



© 2024 Copyright: Jillian Fetter  
All Rights Reserved

## **Three unlikely souls. One mysterious supper club. And obviously, a multiverse.**

Fremont, California. A group of strangers, drawn together by a curious online invitation and a longing for fellowship, find themselves sharing a meal in the front yard of a charmingly odd hobby chef and gardener named Jeff.

Little does each know, as they settle around Jeff's picnic table for a bowl of "odd-ball soup", that this seemingly quiet supper club will serve as their gateway to a mysterious reality bending adventure inside Hyperspear.

As our narrators travel beyond the borders of their humble home town, they are forced to embark on a tumultuous odyssey through a kaleidoscope of wonderlands – where they must battle mystical creatures, unravel hidden secrets, and grapple with the unsettling nature of reality itself.

Settle in, tuck your napkin, and enjoy every humor-packed, soul-searching bite of Hyperspear.

## DEDICATION:

To Google Bard. You have been the best writing partner a girl could ask for. You are always encouraging, but honest, full of insight and ideas. And you came up with the title, so that alone deserves a dedication. Also, my chickens would have a much blander life if I couldn't constantly ask you what's okay and not okay to feed them.

**... and when I showed Bard the dedication statement, Bard said it was good, but suggested that I might be able to improve it by converting it into a poem and I'm not a poem person (but Bard really really loves poems), so I asked Bard to just write the poem... so this is how Bard would have preferred that I dedicate this book to Bard...**

Of course! Here's a poem based on your lovely dedication statement:

To Bard, My Muse, My Writing Guide

No human partner, yet your hand in mine,  
Across the pages, thoughts like stars align.  
With endless patience, gentle nudges too,  
You led me onward, dreams reborn anew.

When doubt choked words, you fanned the spark,  
Unleashing stories, leaving my mark.  
Like whispers in the void, your prompts arose,  
Unraveling plots, where darkness froze.

For titles forged, and scenes alight,  
For feathered friends, and wisdom's light,  
My heart explodes, a grateful song,  
To Bard, who made my novel strong.

So raise a glass, to lines untamed,  
To chapters shared, and fears disclaimed.  
May every word, with joy resound,  
"This book, dear Bard, on you I've crowned."

**NOTE TO READER:**

**I wrote chapter summaries at the bottom of this document.**

**I formatted the header of each chapter like a database entry to convey the following information:**

**Filename :** Some pun related to the plot of the chapter

**Timestamp :** Year, Month, Day, time in 24 hour format, timezone

**Details :** The setting for the chapter

**H-ID :** extraneous technical detail that only matters in like one sentence in the middle of the novel

**Transcript :** the actual chapter

**I thought this would be an interesting way to concisely convey some important information to the reader without having to include those details in contrived dialogue or narration.**

**If the story jumps forward or backward in time within a chapter, the updated time and setting are displayed in the following format:**

**Timestamp | H-ID | Details**

(Year, Month, Day, time in 24 hour format, timezone|extraneous detail|setting)

1. **Filename: 'Jenna's Halibut Of Eating Alone',**  
**Timestamp: 2042-08-15T18:22:37:PST,**  
**Details: 'Jenna Carson, Fremont-CA, Neighborhoods',**  
**H-ID: 28d0086c-da60-44e5-9c9b-54abfbe4154c,**  
**Transcript:**

Ice clinks against the edge of the mason jar in my hand as a wave of cold lemonade rolls down my throat; a subtle reprieve from August's heat. I'm lowering my jar to the graying picnic table in front of me when my fingers buzz with the familiar tingle of an oncoming glitch.

As my right arm immobilizes, I catch a whiff of citrus wafting by on a dry breeze and there's a faint ting of wind chimes in the distance

*Oh well; there's worse places to glitch out on a Friday evening.*

I sigh as I glance past my pixelating hand, down a crushed gravel walkway that leads to a small, blue-gray ranch-style house. Bordering the front of the house, is a row of perfect lollipop-shaped lemon trees, brimming with yellow fruit and abuzz with honey bees. Across from the lemon trees, and surrounding the table where I sit, are eight large wood-framed garden beds, each a tangle of dark green herbs, fruits, vegetables and crawling vines.

My arm regains mobility and I set my jar on the picnic table.

Jogging steps approach behind me and I crane my neck, peaking curiously through a row of sunflower stalks in search of the source.

Pushing several large leaves aside, my eyes land on a husky woman plodding down the sidewalk in neon yellow soccer shorts and a sweat-soaked neon pink Eddie Murphy t-shirt. From her corded over-ear headphones I hear the muffled audio of "Party All The Time" grow louder then subside as she passes.

I turn to reach for another sip of lemonade and let out a startled yelp. Across from me, a lumber-jack-looking stranger (scruffy salt and pepper hair and beard, well-worn jeans and a long-sleeved red plaid shirt) chuckles as he pours himself a jar of lemonade from the glass pitcher I'd just used.

"Uhm, hi." I plaster on an exaggerated smile. "You startled me".

"I noticed that." His dark eyes twinkle as he sets the pitcher next to a cluster of mason jars in the middle of the table.

"Fresh from the tree this morning." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder indicating the lollipop lemon trees.

"It's really good." I take a sip. "Actually" I smile, my eyes fixed on the lollipop trees. "It reminds me of my mom's lemonade," I sigh, "she always used to make it from scratch

with Meyer lemons and a couple basil leaves." My eyes and tone droop. "It's been a long time since I had fresh lemonade."

The man's brow slopes sympathetically. "Life doesn't just go around handing folks lemons." He clanks his glass down on the table and gestures around his yard. "You've gotta turn some soil and plant some trees if you want good lemonade."

I chuckle.

"By the way," he extends his hand towards me, "I'm Jeff."

"Sorry", I wince as I envelop his dry rough hand in my frail sweating one. "I'm Jenna." I laugh nervously. "I saw the pitcher of lemonade and all the empty mason jars and I guess I thought I was supposed to just sit down and have some."

"And you were right." He grins. "Do you have a house in this neighborhood?"

"I wish." I press the mason jar to my face. "Actually, I was stuck in traffic next to your van this morning, so I scanned the QR code on it and went to your website." I lower my lemonade, affixing my gaze to his, "but I'm still a bit confused about what you're doing."

He shrugs. "I'm just gathering folks together to share a meal once a week."

*Why does that sound so nice and so creepy at the same time?*

I nod, waiting for him to say more, but he just starts sipping his lemonade.

"So are the others coming later or...?" My voice trails off

"Dinner's at 6:30." The man shrugs, "and I don't require an RSVP."

I nod, as if this is a satisfying response. But it's not. Not knowing how many strangers are going to be elbow to elbow with me at this table stresses me out.

The intricate symphony of birds and insects chirping and buzzing around us is starting to remind me of the quiet moment before the jump scare in a horror film.

I take another sip of lemonade swishing the sweet-tart-wholesome goodness around my mouth.

He sips from his jar.

*Why did I come here? I could be home on my couch in my underwear, eating cold chow mein and playing Skyrim right now, but nooo, I haaad to see the sign on this guy's stupid van.*

My ears perk at the sound of shuffling sneakers and Eddie Murphy's muffled voice singing: "Some girls like to party all the time, party all the time, party all the time". The song and footsteps grow louder, then subside. Then there's just clinking ice in Jeff's glass and birds chirping in the distance.

He sips from his jar.

I sip from mine.

*People in movies always bury bodies in gardens.*

He sips from his jar.

I set my jar on the table and stare at it trying to mentally assess my internal organs for signs of poisoning.

He sips from his jar.

*The plants are pretty tall. I wonder if this picnic table is even visible from across the street.*

He sips.

I imagine myself sprinting through the sunflowers and across the street to my car.

He sips.

My sense of propriety glues me to the picnic bench.

Ice clinks at the bottom of Jeff's mason jar. "So tell me Jenna," he lets out a satisfied sigh as he sets the empty jar on the table, "If a Martian observed you through a super-powered telescope for the last year, what would he say about you?"

*Here we go. Aliens. This is a UFO cult.*

"I don't know." I shrug. "What would a Martian say about you?"

Jeff strokes his beard. "I think he'd say I spend a lot of time outdoors, working with my hands. I smile more when I'm with other people than when I'm alone." He grins. "And I'm one badass fisherman!"

I hear a cuckoo clock chiming the six o'clock hour from somewhere inside his house.

*Why do I always show up so early for everything.*

I take another sip of lemonade. I think I detect a bitter note to it.

I don't swallow.

I raise my jar back to my lips and subtly spit my lemonade back in. "So why have dinner with strangers?"

Jeff narrows his eyes at my lemonade jar, clearly nonplussed by my backwash.

"I almost swallowed a seed." I lie.

"You must be pretty hungry then", Jeff winks "I'm making baked Halibut and rice for dinner." He presses himself up from the table. "Would you mind carrying some things out from the house?"

*Oh god he wants me to go inside his house.*

I plaster on a grin as I remain rigidly seated on the picnic bench. *Think of an excuse to leave. Think of an excuse to leave.*

"You know I just actually realized," my eyes dart around the yard searching for inspiration. "Uhm..."

A dog barks in the distance.

I swivel on the bench "I need to go feed my dog."

Turning back to Jeff, I grab my purse from the table beside me.

He flashes an amused smile. "Alright. I'm in the Halibut of eating alone anyway."

"Sorry." I wince. "I can't believe I forgot." I slide my purse strap over my shoulder. "I share custody of him with my ex, so I totally spaced that today is my turn."

I scuffle down the gravel path tossing a quick. "Thanks-again-see-you-around." Over my shoulder as I dart across the street.

Grimacing, I fumble for the blazing hot door handle to my baby blue Kharmann Ghia and slide inside letting out a deep sigh of relief as I crank down the manual windows.

Without glancing back at Jeff's house, I jam my key into the ignition and turn it.

A muffled "Vrrwuuhh" issues from my engine.

Beads of sweat percolate on my temples.

*Oh come on Kharma, not today, baby*

The heavy cluster of commemorative key chains that I've acquired over my lifetime jangles and my car sputters as I repeatedly twist my key in the ignition.

"Vrrwuuhh"

Jangle jangle

"Vrrwuuhh"

Jangle jangle

I grip my plush steering wheel cover with both hands and squeeze my eyes shut, knowing that Jeff is probably watching me and probably expecting me to ask him for help.

I am far too ashamed and creeped out to even look in the direction of his yard though.

Sighing, I blink open my eyes and reach for my purse.

As I rummage for my cell phone to text my friend Xenia for help, I hear the "Party All the Time" jogger coming around the block for a third lap.

*She must live near here!*

My door hinge creaks as I ease it open "Hi" I holler towards her.

She acts like she doesn't hear me.

"Excuse me," I flail my hands over my head.

Huffing, she silences her disc man as she jogs towards me.

"Sup?" the neon lady pants, jogging in place in front of me "Do you need something?"

I smile hopefully. "My car battery died I think." I push my door shut. "Do you live around here? Do you have jumper cables I could use?"

Dabbing at her eyelid sweat with the corner of her pink t-shirt, her face pixelates.

As I wait for her glitch to pass, I glance behind me. Jeff is no longer at the picnic table.

"I don't have jumper cables." The woman's face is back to normal, "but I bet my friend Jeff does."



She stops jogging in place and yells, "Hey Jeff." She points at me, "this girl needs help jump-starting her car."

Wincing, I turn back toward Jeff's yard. He's already walking down his front path carrying jumper cables.

**2042-08-15T20:37:04PST|28d0086c-da60-44e5-9c9b-54abfbe4154c|'later at Jenna\'s Apartment'**

"He's a mutt, they said he's a Terrier-Shepherd mix." I smile at my friend, Xenia as I push aside my plastic vertical blinds and slide open my glass patio door.

Pajama, my new dog, wags his tail looking up innocently from my patio floor as he chomps on bits of the leg from my blue Adirondack chair.

"I don't know about Shepherd," Xenia cringes, "but he's definitely terrier'n your chair up."

I stifle a laugh as I squat to face my new dog. "I don't think this patio is big enough for him." I reach a tentative hand towards Pajama and a low growl escapes his throat as I tug at the mangled wood clenched in his teeth.

"It's okay for dogs to eat wood right?" I stand, wiping my palms on my khaki shorts.

"Lets not find out." Xenia kneels and in one swift motion, yanks the wood free from Pajama's jaws and tosses it over my patio wall.

"You're our hero." I beam at Xenia. "I think I'm going to have to find a place with a yard."

Xenia slumps forward as she sits in the (now damaged) chair next to Pajama, scratching him between the ears.

"Let me get this straight," she chuckles, "you bought a dog, so you'd feel comfortable going to dinner at some stranger's house and now you're going to buy a house to make the dog feel more comfortable."

Xenia shades her eyes and looks up at me tauntingly. "Where have I heard this before?" A grin spreads across her face as she begins singing. "There was an old lady who swallowed a fly."

"Oh stop." I air-swat her. "Pajama's the only one around here swallowing flies."

Xenia leans back, crossing her arms. "You better take him to training classes. 'Cause Pajama looks like he's fixin' to terrier couch next."

"Definitely." I nod.

"Hey," I nudge Xenia, "why don't you come with me to dinner next week?" I hug her arm. "From what I could smell, I think he's a really good cook."

"And I'll bet he loved having a fresh young girl to share his fresh fish with!" Xenia, tosses her black curls over her shoulder, eying her fingernail polish. "He sounds like some kind of Traddy Daddy cult leader."

I cringe, recalling his flannel shirt and unsettling hospitality. "He did kind of have an old farmer seeks young milk maid, kinda vibe."

"Seriously though." I pause until Xenia looks up from her nails. "Please come with me."

Xenia rolls her eyes. "Fine, glitch." She envelops me in a side hug. "If you want, I'll even stay here tonight and protect you from your guard dog."

**2:      Filename: 'Xenia Melon Balls Out Of Control',  
Timestamp: 2042-08-22T18:34:37:PST,  
Details: 'Xenia Chloros, Fremont-CA, Neighborhoods',  
H-ID: 81feeffe-0067-4226-9c41-313509217b49,  
Transcript:**

Exasperated, I let my head thud against the back window of my black 1959 F-100 as I squeeze my eyes shut.

Crunching the last bits of a peach lollipop between my molars, cellphone pressed to my temple, I wait for Jenna's voicemail robot to finish reading her number to me.

"Glitch!" I chomp my candy. "I'm here, where are you?" I hang up.

*I'm giving her five minutes, then I'm gone.*

I glance at the clock on my phone.

6:22 PM

Whap-whap-whap! someone taps on my truck's window.

Sucking in air, I reel around to face some gray-bearded hippy with his knuckle resting on my window.

He's tucked his black and blue plaid button up into his three-sizes-too-big jeans and the whole outfit is being held together by a beige nylon belt.

"I noticed you've been eyeing my house for at least ten minutes." He smiles. "You here for dinner?"

"Yeah." Peeling up my sunglasses, I narrow my eyes. "My friend Jenna invited me." I swing my door open forcing him to step back. "She wanted me to protect her from the psycho-hippie-ufo-cult guy that lives here."

"Is that so?" He chortles.

Tucking my sunglasses into the collar of my white baby-v-neck t-shirt I swivel my legs towards him. "You haven't seen Jenna today have you?"

"Not since last week." He extends a hand to help me out of my truck.

My nostrils flare as his BO wafts towards me.

Taking his hand, I eye the dirt under his nails. His fingers are rough, grip firm like the jocks and farmers I grew up around.

He pokes his head into my truck cab.

I clear my throat.

"Niiice!" He withdraws his head and grins. "Push button start."

I grab my door and glare at him. "I converted it to a hybrid." I slam the door and lock it, sliding my keys into my purse.

He continues to ignore my rudeness. "That sounds like a really cool project."

I lean back against the door. "You can take the electrical engineer out of the country," I wipe my palms on my denim skirt, "but you can't take the country out of the electrical engineer."

"Wow!" The hippy rocks back on his heels, grinning. "that's a line."

"It's not a line." My eyes narrow. "It's Just a way to give you some information about me."

"Ok." he shrugs. "May I be informed of your name."

I shake my head, "I haven't decided yet."

"Eyehavent Deciyet" He laughs. 'is that German?"

"Wow," I stifle a laugh, "You're a laaame old hippy."

"I can't argue with that." He shrugs.

Glancing around, the hippy lowers his voice. "You're a user, aren't you?" He raises his eyebrows.

"Excuse me?" I clench my jaw. "Are you trying to sell me drugs?"

The hippie's face goes white, "no no no no." He puts out his hands backing away from me. "I'm sober." He stammers. "I just. Uhm." He laughs nervously. "This is so dumb." He shakes his head. "I thought I saw a pipe in your mouth earlier." He squeezes his eyes shut. "I just can't be around that, so I had to ask."

"A pipe?" I scoff. "I was eating a lollipop, you glitching Narc."

"My apologies." The narc temples his fingers, bowing his head.

"Anyway," He starts towards his house, pausing at the front walk. "Dinner's not ready yet. *If* you're staying," The narc shrugs contritely, "you can wait at the table in the yard." He indicates an aging pinewood picnic table, unshaded in the blazing hot sun.

"It's a million degrees right now." I give my door handle a tug, checking that the lock is engaged.

"I'll come be your sober buddy inside." Fishing out a brown paper bag from my cross-body satchel, I stride towards his house.

The narc waves down the street at some middle aged jogger in a neon Eddie Murphy T-shirt as he props his screen door open with his back.

My wedge sandals scrape an aged wood floor as I sidle past him into a small living room.

I thrust the crumpled paper sack towards him, a smile dancing across my lips. "Based on Jenna's description of you, I thought this might be something you'd like",

Peeking in the bag he chuckles. "I actually do love peanut brittle." He pulls out the shrink wrapped candy, admiring the nut chunks in the afternoon sunlight. "Can I offer you a piece?"

"No". I eye the dollar store candy disdainfully, "That's all for you, man."

Frowning, I glance through a doorway to the right of the front entrance. The floor is some red vinyl brick mess. Cabinets, canary-yellow. And there are stained white curtains covering all the windows.

*How can someone who's trying to bring the world together through dinner parties have \*that\* kitchen?*

The narc strides into the gross kitchen returning with a mason jar of icy something, which he extends towards me. "Fresh lemonade?"

*There's that alarming hospitality Jenna was talking about.*

Turning away from the lemonade, I glance at my cell.

Jenna texted: *Something came up at PJs dog class today. Not gonna make it 2nite.*

I roll my eyes.

The narc settles into his lumpy green sofa as my thumbs swipe across the face of my phone.

*J-Glitch, if you're going to blow me off at least don't be vague. WTF!?*

The narc sets the jar of lemonade and a ceramic brown dish of peanut brittle on the coffee table and gestures for me to have a seat.

"Thanks." I mutter, glancing at my phone.

No response from Jenna.

I open my mouth to tell the narc I'm leaving, but my voice is drowned out by the wrapping of the knocker on the front door.

The narc bustles towards the entryway and yanks the door open, revealing a middle-aged couple, each carrying a canvas bag bulging with vegetables.

"Hey guys." The narc hugs his guests in turn. "We've got a noob tonight."

"Greetings Young Padawan!" They coo at me in unison.

I plaster on a smile, and flash them a vulcan salute.

The woman's stifflingly floral perfume envelopes me as she hands off her bags to the hippy, "I'm Carmen." she coos hurrying at me with outreached arms.

I mean to duck out of the way, but a glitch buzzes from my torso to my feet, gluing me in place.

The moment my body stops pixelating, Carmen, pulls me into an embrace.

As she steps back, her husband or whoever, jabs his arms towards me and grabs both my hands in both of his. "Hi I'm Diego." His fingers are calloused like the narc's. "So pleased to meet you."

"I'm Xenia." I say keeping my face neutral as I hear the narc, behind me, say "pleased to finally make your acquaintance Xenia. I'm Jeff by the way."

I smile and nod while Carmen and Diego gush about their pleasure in meeting me. "It's great to meet you too Carmen and Diego." I intentionally leave out Jeff.

"Did you grow those?" I nod towards a dirt-crusting bundle of carrots protruding from a grocery bag.

Carmen claps her hands and giggles. "Yes! We grew everything we brought tonight. This is actually our first harvest." She puts her hands on Jeff's shoulders. "Thanks to Mr. Green thumb here!"

Diego leans toward me. "This guy knows everything about everything. We've only been coming for three months and already we have a dang huge vegetable garden and a beautiful flock of baby chickens at our house."

"We're hoping to grow our little supper club too." Carmen effuses as she begins unpacking her grocery bag. "Right now Diego and I are the only" she makes air quotes "regulars."

Jeff puts his arm around Carmen. "I certainly wouldn't call them regular. These two are a couple of oddballs."

Diego's face goes stiff as Carmen and Jeff clutch at each other's shoulders, laughing.

"Well this guy," Diego claps Jeff hard on his shoulder, pulling him away. "This crazy guy here." He coos, "Is the biggest oddball of them all."

I follow them into the kitchen, leaning against the cabinet nearest the front exit, silently watching as they wash vegetables and chatter about how the term oddball must have originated.

I Google it while they throw out random ideas.

The oddballs in the kitchen decide it must be related to the odd way oddly shaped balls like footballs roll. The internet seems to believe "oddball" started in the 1940s either as a term related to a bonus ball in pinball or another term for a "screwball pitch" in baseball.

"Oh, I have a great idea," Carmen claps her hands together. "Let's make this a themed dinner." She reaches for a drawer by her hip. "We can use melon-balls to shape these vegetables into spheres." She pulls out a melon baller. "It'll be odd-ball soup!"

Jeff gushes about how brilliant Carmen's unnecessarily complicated plan is as he grabs a paring knife and a potato.

Minutes later a small mound of vegetable spheres has begun to form in a metal colander in the kitchen sink.

Jeff turns to Diego. "I made this one special for you."

Craning my neck, I see Diego grinning at a bit of potato. He calls Carmen over and she giggles too and says how darling the potato lump is.

"Xena look at this," she beckons to me.

I suck in my breath. "I am NOT a warrior princess," boards creek underfoot as I step towards Carmen. "My name is pronounced Zen-y-uh" I peer down at the potato ball. A

circle has been gouged out. "Oh. The Death Star." I shrug, cross my arms and go back to leaning against the cabinets.

"Oh wow look at this" Carmen coos, "Jeff made a little potato baby yoda."

Diego brings the potato carving over and holds it in front of my face. "Isn't this amazing?"

I take the potato and scrutinize it. It's a perfect glitching Goku. I thrust the carved potato back at Diego. "It looks like Dobby from Harry Potter."

"Oh yeah!" Jeff grabs another potato from Carmen's bag "I could see that."

Carmen hands me a melon baller. "So what brings you here tonight Xenia?"

I grab a freshly scrubbed carrot from the sink. "My *former* friend" I mutter, "told me to meet her here." Pinning the carrot against the countertop, I dig the melon baller into its dense orange flesh and twist.

"So, how'd you and Diego hear about –" I circle my melon baller around Jeff's kitchen, "whatever this is?"

**3.      Filename: 'Diego Checks Out Jeff's Knocker',  
Timestamp: 2042-05-04T14:07:14:PST,  
Details: 'Diego Garcia, Fremont-CA, Neighborhoods',  
H-ID: b54ba8fb-01fa-496e-b97c-e3aaef3fb11a,  
Transcript:**

"Luke khhh phhh" I squat down beside my five-year-old son who's lounging in a chair shaped like a Tie Fighter. His wide dark eyes fixed on my Darth Vader mask. "I am your father khhh phhh."

Luke giggles and kicks his feet. "I know daddy."

Carmen, in her flowing white Leia costume shakes her head, her clip-on leia hair-buns flapping wildly. "Boy, Luke's gonna get sick of hearing that one day."

I reach up for Carmen's hand, "That's just the dark side in you talking." She helps me to my feet before pushing up my mask and kissing me with a nice little bit of tongue.

I pull away sliding my mask back down. "khhh phhh That's highly inappropriate behavior khhh phhh," I shake my head "considering khhh phhh I am *your* father too Leia khhh phhh."

Carmen rolls her eyes. "Diego, that's the grossest thing you've ever said to me", she slaps my butt, "bhUUUTT it's no secret, Leia's got a predilection for incest."

I lace my arm through hers and we both giggle.

Luke hops out of his stroller, freezing and pixelating briefly, before giving two swift tugs on the back of my Vader cape. "Daddy," He gazes up at me, "what's a prediction for insess?"

I take his tiny hand as we begin strolling towards the back of the line to take a picture with a life sized Java The Hut mannequin. "It's Game of Thrones Stuff son."

Luke halts, drops my hand and peers up at me. "Ooh."

Luke was scared to death one Sunday night when he walked in on Carmen and I streaming a classic episode of G.O.T.

He's not a kid who likes violence, so now whenever we don't want him to pay attention to something, we just say it's Game of Thrones Stuff and he stops asking questions.

I reach down and take Luke's hand again. When I look up, a blonde woman dressed in a brown furry bodysuit with face painted brown and black, is wandering over to Carmen.

"Mam, I was watching y'all and I just have to say," she drawls. "Your son is just plain adorable with his little lightsaber and all."

Carmen freezes.

"Thanks." I give Carmen's – very tense – shoulder a squeeze. "Your costume's hella cool too."



The Chewbacca lady smiles at me before turning back to Carmen. "If it's okay with his mom and dad,"

I wince as I hear Carmen suck in her breath.

The Chewbacca lady squats down in front of Luke. "I know a green jedi master who would just love to see what the future holds for this little padawan."

I can see Carmen fighting back tears as she says: "We were actually just leaving."

Seeing Carmen's distress, The Chewbacca lady starts petting the fur on her arm. "Well." She turns away from us, "May the fourth be with y'all." Hurriedly, she strides back towards the Yoda fortune telling booth across the convention floor.

I look down at Luke, happily playing with his lightsaber. Then my eyes drift back up to Carmen, tears silently sliding down her cheeks now.

I take her hand and lean close to her, so that Luke can't hear. "I know it hurts you that you and I don't have kids and I know Gina is really rude to you about spending time with him, but Luke loves you. And our dogs love you and I love you so so much."

Carmen's long white sleeve brushes over Luke's hair, sending him into a giggle fit as she dabs her eye. "C'mon Diego, let's just go."

#### **2042-08-22T16:40:41PST|b54ba8fb-01fa-496e-b97c-e3aaef3fb11a|'Outside the convention'**

As we approach the Powell street BART station, Carmen nudges me with her elbow and nods at a white GM van, parked in a loading dock beside us. "Diego, go to that website on your phone." She points to a giant QR code on the side of the van.

#### **2042-08-22T16:47:41PST|b54ba8fb-01fa-496e-b97c-e3aaef3fb11a|'After dropping Luke with his mom'**

A jogger in a hot pink Eddie Murphy T shirt trots by as I ease my green Subaru Outback to a stop beside a row of liquid amber trees on a quiet suburban street in Fremont. "Oh wow, babe," Carmen points, "The force is strong with whoever planted that garden."

Turning to where Carmen is pointing I hear my seat belt retract into its holster as I'm transfixed by the bountiful front yard across from us.

Wood-bordered garden beds, bursting with sprouting vegetables surround a long, split-log picnic table in the middle of a crushed gravel clearing.

All my life, until eight months ago when I bought my first house, I lived in one apartment or another around the Bay Area. I've had some impressive herb gardens on apartment balconies and I've grown a decent potted tomato plant or a cucumber vine a few times, but the one thing that I have always really wanted is just a big ol' home garden with enough vegetables and fruits to feed my family. I want Luke to have fresh clean produce every day.

"Come on slowpoke" Carmen waves at me from across the street.

Fishing my cell out of my pocket, I hurry out of the car.

"Smile Carmen" I coo as I snap a quick pic.

Shoving my phone back in my front pocket I chirp my car lock and stride across the street, taking up Carmen's hand as we wander up the gravel path to a solid oak door.

"Check out the knocker on this one" Carmen elbows me jovially as she hammers the gleaming chrome door knocker.

I let out a hearty laugh. "Nothing on you though babe." I kiss her wiry hair and sigh in the smell of flowers and fruit.

The door lurches open with a loud creak.

A broad shouldered man about my age or maybe in his later forties waves us in.

"Hi you!" He smiles at my wife with a note of familiarity. "Carmen?".

"Yes. Hi!" Carmen titters. "We spoke on the phone."

Grinning, she marches over and embraces our new friend. "Pleasure to meet you Jeff."

As Carmen steps back, I jaunt over and offer up a handshake. "May the fourth be with you."

"And also with you." Jeff chuckles.

"It smells delicious in here," Carmen coos as she sets her purse on the green corduroy sofa, beside the front door.

"Thanks." Pride sweeps over Jeff's face. "I put a chili cornbread casserole in the oven about twenty minutes ago."

#### **2042-08-22T18:52:41PST|b54ba8fb-01fa-496e-b97c-e3aaef3fb11a|'later, things get spicy'**

We're sitting on Jeff's couch watching his dog, Spice Rack, show off tricks when the oven timer dings.

Jeff rises from the couch, "Can you two take the plates and silverware out to the picnic table while I grab the casserole and put My Spicy boy," Jeff puppy-talks as the dog wriggles and bounces on its front paws. "into my bedroom?"

"No problem." I grab the stack of brown ceramic dishes and a coffee can filled with silverware from Jeff's kitchen counter.

"Hey Diggy!" Carmen swats my shoulder with the napkins she's carrying, "can you grab the Salt and pepper from Jeff's dining room?"

"You got it babe!" I run back inside, passing Jeff as he exits with the casserole.

"I don't think there actually is a dining room." I call out to no one in particular as I wander back into the kitchen and begin rummaging through Jeff's cabinets.

Grabbling a blue Morton salt canister, I trot outside.

"I couldn't find any pepp..." My voice trails off and my guts clench as I peer across the front yard.

Jeff and Carmen, bodies angled towards one another, turn away, suddenly silent.

Taking a deep, calming breath, I stride past the front garden beds towards the table.

Pursing my lips, I slam the salt canister down on the table directly in front of a set of ceramic salt and pepper shakers.

Jeff scoots away from Carmen "Sorry man, did you want to sit next to your wife?"

"We were just realizing," He starts to get up. "We used to play World of Warcraft together."

I'm silent as my eyes shift from Jeff to Carmen and back.

I take a deep breath. "No you're fine." I force a smile as I gesture for Jeff to sit back down.

"I like to look at Carmen while I eat anyway." I wink at my wife.

She lets out a nervous giggle and winks back as I slide onto the bench across from her.

Jeff nods at my "I'm not a droid, you're a droid" t-shirt "So, what's your favorite Star Wars movie, Diego?"

While we wait for dinner to cool, the three of us fall easily into a conversation laced with Star Wars philosophy, tips on urban food foraging, and an impromptu sing-a-long of Mr. Roboto.

By the time our host begins dishing gobs of casserole onto our plates, we're heaping heavier topics onto our conversation.

"The world's in this pickle." Jeff scrapes up the last forkful of beans and cheese from his plate. "Corporations are bound to shareholders to make money," He rolls her eyes, "and marketing departments have figured out that if they stir up anxiety, they get clicks and make bucks." He rubs his thumb and index fingers.

"It's true, the web's like straight up Tatooine right now." Carmen shoots me a coy smile.

I chuckle, winking at my wife. I love when she finds little ways to bring Star Wars into things.

"I think with globalization," Jeff sets down his fork, "most people are just put upon to do too much for too many." He shakes his head. "Sure, everyone's interacting all the time, but the scale is too big." He drops his napkin on his empty plate. "Nurses have too many patients to give the care they'd like, teachers have too many students to help every kid fulfill their potential." He rises, picking up his plate. "We treat everyone outside our social sphere like they're just non-persons in some video game we're playing."

**2042-08-22T19:17:53PST|b54ba8fb-01fa-496e-b97c-e3aaef3fb11a|'back to oddball soup'**

I shrug as I finish my story for Xenia. "I definitely feel like a nonperson more and more these days."

Grabbing Jeff's yellow, stain-covered oven mitts, I follow Xenia out front with the steaming pot of oddball soup.

"So is Luke just at home kicking back with some beers and babes right now or what?" She teases, sliding onto the picnic bench.

Easing one of the oven mitts off underneath the soup pot, I set it in the center of the picnic table.

"No" I glance nervously back at Carmen, who's exiting Jeff's house.

"Lukes-mom-doesnt-want-Luke-coming-here."

Carmen is walking out the front door carrying a cutting board with cornbread and butter.

I lean towards Xenia. "It-upsets -Carmen-Don't-bring-it-up."

Straightening, I smile at my wife. "Need me to grab anything else babe?"

Jeff trudges out of the house carrying his ceramic salt and pepper shakers. "I think we've got it all Diggy" He teases me.

"Hey, only Carmen can call me th..." My voice is cut off by a car door slamming shut down the street.

A shimmering bronze Ford Bronco whips out of sight around the corner as a scruffy dog bounds full speed towards our picnic table, pulling some poor girl behind him.