at the table really knows what he's famous for, but there's a general sense that he said *something once*.

Pope clears his throat. It echoes into several dimensions.

> **POPE:** "Gentlefolk and professional nitpickers, welcome. Tonight we answer the eternal: *What is the most important criticism ever given?* Speak freely, but know — I carry a divine buzzer."

He gestures to a small brass bell shaped like a curled lip.

KAEL goes first, obviously.

> "Criticism is bloodsport and ballet. The greatest criticism makes art feel like a scandal. *Bonnie and Clyde*? That wasn't just a film. That was *me*, telling America to drop its drawers and find some guts."

She sips something violently carbonated.

> "The critic must seduce. Or slap. Or both. But always better dressed than the audience."

POPE: "A noble thesis. Arrogant. Slightly French. Proceed."

EBERT, glowing warmly, speaks with the cadence of someone narrating your best memory.

> "The finest criticism reminds us we're human. It sees *inside* the art. My review of *Dark City*? That wasn't just about sci-fi noir — that was about *truth*. The movies are empathy machines, and critics are their janitors."

POPE: "Profound. A bit Midwestern. But nicely rinsed."

ARMOND WHITE, leaning forward like a man who's never blinked:

> "Criticism is rebellion. The greatest criticism is a weapon *against consensus*. I championed *Norbit*. I found beauty in *Transformers* 2. I walk where cowards dare not review."

He slams a VHS of *Spice World* on the table.

> "Art is pain. Critics should cause it."

POPE: "Delightfully perverse. Verging on cursed. I smell brimstone. Continue."

A.O. SCOTT, adjusting every object around him:

> "True criticism is the slow dissection of civilization's moral pancreas. It asks: *What does this say about us?* My review of *Batman v Superman* wasn't just about superheroes—it was about *late-stage capital's mythic self-flagellation through caped proxy.*"

A beat. Everyone stares.

> "Also I liked *Paddington 2*."

POPE: "Impeccably overthought. You remain the high priest of reluctant joy."

Finally, all eyes turn to **BASIL FARBEN**, the Empire Indie Boy. He pushes his beanie back to reveal nothing underneath.

He clears his throat, leaning into the mic like he's about to accidentally record a seminal lo-fi album.

> "I once reviewed a film called *Knowing*. Nic Cage. Aliens. Apocalypse. The works."

The other critics lean in.

> "I gave it two stars and wrote: *'You're better off not knowing.'*"

He shrugs, chewing the end of a blunt pencil.

"That's it. That's the best criticism anyone's written in 10,000 years. Art makes you curious. I said: *Don't be.* What's more honest than that?"

There is a silence.

A long, echoing, cosmic silence.

Even **Pope** is still.

He folds his hands. Eyes closed.

POPE: "...It's clean. Cruel. Biblical, even. Six words. An anti-epiphany."

He rises.

"Let the record state: All criticism henceforth shall be judged against this one *Empire* review. The rest is discourse. Or worse — Letterboxd."

The critics bow their heads.

The lights dim.

In the corner, a janitor begins mopping up spilled metaphor.

HOW TO BECOME THE BERT KREISCHER OF YOUR SMALL TOWN
(A MONOLOGUE — RORSCHACH STYLE)

Step one. Find the bar. Not just any bar. The one where the fittest babes drink like gods on a Friday night. Enter with the fire of a man who's got nothing left to lose. Down twenty beers. Embarrass yourself. Lose control. Strip away the lies. Be *seen*. Be raw.

Step two. Play beer pong with the local legends. The titans of the night. Invent scoring systems so convoluted, so arcane, the gaggle accepts you. You're one of them now. Not just an outsider. The laws of the game bend to your will. You own the table. You own the ritual.

Step three. Do the coyote ugly. Dance with the lads. Let the girls watch, mesmerized. Your shame becomes a weapon, your foolishness a beacon. The dance floor is your battlefield, and you fight with reckless abandon. They love it. They worship the madness.

Step four. Propose. To the queen bee of the bar. The one who told you to leave. The one who screamed *never come back*. But you know better. You see through the chaos to the queen's secret fire. Drop to one knee, and defy her silence. She's yours now, or the town's a lie.

Step five. Get married. Live happy ever after. A legend carved in bourbon and broken dreams. The town remembers. The tales are told. You are immortal, not despite your chaos, but because of it.

This is no fairy tale. It's blood and beer and damnation. But it's yours.

And you? You are the machine.

INT. UNITED NATIONS MEGADOME - PRESS CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

A dazzling chrome monstrosity of a building hums gently with atmospheric pomp. Flags of every nation—and some newly invented—flutter as delegates, journalists, and influencers sip mood-neutralising beverages.

At the dais: a semicircle of the NEW GLOBAL CABINET. All in matching semi-military-silken uniforms. The Secretary-General, a slim man with a moustache that implies dangerous optimism, steps forward. His name placard reads: **SECRETARY-GENERAL BIX ST. CRISP.**

SECRETARY-GENERAL BIX ST. CRISP (firm, radiant) Ladies, gentlemen, and sovereign holograms... I bring historic tidings. After a unanimous algorithmic vote and several vibe-check subcommittees, the United World Government has identified our era's most pernicious adversary.

(beat)

It is not war. It is not famine. It is not cyber-populism or rogue AI with podcast deals.

(he leans in)

It is DEATH.

(GASPS. A woman in the crowd faints. A man salutes instinctively.)

BIX ST. CRISP Yes. We are declaring a War on Death. Codename: Operation Forever Ever.

A flurry of hands. The press corps bristles.

REPORTER 1 (BBC FUTURE-LITE) Just to clarify, Mr. Secretary-General—death as in... the cessation of life?

BIX ST. CRISP Precisely. That rude interruption. That finality fetishist. That... biological gatecrasher.

REPORTER 2 (VICE-NEO) How do you plan to defeat death?

BIX ST. CRISP Glad you asked. We are initiating a multipronged attack. First, all global health services will be rebranded as "Mortality Reversal Divisions." Second, the military has been tasked with locating and neutralizing any known personifications of death—skeletons, reapers, goth DJs, et cetera.

REPORTER 3 (AL JAZEERA NOIR) Will this affect funerals?

BIX ST. CRISP Yes. They will now be referred to as "post-life inconveniences" and must be celebrated with bounce castles.

Behind him, a slick young advisor taps into a glowing tablet.

YOUNG ADVISOR (whispering) Sir, we're getting pushback from the Thanatologists' Union. They claim this is... species-ist.

BIX ST. CRISP Tell them to try being on the winning side of history for once.

A DR. STRANGELOVE-ESQUE SCIENTIST wheels out a chart titled "STRATEGIC IMMORTALITY MAP." It includes bizarre acronyms, a cloning chamber, and something labeled "HOT YOGURT REBIRTH INITIATIVE."

SCIENTIST We believe we can outpace death via aggressive vivification—jetpacks, nano-wombs, and what we're calling... Soul 2.0.

CHAOS. The French ambassador has lit a cigarette. A monk screams into a conch shell. The Canadian representative politely raises his hand, weeping.

BIX ST. CRISP (tapping mic) Let it be known: humanity is no longer in retreat. We are marching forward... forever.

WAR ON DEATH HAS BEGUN.

FADE TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD: "OPERATION FOREVER EVER"

Muffled screaming. Applause. Lounge jazz plays.

END SCENE.

Did Everyone Become a Scientologist?

By Aarya Addison

It started subtly. A friend on Instagram stopped replying to messages because she was "setting boundaries with negative energy." A former coworker launched a podcast about "deprogramming from scarcity mindsets." A wellness brand promised that if I bought their $88 crystal-infused serum, I could finally "transcend my old operating system." I wasn't talking to Scientologists—but suddenly, it felt like I was surrounded by them.

Not the literal Church of Scientology, of course. That institution—with its sci-fi mythology, Hollywood headquarters, and track record of controversy—is still relatively fringe. But many of its core ideas, language patterns, and social dynamics have leaked out into mainstream culture. Without realizing it, large swaths of society have absorbed a Scientology-like framework for thinking about selfhood, relationships, and reality.

Welcome to the age of secular spiritual programming.

The Operating System Mindset

Scientology was built on the premise that humans are programmable—that our traumas, called *engrams*, can be cleared through a process of mental debugging. We're all born as powerful *thetans* (souls) but become clogged by emotional baggage. With enough "auditing" and payment, one can climb the "Bridge to Total Freedom" and become an *Operating Thetan*, a spiritually sovereign being.

Sound familiar?

Today's culture is awash in talk of mental "reprogramming," "shadow work," and "optimization." Tech executives speak of rewiring their dopamine cycles. Therapists and influencers advise followers to "update their internal software." The underlying logic is the same: your problems aren't just emotional or social—they're code errors that need fixing.

You don't need a church. You need a protocol.

From Religion to Ritualized Wellness

Since the decline of organized religion, people have filled the spiritual vacuum with self-help, wellness, and productivity culture. The idea that we're each on a journey of ascension—whether it's healing childhood trauma or becoming financially "abundant"—has become a secular gospel.

The most powerful belief systems today are sold in course modules, marketed via reels, and gamified into tiers. Like Scientology's "OT levels," these programs often promise exclusive knowledge, emotional mastery, and access to inner circles—once you've proven yourself.

A 10-week mastermind can feel eerily similar to Scientology's auditing rooms: confession, feedback, breakthrough. The difference? These gurus let you use Afterpay.

The Cult of the Influencer-Guru

Scientology was an early adopter of the *charismatic central figure*. L. Ron Hubbard loomed over the entire organization, and after his death, David Miscavige became the controlling force. But the model has been replicated across industries.

From Gwyneth Paltrow to Andrew Huberman, Jordan Peterson to Tony Robbins, modern thought leaders act as quasi-spiritual guides offering systems to decode your suffering. You get a vocabulary ("nervous system regulation," "self-sourcing," "masculine/feminine polarity") and a sense of shared struggle. More importantly, you get an identity.

Like traditional religions—and high-control groups—these ecosystems tend to isolate dissenters, elevate insiders, and demand performance. Doubt is "resistance." Criticism is "projection." If you're not onboard, you're unhealed, unready, or toxic.

Scientology Without the Label

None of this is to say that people are joining Scientology en masse. In fact, its membership has declined. But its influence has metastasized.

The culture-wide obsession with self-authoring, reality-bending, boundary-setting, and trauma-clearing has taken on the cadence of Scientology's worldview—just in softer fonts and better lighting.

What was once fringe—operating thetans, reactive minds, suppressive people—has become palatable when filtered through apps, courses, and TikToks. You no longer need a religion to hold dogma. A self-help framework will do.

Why Now?

There are several reasons this shift has accelerated:

- **Crisis Culture:** In times of uncertainty, people seek answers. Climate dread, economic precarity, and political instability have created a hunger for systems that promise control.
- **Disillusionment with Institutions:** Traditional religion, government, and even therapy are viewed by many as too slow, inaccessible, or compromised.
- **Algorithmic Identity:** Social media platforms reward extremity, certainty, and personal branding. The more clearly you perform your healing or your hustle, the more attention you get.

- **Accessibility of Language:** You don't need to read *Dianetics* to start talking about "high-vibe living" or "removing energetic blocks." It's in the feed now.

So... Is That a Bad Thing?

Not inherently. Healing, introspection, and boundary-setting are all valid, even necessary. But when these things are commodified, moralized, and turned into rigid dogma, they stop being liberating. They become another system of control.

The danger isn't Scientology. It's **Scientology-thinking**—the idea that human complexity can be solved like an equation, that dissent is dysfunction, that spiritual health is something you can rank or buy.

In a world this disorienting, it makes sense that we want answers. But maybe the first step toward clarity is admitting that we don't need to become our own cult leaders to survive.

THE SANE EX

Set to the low hum of a jazz quartet in the corner of a London hotel bar, brushed drums, warm piano, and a double bass barely louder than the clink of glassware. The kind of place where people don't raise their voices, just their eyebrows. Midnight has passed, but no one is rushing home.

Lena: *"You know what's weird?"* she said, pulling her heels off under the velvet booth. *"I actually think he's...fine."*

Claire raised one perfectly arched brow, just slightly. "Fine as in—'not texting you from outside your flat at 3am' fine? Or actual human being fine?"

Lena laughed, the kind of tired-laugh that's mostly air. "No. Like...he sent me an article last week. On grief. Said it made him think of how endings aren't failures. Can you imagine?" She sipped her Negroni like it might sting. "I was halfway through crying and halfway through genuinely appreciating the sentiment."

Claire leaned back, stretching her long legs in those sleek, indecipherable trousers only she could pull off. "You always went for the over-evolved ones. The men who keep dream journals and own linen." She paused. "Still, that's...annoyingly decent."

Lena looked out across the bar—soft pools of golden light, everything forgiving in its angles. Two people slow-dancing quietly by the piano, not quite brave enough for a real scene, but still brave. She smiled faintly.

"He was never going to break anything," she said. "Not even the rules. Not even my heart. Just...put it down gently and walked away."

Claire watched her friend closely, stirring her drink with unnecessary intent. "And that's worse?"

Lena didn't answer right away. She ran a hand through her hair, letting silence settle like the steam of a hot bath.

"It's just—when someone leaves without chaos, without drama, just...because they know it's time—that's the bit that undoes you, isn't it?" she finally said. "Because then there's no villain. No loud argument. Just you, with all your perfectly intact pain."

Claire reached across the table and tapped Lena's glass with hers. *Tink.*

"To the sane exes," she said softly, voice full of a kind of reverence, a kind of resignation. "They ruin the good wallow."

Lena grinned. "Bastards."

They both laughed, quietly. Then sat in it. The music swelled a little—Bill Evans, maybe. Or someone trying to sound like him. The kind of jazz that didn't ask for attention but deserved it anyway.

Lena looked down at her phone. No messages. No unread missives or half-thought apologies.

"Maybe this is what being grown-up feels like," she said.

Claire shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just what happens when you've run out of bad decisions."

They stayed there a little longer, two women in their thirties, hearts mostly intact, shoes off, makeup faded. Not broken, not bitter—just old enough to know that some endings come with thank-you cards.

And somewhere, not too far off, someone was playing the last notes of a song no one ever really learns the name of—but still knows by heart.

Absolutely—this is delightfully niche and has legs like Toad in a hijacked hot air balloon. Here's a **farcical, sleepy, 3000-word parody of a Guy Ritchie caper** *via* The Wind in the Willows.
We open in the shadiest parts of a drowsy English woodland, where the river runs slow and Badger's got no time for drama—but unfortunately, **Toad's got time for everything.**

Here's a **full short story** titled:
"Badger Gives Toad a Slap (and Then Has a Sit Down)"
(A Rustic Tale of Misguided Entrepreneurship and Mild Violence)

CHAPTER ONE: Trouble's Come Knocking Again

It was half past a hedgehog's sneeze on a Tuesday when the telegram arrived at Badger's door. He was asleep in his armchair with a plate of toast perched precariously on his belly and a book of Anglo-Saxon pottery slowly sliding off his lap.

BANG BANG BANG.
The door knocker, which hadn't been used since 1993 (and that was just Mole trying to return a misdelivered cabbage), rattled the entire burrow.

Badger stirred, grunted, and muttered something impolite about society.

"WHO IS IT?" he barked.

"IT'S RAT. AND YOU NEED TO HEAR THIS."

Badger grunted again, louder this time, rolled himself upright like a seal with opinions, and padded to the door in his woollen socks.

Ratcheting open the latch, he squinted at Ratty, who was panting, soaked from river spray, and clearly on the verge of spontaneous jazz hands.

"It's Toad," Ratty said, as if that explained everything.

Badger sighed. "What's he done now?"

Ratty's voice dropped, heavy with scandal.

"He's opened a pop-up gin distillery on the cricket green. Calls it *'Toad & Toad Again'*. He's selling cocktails in jam jars out of the back of a Morris Minor. Says it's 'disruptive hospitality.'"

Badger closed his eyes and counted to ten in Latin.

CHAPTER TWO: The March of the Enraged

It is important to understand that Badger didn't **walk** to Toad Hall.

He **trudged**. With purpose. With grim inevitability. Like a tax bill. Or gout.

Clad in a moth-eaten coat and wielding a cane last used to threaten a kestrel with poor table manners, he left his burrow and turned down the long dusty woodland path.

Behind him, the forest sighed.

"Where are you going?" Mole called, popping up from a hillock like an anxious muffin.

"To administer justice."

"Will there be tea?"

"There will be *reckoning*."

"Oh," said Mole, and went back inside for a biscuit.

CHAPTER THREE: Toad & Toad Again

Toad's cocktail bar was less of a structure and more of an idea held together with fairy lights and misplaced confidence.

Perched in the middle of the green, it boasted:

- One rusted Morris Minor
- Two hay bales for "VIP seating"
- A sign reading:
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  NOW SERVING: The Pine Needle Negroni, The Blackberry Bloodbath, & The Riverbank Manhattan (May Contain Actual Riverbank).

Badger arrived just as Toad vaulted onto the roof of the car with a ladle in hand and a scarf billowing like he was auditioning for a very small production of *Les Misérables*.

"Friends! Denizens! Woodland entrepreneurs!" he cried. "Welcome to the future of rural nightlife! No more sleepy tea! No more jam sandwiches in silence! We're shaking up the scene, literally! This one's called *The Ferret's Lament* and it will knock your clogs off!"

He downed the drink, fell backwards into a hedge, and yelled, "I MEANT TO DO THAT."

Badger approached.

Everyone else backed away.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Slap Approaches

Toad, brushing pine needles from his trousers, grinned.

"Badger! Old sport! Come to try the menu? I've invented a cocktail called *The Stoat's Demise*—it contains marmalade, regret, and shoe polish. It's quite *authentic*."

Badger stopped, cane planted in the turf.

"Toad," he said, in the voice you reserve for disappointed fathers and low Yelp reviews, "I have had *four telegrams*, six complaints, and an irate note written in vole blood about your latest enterprise."

Toad puffed up.

"It's *boutique*, Badger."

"It's *illegal*, Toad."

Toad waved a paw. "Red tape! Paperwork! The small-minded tyranny of permits! I am *innovating*. I am *disrupting*! I am *micro-batching botanical gins*! And also moonshine. But only on Thursdays."

Badger took a single, measured step forward.

Toad took a corresponding step back.

"You're fermenting elderberries in *Mrs. Otter's water butt*, Toad. You've been banned from three cricket matches for 'exuberant garnish placement.' You tried to pay the vicar in juniper. And Mole's nephew has a hangover that could level a goat."

Toad opened his mouth.

Badger raised the cane.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Slap

Time slowed.

Birdsong paused.

A squirrel dropped a conker.

Then, with all the solemnity of a council vote and the grace of a swan dipped in vinegar—

Badger slapped Toad.

It was not a violent slap.
Nor was it vindictive.
It was the slap of a creature who had simply *had enough*.

A slap of pure disappointment, crusted in wisdom and faintly scented with lemon curd.

Toad blinked.

"Thank you," he said faintly. "I think I needed that."

CHAPTER SIX: The Walk Back

Badger left without ceremony.

No words. No encore.

Toad was still blinking, one paw on his cheek, looking not so much chastised as **clarified**.

As Badger walked home through the moss and twilight, birds began to sing again.

The river made soft burbling apologies.
A fox waved politely from a hedgerow.
And somewhere in the distance, a small jam jar exploded.

Back at his burrow, Badger sat down, exhaled, and resumed his toast.

He turned to his Anglo-Saxon Pottery book, flipped to a page marked "Chapter XII: Urns of Mild Intrigue," and muttered:

"Toad, my boy... you will *never* run out of nonsense."

And with that, he dozed off, a contented curmudgeon surrounded by silence.

Until Thursday.

Because Thursday was moonshine day.

THE END
(...for now.)

What's She Gonna Look Like With Forgiveness on Her?

(*after Pope and Fatboy Slim*)

To err is human, babes — we all spill the wine,
Trip on our own ego, pretend we're fine.
We tweet, delete, repeat the same old sin,
Still think it's justice if we get the win.

But listen: the high road's got better shoes.
Forgiveness? That's couture you get to choose.
No likes, no flames, no viral praise or pay—
Just sleeping soundly at the end of the day.

What's she gonna look like with a chimney on her?
(What's she gonna look like—)
Hot, haunted, and bitter in a velvet blazer,
Lighting fags with receipts like a heartbreak laser.

But babe—
Put the chimney down.

Paint it lilac.
Call your ex. Or don't.
But don't drag that drama like a fur you can't afford.

Because forgiveness?
That's **power**. That's **glow**.
That's not letting their mess rent space in your show.

You want divine? Try biting back the clapback.
You want peace? Unpack that emotional backpack.
You want to live in style, sass, and grace?
Then say: *"She was trash... but I vacated the space."*

And remember:
What's she gonna look like with a chimney on her?
A mess.
But you?
You're radiant, darling.
You forgave.
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sashade a way.

THE SANE EX

Set to the low hum of a jazz quartet in the corner of a London hotel bar, brushed drums, warm piano, and a double bass barely louder than the clink of glassware. The kind of place where people don't raise their voices, just their eyebrows. Midnight has passed, but no one is rushing home.

Lena: *"You know what's weird?"* she said, pulling her heels off under the velvet booth. *"I actually think he's...fine."*

Claire raised one perfectly arched brow, just slightly. "Fine as in—'not texting you from outside your flat at 3am' fine? Or actual human being fine?"

Lena laughed, the kind of tired laugh that's mostly air. "No. Like...he sent me an article last week. On grief. Said it made him think of how endings aren't failures. Can you imagine?" She sipped her Negroni like it might sting. "I was halfway through crying and halfway through genuinely appreciating the sentiment."

Claire leaned back, stretching her long legs in those sleek, indecipherable trousers only she could pull off. "You always went for the over-evolved ones. The men who keep dream journals and own linen." She paused. "Still, that's...annoyingly decent."

Lena looked out across the bar—soft pools of golden light, everything forgiving in its angles. Two people slow-dancing quietly by the piano, not quite brave enough for a real scene, but still brave. She smiled faintly.

"He was never going to break anything," she said. "Not even the rules. Not even my heart. Just...put it down gently and walked away."

Claire watched her friend closely, stirring her drink with unnecessary intent. "And that's worse?"

Lena didn't answer right away. She ran a hand through her hair, letting silence settle like the steam of a hot bath.

"It's just—when someone leaves without chaos, without drama, just...because they know it's time—that's the bit that undoes you, isn't it?" she finally said. "Because then there's no villain. No loud argument. Just you, with all your perfectly intact pain."

Claire reached across the table and tapped Lena's glass with hers. *Tink.*

"To the sane exes," she said softly, voice full of a kind of reverence, a kind of resignation. "They ruin the good wallow."

Lena grinned. "Bastards."

They both laughed, quietly. Then sat in it. The music swelled a little—Bill Evans, maybe. Or someone trying to sound like him. The kind of jazz that didn't ask for attention but deserved it anyway.

Lena looked down at her phone. No messages. No unread missives or half-thought apologies.

"Maybe this is what being grown-up feels like," she said.

Claire shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just what happens when you've run out of bad decisions."

They stayed there a little longer, two women in their thirties, hearts mostly intact, shoes off, makeup faded. Not broken, not bitter—just old enough to know that some endings come with thank-you cards.

And somewhere, not too far off, someone was playing the last notes of a song no one ever really learns the name of—but still knows by heart.

Absolutely—this is delightfully niche and has legs like Toad in a hijacked hot air balloon. Here's a **farcical, sleepy, 3000-word parody of a Guy Ritchie caper** *via* The Wind in the Willows. We open in the shadiest parts of a drowsy English woodland, where the river runs slow and Badger's got no time for drama—but unfortunately, **Toad's got time for everything.**

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