

STRING CHEESE THEORY

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I passed away on April 19th, 2016, one day before my 26th birthday. Of course, as time travelers like to say, it's always April 19th, 2016 *somewhere*.¹

You're presumably wondering how I died and whether or not you should care. The former isn't the point and the latter is almost assuredly "no." At least, "not yet."

Next, you may question why I'm communicating with you from beyond the grave. Maybe you think I want to warn you about an upcoming global catastrophe (too late), the rise of right-wing totalitarian governments (way too late), or to caution NFL teams from hiring Urban Meyer to be their head coach (woof). The truth is, however, that I cannot save you, so we might as well get started.

To tell you the complete story of my life and death, I would naturally need to tell you the entire story of the Universe, but neither of us have the patience for that, so the abridged version will have to do.

As with most good tales of woe and woo, this one begins in early September with a man with a funny name.

Beauregard Q. Hundschlager was waiting for me as I stepped out of the elevator, in much the same way a toaster might wait for a slice of bread. I can't say for certain that he had been lingering there for me specifically, nor can I be sure he was aware of his own actions, but my arrival seemed to rekindle inside of him a sense of purpose.

"Good morning," I said, instinctively.

¹ As opposed to seventh-dimensional beings, who smirkingly say that it's *always* April 19th, 2016 before trying to impress women by bench pressing the multiverse.

* * *

“Hmm... good. Yes, good morning,” he replied with his mysterious accent that sounded like every Bond villain coalesced into one grandiose super-scoundrel. “Truthful, it seems to be shit morning, but I do not blame the morning for this.”

Unperturbed by his response, I walked past him toward my desk. Beauregard followed.

We worked together at Mooseport LLC, a technology firm representing external clients throughout northern Michigan. I constituted part of the company’s tech support team, while Beauregard was tasked with software development. He didn’t actually have much programming experience, and I secretly doubted he had *ever* completed any useful work for the company, but he had always been there, even before Mooseport was Mooseport.

According to a legend I may or may not have been responsible for starting, years ago Beauregard had been standing in a field, and then a building had slowly risen up around him. Unperturbed by this development, Beauregard had obstinately stood his ground until that building one day hosted Mooseport LLC. Unable to remove him, management had offered Beauregard a job instead.

Luckily for Beauregard’s bank account, his job security seemed to depend on appealing to people’s senses of tradition rather than fulfilling any set job description. It simply wouldn’t have been Mooseport without him.

“My friend, I wasn’t declaring the morning ‘good’ as much as I was simply trying to be pleasant,” I explained. “But I think you already knew this.”

“Ahh, forgive me. I momentarily experience lapse and forget correct human response to your rhetorical pleasantry.”

I placed my messenger bag on my desk and removed my laptop. “Beauregard, please don’t tell me you’re turning into a machine on me!”

“Aha! I worry the same thing with you!” he said, quite seriously. “‘Good morning!’ you say. Heh! We will see if morning is good or not soon enough!”

I chuckled. “I always figured that you would prefer it if I and the rest of humanity were replaced by machines.”

“It matters not,” he said, shrugging. “You are already machines, just soft and virulent, like Trojan horse for ecological network.”

My soft and virulent finger pressed my laptop’s power button,

setting an invisible stack of processes into motion. His words didn't bother me; making disparaging remarks about humanity was Beauregard's version of discussing the weather. Every day was regrettable with a ninety-nine percent chance of human error. He often said that the worst creation had been man, with Billy Joel's discography a close and highly correlated second.

Frankly, it was odd that we were so palatable; we were a lesson in contrasts. I was in my mid-twenties; he was in his late thirties. I was taller, but he walked more quickly. I had something resembling a beard, but his looked like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx's faces had bonked² and had a child. Less superficially, I enjoyed humans while Beauregard did not, rare exceptions aside.

For this particular exception, it was time to begin the daily grind. I sighed an exorbitant sigh—an auditory signal to my brain to prepare for further degradation.

Beauregard understood this signal. “Enough of chit chat,” he said. “Have fun helping meatbrains with their metalbrain problems.”

He turned and left me to my work, but my meatbrain quickly wandered in a desperate attempt at data, or, rather, protein preservation.

I recollected how the “Q.” in “Beauregard Q. Hundschlager” wasn't actually short for anything. Beauregard's complete middle name was “Q.”, period included. I had never had the pleasure of meeting or even hearing about Mr. and Mrs. Hundschlager, but I imagined they were lovely people who simply prided themselves on their punctuality.

I shuddered as I found myself briefly struck by the possibility that there may have never even been a Mr. or Mrs. Hundschlager, but I found comfort in the reminder that even eccentric people had parents. Nothing miraculously came into being without lots of planning, foreshadowing, and/or preventable accidents. Well, except for the Universe itself, apparently, and all the matter within it. Come to think of it, everything had once miraculously come into being, including the matter that currently constituted Beauregard. Clearly God hadn't grown up in an Evangelical “purity culture” household.

I was suddenly wrenched away from my “Leaky Condom and the Birth of the Universe” theory by the sound of the phone ringing at

² Sometimes I found myself using British slang. This has yet to be scientifically, geographically, or linguistically explained.

my desk. Somewhere, someone was in desperate need of help. Tragically, I picked up the phone.

“Hello, Mooseport technical support; this is Johnny. How may I assist you?” I asked.

“Happy Friday,” said a weary voice. “This is Stephanie Lavernicus. I can’t log in to my email.”

“Okay, one moment please while I look into your account,” I searched her name in Active Directory and saw that her account wasn’t locked out; her password had simply expired—classic. Meanwhile, I could hear a child in the background screeching and what sounded like a clunky printer cranking out a Ph.D. thesis.

“Okay, Stephanie, it looks like your password expired yesterday. My recommendation is that we temporarily keep your password the same in order to minimize the risk of any account lockout issues with your mobile device. Do you mind sharing it with me?”

Without any hesitation, Stephanie replied, “MonkeySlut69.”

MonkeySlut69. I muted the phone and let the words slosh around in my mouth before I spit them out into the virgin air around me. After a few moments, I let out a nervous titter. I was nothing if not professional.

I unmuted the phone and asked for clarification. “Is that MonkeySlut69 with both the ‘M’ and the ‘S’ capitalized, or only the ‘M’?”

“Both,” she replied before holding the phone away from her mouth and yelling, “Tim, turn off the stove!” Speaking to me again, she said, “My apologies, Johnny. Do you have any fixes for troublesome four-year-olds?”

“Well, there’s a patch for that,” I said, “but it takes about twenty years to download and install.”

Stephanie snorted a brief courtesy snort.

“Okay, Stephanie, I’ve reset your password to ‘MonkeySlut69’ with both the ‘M’ and the ‘S’ capitalized. Please try logging in again.”

As Stephanie typed in her password, I further analyzed the cadenced “HEE-HAW” sounds on the other end. *What epic tome is she printing?* I wondered, *Infinite Jest?* *War and Peace?* *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare?*

“It works,” she unceremoniously announced. “Thank you.”

“No worries at all,” I replied. “Out of curiosity, what are you printing?”

The silence brought about by my question was immediate, both

from Stephanie and the “HEE-HAW”s.³

“Johnny, do you have kids?” Stephanie finally asked.

“No,” I replied, finding the question quite random.

“Well, I have two... and that sound was actually my breast pump.”

Woof. Confronted by a response my programming hadn’t adequately prepared me for, I laughed, this time without muting the phone first. This wasn’t strictly professional, but it was the only coping mechanism my body had.

“Okay, well if you experience any recurring issues, Stephanie, please feel free to reach back out to me. Have a great weekend!”

“You too,” she said dryly, before hanging up.

Yikes. I had broken my golden rule of not engaging in anything beyond the minimum amount of conversation required to resolve an issue. Whenever I tried to engage in small talk over the phone, either the other person would disclose too much, or I would, and I would inevitably find myself mildly sweaty.

I was logging the call into our ticket management system (leaving out certain details of the conversation) when the phone rang again. I had really come to hate that sound, but maybe that was the point. The quickest way to make the piercing dissonance stop was to do my job. How cleverly sinister!

“Hello, Mooseport technical support; this is Johnny. How may I assist you?” I asked.

“Hey there, Johnny did you say?” asked a male voice.

“Yup, you heard correctly,” I answered.

“Are you the same Johnny who once consulted me for ten minutes on the best ingredients to spice up a box of mac n’ cheese when I couldn’t connect to the Internet?”

“Uhh, that must have been the other Johnny,” I said, sweating mildly.

“That’s too bad. That man was a genius. Well, ‘other’ Johnny, and I’m a bit embarrassed to admit this, but I think there might be some water damage *inside* my computer.”

I shook my head disapprovingly, as my IT conditioning had taught me to do. “You *think* there might be water damage? What happened?”

“Well, the bottom of my computer was feeling awfully hot, so I

³ Feel free to steal “Stephanie and the Hee-Haws” for your next shitty trivia team name.

flipped it over and placed a bag of frozen peas on it.”

“And let me guess,” I said, “it thawed?”

“Bingo. Now my computer isn’t turning on. What should I do?”

“We’ll need to replace your machine. If any liquid reached the motherboard and dried there, it could start a fire.”

He let out a big sigh. “Well, I feel just awful about this. Will you be able to retrieve my files?”

“We can try to recover your data, but I’m afraid the most helpful technical advice I can provide at this point is a guide to crossing your fingers.”

He chuckled at my suggestion, but I wish he hadn’t. Little did he know, that was actually the fiftieth time I’d used that line, and each time it killed me a little more inside. What had once felt like a witty response was quickly becoming a crippling character flaw.

“I’ll send you the replacement form momentarily,” I continued, “so we can hopefully ship it out today. If you have access to your email on your phone, you can fill out the form there.”

“What should I do in the meantime?” he asked.

“Well, have you ever considered adding snow peas, lemon zest, and toasted almonds to your mac n’ cheese?”

He laughed again, thanked me for my help, exchanged the socially-necessitated departing pleasantries with me, and hung up.

If I had to score him, which unfortunately wasn’t part of the standard procedure, I’d give him a ten for resourcefulness, but a zero for common sense. At least he seemed genuinely nice. I started to send him the replacement form, when I realized I had never asked him for his name or email address. *Shit!* I tried looking up the phone number in the call logs, but it just said “Unknown number”.

Why had he chosen to hide his number? Was he a politician? A doctor? D. B. Cooper? Did he even know his identity? These were the types of completely worthless questions that engaged my brain at work, since the rest of my job had become monotonous. *Maybe he was named by Beauregard’s parents. Maybe his name actually was “Unknown Number.”*

Oh well, without a working computer he’d call back eventually. I kicked my feet up and shoved my hands in my pockets, at which time I noticed a piece of paper pinned above my desk, presumably left there for me by my manager. Containing a W. Clement Stone quote, it read, “Aim for the moon. If you miss, you may hit a star.”

Coming as a shock to nobody, I immediately overanalyzed it. My

manager was undoubtedly trying to motivate me to keep working hard, but it was motivating me to do the exact opposite.

First, an office was no place for a motivational quote. It couldn't reseal a hard drive, fill out a timesheet, or make the weekend come any sooner. Second, space wasn't like a dartboard where if you missed the bullseye you still got points. If your math was wrong and you missed the moon, you were shit out of luck. Yes, I was being technical, but my job was literally to be technical. Third, the analogy felt misplaced. Was my job at Mooseport supposed to be leading me to the moon or the stars? Because I'm pretty sure all it was doing was slowly making me a worse, more jaded human being.

As a textbook millennial, I'd been burdened my entire life with the ever-present feeling that I could accomplish or become anything I set my mind to. As vague as that feeling may have been, tech support had never been what my superego had in mind. Realistic or not, I thought there really had to be something more out there for the world to offer me, and hopefully something more that I could offer the world... like better motivational quotes.

"Pull down your pants and moon the sky," I scribbled underneath the quote. "But be mindful when you zip your fly." ...*Well, it's a work in progress, anyway.*

And thus, with a brief feeling of courage, I decided my time dealing with the technological repercussions of thawing vegetables had come to an end. So too, I resolved, had my mildly sweaty career at Mooseport LLC. The decision to quit my job may seem sudden and out-of-the-blue to you, but honestly, it was about damn time.

I wished I could have called Unknown Number to tell him the good news, but I settled for unpinning the newly vandalized W. Clement Stone quote from the wall and taping it to my work laptop instead.

My good mojo was quickly interrupted, however, by the phone ringing. Having just decided to quit, I decided not to pick it up, which meant I had to endure the clamor. Within ten seconds of the user being redirected to the voicemail, however, they called back again. Clearly, this was urgent. Feeling both pity and pain, I picked up the phone.

"Hello, this is Johnny," I said, abandoning protocol.

"Hello, Johnny. Is this tech support?" asked the caller, uncertainly.

"As of a minute ago, yes, but as of this moment I'm not really

sure what I am.”

“Okay,” the female voice on the other end said, “so if I asked for assistance with a tech issue, would you be able to help me?”

“I’d rather not, if it’s all the same to you,” I said, feeling guilty. “The truth is that I’ve just decided to quit, and I feel I need to fully commit or risk being stuck in this soul-crushing vocational roundabout forever.”

“I see,” the lady said. “Good for you.”

I was caught off guard by how understanding she was, especially considering how dramatic I had just been. “Out of curiosity, what was the issue you were calling in about?”

“Oh, nothing as troubled as an atrophied soul. My laptop is running a bit slow. I think it’s just getting burnt out.”

“Same,” I said. “If you call back in a few minutes, a colleague should be able to assist you. In the meantime, out of habit rather than profession, I recommend checking your disk space, repairing your Microsoft Office installation, and limiting the number of browser tabs you have open. When you call back, ask how to increase your virtual memory, as that might also help some. I just want to thank you for being so understanding and making my last call a truly pleasant experience.”

“You’re welcome, Johnny. Good luck out there.”

“You too!”

I hung up the phone and subsequently disconnected it for good measure. I wasn’t going to waste this opportunity to end on a high note. Next, I shut down my laptop and cleared out my desk, putting my various action figures, company pens, and multi-colored Post-it notes into my messenger bag, which I slung around my shoulder. Carrying my laptop, I pushed in my chair and began casually strolling to my manager’s office to deliver the good news.

Halfway there, however, Beauregard popped out from behind a wall holding two cups of coffee. “I buy one for you,” he said.

“Jesus!” I replied, startled. “Dammit, man... I was just on my way to quit my job.”

“Ahh, see? I tell you would be shitty morning,” he replied, handing me a cup. “But I need you to be witness first.”

“Witness to what?” I asked, slightly alarmed.

“It is surprise!” he said.

Now I was definitely concerned, but I ignored my hard-wired survival instincts, took a big gulp of coffee, and followed him into his

office. Beauregard was one of the only employees to have his own, but I assumed it was given to him in an attempt to hide him, not as a reward. I had never heard a single whisper of protest about it, either.

Beauregard sat down at his desk and beckoned for me to look at the monitor. He very quickly scrolled through hundreds, maybe thousands of lines of code, all of which resembled technical gobbledygook to me.

“I work on it all month,” Beauregard said, proudly.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Truthful, I do not know. But I think it is ready.”

“You’ve been working on it for a month and you don’t even know what it’s for?”

Beauregard shrugged. “We often do not know for why we do things. Like ants in colony or spleen in body, we just do.”

He had a weird way of explaining nonsensical things in a rational way. It was strangely comforting.

“Ready?” Beauregard asked anxiously. “I am too nervous to watch. Please, watch for me and let me know when finish.”

“Okay, ready,” I replied.

He typed “start bb”, instructed me to press Enter, and turned away. As I pressed the Enter key, the only thought going through my mind was *How very odd*.

The cursor blinked as I waited to see if anything would happen. Suddenly, the console window stated “bb initializing...” before thousands of lines of code scrolled down the screen faster than my human eyes could comprehend. I had no idea what the program was doing, but it was seemingly doing it very, very quickly. Finally, everything disappeared and it simply read, “bb successful, with 1 error(s).”

I took another sip of coffee and eyed the monitor suspiciously. Nothing in particular seemed to have happened.

“I think it’s done,” I informed Beauregard, who turned around. “What did it do?”

“I know not the answer to your question,” he solemnly replied.

“What was the error?”

“I know not the answer to your question,” he replied again.

“Are you satisfied?”

“I... I know not the answer to your question,” he replied, this time with a note of exhaustion in his voice.

"I feel you," I said, literally resting my hand on his shoulder. "I'm not sure what my work has amounted to either. If you ever find out, let me know."

Beauregard turned and smiled at me. "Farewell, Johnny. May destiny find you by the beard and pull."

"Only after pulling yours first," I said, shaking the hand he had presented. "Take care, old friend."

I disposed of my coffee cup and walked out of Beauregard's office, immediately running into my manager, Dave. While not particularly important for you to know, Dave's broad shoulders and perfectly coiffed blond hair reminded me of Fred from *Scooby-Doo*. Never in my life had my hair been coiffed even half as successfully as Dave's, a fact I frequently stewed over during team meetings.

This time, however, Dave had the look of a perfectly coiffed air conditioner, with sweat running down his face due to leaks in his ductwork. He was holding a wireless phone.

"Johnny," he said, slightly out of breath, "where have you been? The tech support line is redirecting to my desk. Is your phone disconnected?"

"Yes, it is," I said. "I was actually looking for *you*, Dave. I quit."

Dave dropped the phone in shock. "You're quitting!? Why?"

"It's not you, it's me," I said, taking pleasure at using a line that would have been used on me by countless girls over the years if, in fact, girls talked to me at all. "I need to rediscover myself."

"Well, that just freezes my coils. What will we do without you?" he stammered.

I showed him the quote taped to my laptop. "Aim for the moon, Dave."

He and his perfectly-coiffed, condensating head considered that for a moment. "Well, what will *you* do?"

"Hopefully, Dave? Literally anything else." With that line, I handed him my equipment and ID badge and, despite being indoors, put on my sunglasses and walked away without looking back. The nice lady's voice could faintly be heard speaking into the office floor.

I rode the elevator down to the lobby, kicked the crash bar on the front door open, and met the sunny day with my arms raised triumphantly à la Sylvester Stallone in a training montage. Luck chose that moment to pull me by the beard; I was just in time to witness a black sedan reverse into my gray Toyota Corolla hatchback before speeding off. Like Venice sinking slowly into the sea, my arms

slumped back down to my sides.

Frankly, I felt I might have deserved having my car hit for acting like such a complete tool. As I stopped to ponder the significance of the timing, I momentarily wondered whether I had just made a huge mistake quitting my job. But after surveying the damage, I determined that the new dent in my rear fender was perfectly camouflaged by all the existing dings and scratches. It was past its prime, but still a contender—the Rocky Balboa of 1986 compact cars.

Having brushed my premonition aside, I allowed myself, in a quintessential example of something one should never do, to shrug and think, *What else can go wrong?*²

2

Before we progress any further, I feel it's important to stop and clarify that I'm not, nor have I ever been, a hero. Any notion of such you may have accidentally picked up should be discarded at your earliest convenience in the nearest receptacle. Pour some cold water on top of it for good measure and make sure to tip your cleaning staff afterward.

Many people have fantasized about quitting their jobs before, and many have acted upon those desires, and frequently for much better reasons. I am not a role model, and I am not a success story.

A real hero would have led his fellow technical support associates out of cubicle Egypt or stayed and fought the systemic malaise from within by calling forth a plague of locusts on the office, and a real hero would certainly not be sitting in his car immediately after quitting his job trying to pinpoint the exact moment where everything had gone so truly and utterly wrong.

Two years and over seven hundred pre-ground, reusable-filter cups of coffee later, where did I find myself? Free from Mooseport LLC, certainly, but free to do *what*? Whatever I wanted, I supposed, but so far all I had managed to do was swap my artificial leather desk chair for my cloth-backed vinyl car seat. Worst of all, I had yet to free myself from the Mooseport parking lot.

Literally, if not figuratively, sitting in the driver's seat, I pulled out my phone and checked the time: 10:15 a.m. I stared listlessly at the digital numbers like a garden gnome gazing at an approaching rain cloud. A terrible thought entered my head. *Am I unfit for the responsibilities of freedom, for the responsibility of deciding for myself what to do?*

At the heart of it, I had lacked clear life guidance while employed,

and I still lacked clear life guidance unemployed. My mistake was in thinking that quitting my job would offer instant and enduring gratification. I still needed to earn that, but all I knew for certain was that continued employment at Mooseport wasn't the answer.

My manager had once tried to convince me that I had ADD because, in Dave's mind, there was no other explanation for why I wasn't one hundred percent smitten with my job. So, I submitted myself to some tests. In the end, I, or rather my company-provided insurance, paid five hundred dollars to discover that I was just really bored at work.

Currently really bored outside of work, I glanced at my phone again: 10:16 a.m. I once would have looked at my watch, but I hadn't worn one since high school. Just as my phone had replaced my need to carry an abacus or rolodex, it had also relegated all of my sundials to the transfer station. Technologically, we had come a long way as a species. Portable devices had long since entered a binary realm consisting of those that would allow me to stream episodes of *Stargate SG-1* on the toilet and those that wouldn't.

It was probably only a matter of time before a smartphone replaced me at work anyway. "Greetings, human colleague. Welcome to Mooseport LLC technical support services. My model name is Johnny666. How may my IT programming and curated selection of holiday films be of assistance?" And, to paraphrase Phil Davis in the movie *White Christmas*, I was concerned that now that what was left of me was finally getting around to what work was left to be gotten, what work was left to be gotten wouldn't be worth getting, whatever it was my husk had left to give. I mean, northern Michigan wasn't exactly Jobs Capital USA.

The Upper Peninsula, my home, sat isolated between Lake Superior to the north and Lake Michigan to the south. The U.P., the oft-used abbreviation unrecognizable to most outside of Michigan, had twenty-nine percent of Michigan's total land area, but only three percent of its total population. It was simultaneously beautiful, spacious, quaint, cold, humdrum, and earthbound. Eccentric yet dull.

Being outlandishly drab myself, I took another gander at my phone, knowing full well that one day it would be naturally selected over me: 10:17 a.m. It was time to either roll out or roll over, so I put my key in the ignition and turned it, feeling my abused and battered car sputter to life.

The radio told me that today's weather in Houghton, MI would

be a “warm one,” with a “low of 55 and a high of 79.”

The town of Houghton, as well as the larger county it formed the micropolitan heart of, were named after Douglass Houghton, the first state geologist of Michigan whose surveys of the Keweenaw Peninsula led to the area’s great copper boom. He drowned in Lake Superior at the young age of 36, but his name could be found all over the state map due to his collection of powerful and adoring friends, who went by the nickname “the Houghton Boys” and included a future state governor. My friends and I, however, referred to ourselves as “Houghton’s Heroes.” If only we had been alive in 1845, Douglass Houghton might have never drowned.

I’m kidding, of course. While I might have been a Houghton’s Hero, I was not, nor had I ever been, an actual hero, nor had my friends for that matter. It was more of an aspirational title.

Houghton wasn’t known for its heroes, though, as the town was originally said to have exclusively been inhabited by “thieves, crooks, murderers, and Indians.” In 2015, however, it was named the 96th “best small town in America” by Livability.com, so any problems I was experiencing living there were evidently my own.

As my car sat idling, I noticed the Corolla’s dashboard clock was incorrectly displaying 10:08 a.m. Due to its inability to keep the correct time, I had now not only failed to find a suitable way to take advantage of my illusory freedom, but I had actually gone back in time nine minutes to a period in which I was still employed at Mooseport LLC.

I would have continued contemplating the potential consequences of time travel, of which suffering old managers anew was certainly one, if I hadn’t noticed that many of my former colleagues were gathered together gawking at me through the third-floor office windows. They appeared to be waiting to see if I would actually leave. You see, I wasn’t the first person to suddenly declare they were going to quit Mooseport and then fall apart shortly afterward; it was practically part of the company culture.⁴ I was sure bets had already been wagered on the outcome.

Not wanting to waste an opportunity to disappoint my doubters, I shifted the car into drive and pressed down on the gas pedal a little too hard, causing the car to jackrabbit. As I carelessly sped off into my

⁴ Along with Ray Romano impressions and avoiding Beauregard Q. Hundschlager.

future, I glanced back at the building. Watching it grow smaller in my side mirror, I suspected my career was the rare object that was actually farther away than it appeared.

Forced to pick a destination, I decided that my first order of unemployed business was to have a proper cup of coffee. My coffee addiction frankly didn't care if I could afford it anymore or not. At least these beans would be freshly roasted.

The Sisu Café was my local spot, a tiny diner featuring a variety of Finnish and American breakfast and lunch options. While it served the same coffee supplied by the same wholesale distributor as the other Finnish-American café in the area, the Sisu Café didn't claim to have the "U.P.'s Best Cup of Coffee," which I respected. It was also the only place I had ever taken the time to review on Yelp:

Entering Sisu Café feels like reconnecting with an old flame. I wish everyone had Sisu in their life. Sunlight pours through the window; regulars sit behind the bar drinking their coffee and eating their hot cereal. I can hear a pair of older gentlemen speaking jovially in Finnish. I'm not sure what they're talking about, but I'm sure it's charming, full of grandchildren, past winters, and ancient workplace accidents. When there is silence between them, it isn't for a lack of lies to tell each other, but because they want to savor their last remaining days... and their corned beef hash.

Maybe I can become an Elite Yelp reviewer and make absolutely no money while simultaneously becoming insufferable in public, I thought as I parked my car. Fortunately, I only liked Yelp for its name. I found it amusing to imagine someone in a state of distress crying out "Help!" at the top of their lungs because they didn't know where to find a good piece of baklava in San Francisco. You know, like what people must have done before smartphones.

When I entered Sisu, the waiter, a friendly acquaintance of mine named Andy, seated me at a table near a window. It would have been a prime people-watching spot if there had been any people to watch.

"Why ain't ya at work?" asked Andy, knowing that I usually came in the early afternoon.

"Oh, I just quit," I replied casually, like Elon Musk discussing detonating thermonuclear bombs to induce climate change on Mars.

"Wow! That's great, man! That's the thing to do right now fer

sure. What's yer plan?"

"Eh, I haven't really thought that far ahead yet."

"Gotcha. Hey, yer meal's on me. What'll ya have?"

"Just coffee," I replied.

"Really? I can't tempt ya with a pasty, or pannukakku, or a cheeseburger?"

They were all enticing offers. Pasties were compositions of meat and veggies in a crust, a local food staple. Pannukakku was a baked Finnish pancake, similar to custard. Cheeseburgers consisted of a burger with cheese.

"I'm really not that hungry," I replied.

"Okay, how 'bout this?" And said. "I can take my lunch break early. How 'bout we go get high in my car and *then* see if yer hungry or not?"

I generally didn't smoke more than once in a calendar year, but I had nothing better to do, so I sensibly agreed. The notion that I had nothing better to do was most likely false; I could have done anything, but it was honestly a relief to not have to come up with an idea for myself.

After getting cups of coffee to go, we walked down the hill from the café to where his forest green Oldsmobile was located underneath a parking deck, asleep in the shadows. Once inside the car, Andy reached across and took a baggie and some papers from the glove box. Being six foot five, his wingspan made it a fairly easy undertaking. He looked goofy sitting in that car, though, what with his seat pushed back all the way to maximize leg room.

"So, what made ya quit?" he asked.

"There was no trigger, per se; my mind was full, but my soul was hungry. I think I've been on this path for a long time and it was just inertia, or rather the opposite of that: 'an unbalanced force'. Isaac Newton's First Law made me do it," I said.

"Try usin' that in court," he said, chuckling.

I turned on the radio and switched to the news. Someone was blustering about building a wall again.

"An election's coming up," I said.

"Oh?" Andy said as he studiously shaped the joint, pressed it down, and rolled it.

"You don't care?"

"Nah. I got my fill o' politics in middle school. Politicians are just

bullies with more power and even smaller pricks.”

“And worse report cards,” I laughed. “Was it all those years of being picked last in gym class?”

“Yer darn tootin’! I’m jaded as hell, soon to be faded as well,” he said before tacking and licking the joint. “Now, the legalization of marijuana, *there’s* a cause I can git behind! It ain’t lethal and it’s safer than alcohol! ‘Spurely medicinal!” he exclaimed before taking out a lighter from his jeans pocket. Expertly rotating the spark wheel, he introduced the flame to the end of the joint that was now jutting from his mouth. After inhaling and exhaling the smoke, he reclined the driver’s seat and stared up into the sagging fabric of his car’s ceiling. “It’d probly be legal by now if smokin’ it didn’t make people so darn lethargic.”

“Wait in line in the Taco Bell drive-thru at 1am and you’ll find enough signatures for a public ballot initiative,” I suggested.

“Yer gonna need someone else to organize yer Doritos Locos Taco democracy,” Andy said, with a hint of sadness. “By 1am my ass is sleepin’ so I can git to work in the mornin’.”

“Have you considered growing medical marijuana?” I asked. “Commercially, I mean.”

“Shit, I may have a little backwoods patch, but I ain’t got them entrepreneurial qualities, man.”

He passed the joint and lighter combination my way. Feeling cool, I took a long hit, predictably inhaling the smoke haphazardly and swallowing all of it. I began to backfire like an engine with an improper air-to-fuel ratio. Embarrassed, I passed the items back to Andy.

“Good stuff, ain’t it?” he asked, grinning. “Oh boy, yer gonna be so fuckin’ high, man!”

Still coughing, I managed to wheeze out the words “spurely medicinal” before doubling over in my seat, nearly spitting my lungs out onto his Cheeto-riddled car floor.

“Ya don’t smoke much, do ya?” asked Andy, rhetorically.

I took a sip from my coffee, trying to eliminate the harshness in my throat. “Ahh, fuck,” I mumbled after the scalding liquid blasted my esophagus.

“Me, this is my life,” Andy said between hits, “but you, Johnny, you can do anythin’.”

“Sure,” I said, having recovered enough to speak, “but I probably won’t.”

“Why not?” asked Andy, genuinely curious.

“My expectations are too lofty for me to meet them. I’ll always be drifting around looking for an opportunity that doesn’t exist.”

“That’s some sad shit, man,” Andy lamented.

“I can’t wait to find out what I can actually accomplish with my life once I finally give up. Once I just sit on my ass and settle. You know, kids take it for granted that they can do or become anything they want; it’s a given. But as soon as we tell them that out loud and keep repeating it, it sets them up to feel terrible when they inevitably don’t. The problem with being able to do anything is that you gotta do *something*. When that energy turns from potential to kinetic, we fail.”

Andy passed me the joint again. “Well, I don’t know about all that. Nobody ever bothered tellin’ me I could do anything, and it ain’t really helped me none.”

I took a smaller, better-controlled hit, exhaling the smoke this time like I was Gandalf the Grey enjoying some Longbottom Leaf. A Tolkien toking and wandering wizard I was not, but my thoughts wandered wonderfully nonetheless.

“Man, I feel sorry for my brain,” I said.

“Why?” asked Andy.

“It’s so much better and smarter than I am.”

“Ain’t yer brain you?”

“Don’t insult my brain like that!”

“Sorry, man,” he said, not sure why he was apologizing.

“My brain is stuck with me, and I’m the only thing holding it back,” I explained. “The American dream is still alive and well in my brain, but the rest of me has surrendered. I should do the right thing and give my brain its freedom.”

“Ya can do that?” Andy asked, a bit incredulously.

“You can do anything you want. I believe in you, Andy.”

Andy chuckled. “Thanks, man! But I already am doin’ what I want.”

I soon found myself fascinated with the Jesus bobblehead doll that Andy had on his dashboard. Jesus had his arms raised, but it didn’t look like he was lifting his hands in praise as much as he was giving a little shrug with his hands outstretched. “Shit happens,” he seemed to be saying with a wry smile.

“Andy, do you believe in God?” I suddenly asked.

“Well, shit!” he exclaimed. “Are we gettin’ into one of them

conversations? I ain't high enough fer this."

"But seriously, do you?"

Andy took a final hit and threw the butt out of his car window. Then he turned to me and shrugged, reminiscent of his Jesus figure. "I s'pose I do. I've never been given a reason to believe otherwise, so I guess I do believe in Him."

"Does the burden of proof lie on us to prove He doesn't exist, or on Him to prove He does?"

"Does there *always* have to be a burden?" asked Andy. "I'm feelin' pretty relaxed right now."

"My former coworker, Beauregard, has this theory about there being a Great Programmer. He says that all humans, animals, plants, planets, space, gods, feelings, facts, soap operas, etcetera are all part of a single program. We're all just lines of code. Zeroes and ones. Beauregard says if we could just see and understand the underlying source code, we could learn everything about everything."

"And who made this program?" asked Andy.

I shrugged. "The Great Programmer."

"I don't know nothin' 'bout programmin', but it sounds like yer just talkin' 'bout God but callin' Him somethin' else."

"The difference is that God Himself is just a potential variable in the code represented by a one or a zero, either turned on or off. Maybe the program itself created God, and then God's programming was to create the Universe. Maybe after creating the Universe, the God variable was switched to zero and He no longer exists."

"Heh, maybe," Andy muttered, no longer paying attention.

Despite Andy's apathy, I bravely continued. "Life is a good program in that it requires little upkeep and mostly manages itself. If we could understand the source code, maybe we could manipulate it, like video game cheats. We could turn mortality off or big head mode on. Personally, I'm glad we can't, but Beauregard claims that's the future."

There was silence before Andy turned to me and asked, "What's the point?"

"The point of what?"

"What's the point of cheatin' at video games? It ruins the feelin' when ya beat it."

"Well, what's the point of anything?" I asked.

"No idea, was just askin'," mumbled Andy, sighing.

Feeling a little pissy, I stopped talking and stared out the window. I was upset not because I had failed to convince Andy of Beauregard's "Great Programmer" theory, but because I didn't know what the point of life was. Andy had unknowingly needled my existential crisis.

"I just don't know how knowin' more changes jack crap in the grand scheme," he offered.

"Oh, don't even get me started on the grand scheme of things!" I exclaimed. "We'll be here all day!"

"Would that be so bad?" Andy asked, looking at me seriously. "Bein' here all day?"

I looked out the window at a bird sitting on a guardrail. "Nah, not bad at all," I replied.

The bird, the name of which I knew not, kept looking around, probably in search of something else to do. *I should learn that bird's name*, I thought, not very seriously. *He looks like a Gary. Or a Khrushchev.*

Hungry, and not just for answers, I mindlessly picked up a Cheeto off of Andy's car floor and ate it.

"Did ya just eat that Cheeto?" asked Andy, wide-eyeing me.

"Oh... yeah. I guess I did," I replied.

"Dude! That's like two-month-old car floor Cheeto, man," he exclaimed, still eyeing me widely.

"It wasn't very good."

"No shit, Shakespeare. Next time ya see somethin' in my car ya want to eat, check with me first, okay?"

"Aye-aye, captain!" I said, saluting him.

"Let's get some real food."

"Aren't you worried you'll smell like weed when you go back inside?"

Andy sniffed his fingers and then said, "Nah. They say after ya smoke ya should smell yer fingers because that's how other people smell ya."

"Who says that? I've never heard that before."

"I dunno, 'they' do."

"Oh, 'they'. They sure do say a lot."

"Not half as much as you, Johnny. I'm gonna order us two pasties."

"Fuck yeah," I said.

"Fuck yeah," he repeated. Andy paused before opening his car

door, choosing to whisper to me instead. “I have some new, wild stuff fer sale if yer interested. It’s more mind-expandin’ than weed.”

“What is it?” I asked, matching his whisper and failing to question his newfound entrepreneurial skills.

“It’s called *Ahnunggokwan*. It’s Ojibwe fer ‘Star World’.”

“Star World”, when white and sober, brought forth images of a grandpa trying desperately to relate to his grandkids but misremembering *Star Wars*. But when whispered while high, it sounded absolutely magical. I had never tried anything stronger or stranger than weed (unless you counted eating lutefisk), and I didn’t really want to, but instead of saying ‘no,’ I found myself saying the exact opposite.

“Fuck yeah,” I whispered.

“Fuck yeah,” he whispered back. “Now, let’s go get us some pasties with extra rutabaga and gravy.”

While I was normally a ketchup-on-my-pasty guy, I let Andy order since it was his treat and I wasn’t about to turn down a free lunch. And while I had never been a hero, Andy most certainly had. He may not have known all of life’s secrets, but he knew the most useful one: life was always better with a little extra rutabaga and gravy.

If I was a lightweight when it came to smoking weed, then I was only slightly less of a lightweight when it came to taking naps. I did either activity so rarely that the combination of the two left me feeling exceptionally paranoid when I woke up later that day, like everything in the world had shifted two inches to the left except for me.

But as odd as that may sound, the new leftist reality I found myself in had a lot of redeemable qualities: it was Friday, the breeze coming through the window was fat and lazy, and the crippling anxiety I had felt sitting in the Mooseport parking lot had graciously relocated leftward with the rest of the world. Thanks, Andy. Thanks, tetrahydrocannabinol.

Noticing me stirring on the couch, my cat, Magrarius X (last name pronounced like the letter), jumped up onto my chest and started rubbing his gray, furry face against my beard. I knew nibbling would come next if I didn't stop him, so I picked Magrarius up and plopped him back onto the floor.

Pissed at me for putting a crimp in his beard fetish, he slowly trudged over to his food dish, stopping occasionally to stare angrily back over his asshole at me. Once he reached the little metal dish, he expertly placed a paw under the lip of the bowl and flipped it over with a clatter. Then, turning to face me, he plopped his barrel body onto the floor and challenged me with his deep, penetrating glower. "Feed me, big boy," his eyes mandated.

This was life with Magrarius X, my fat, emotionally-abusive, kinky cat. It took a certain lack of self-esteem to love him, but at least I didn't have mice to deal with anymore. It's not that he caught them; he didn't need to. They simply couldn't stomach his toxic masculinity. "Magrarius X! That damn cat!" they had squeaked on

their way out.

Sighing, I hoisted myself off the couch to feed Magrarius, making sure to avoid the area two inches directly to my left, just to be safe. By this point, late afternoon had transmogrified into early evening, and the sun was beginning its descent. Pretty soon I needed to be at the Keweenaw Brewing Company's taproom for my ritual Friday night drinks with my best buds Duncan and Chet.

As the only food available at the KBC was shelled peanuts, I called up Larry's Chinese Food, the new takeout place down the street, and ordered the Kung Pao chicken. While it also had peanuts, they would be unshelled. Plus it was jam-packed with other ingredients, too, like Kung Pao and chicken. I knew I should start saving money by cooking for myself, but that required actually cooking, and I had already made one major life change that day.

While I waited, I opened up my laptop and hit shuffle on my extensive, eclectic, and almost exclusively illegally-obtained music library. While the rest of the country had discovered Spotify and gone legit, I was still stubbornly (and selfishly) clinging to the pirate's life. "Sittin' On The Dock of the Bay", my favorite song, began playing.

Otis Redding's inspiration for the song came from when he was living in a boathouse and performing in San Francisco. Listening to the song, I got the impression that Otis knew something that everyone else didn't, that he had figured out the riddle to enjoying life. The steps he laid out were pretty easy to replicate, however.

1. Find a bay
2. Find a dock
3. Sit

Of course, if you were to entirely miss the point, you could argue that too many people were already living like they were sitting on the dock of the bay—myself being no exception. We sat by while the real world rolled away all around us. In life, some people watched the tide, some were carried away by it, and a select few managed to stop watching long enough to actually find something worth living for. Their dreams were sometimes the simplest, but most profound.

Similarly profound was the sense of intrigue I felt when I spotted the unmarked bottle containing the *Ahnunggokwan* that Andy had sold me.

I knew a little bit of Ojibwe from becoming an *ogimaa mukwa*

(leader bear) as part of my Boy Scouts training, but in this case, “a little bit” meant three words: *ogimaa* (leader), *mukwa* (bear), and *gichi-gami* (Lake Superior). *Ahnungwokwan* made four.

My first attempt to Google “*Ahnungwokwan*” failed miserably, partially because I didn’t know how to spell it, but mostly because Magrarius X jumped onto the keyboard while I was typing.

My search - `awnungndkjkkkkkkkkkkkkkkdl` - did not match any documents, Google informed me.

I plopped the cask known as Magrarius X onto the floor and then tried a couple of different phonetic spellings of the word before figuring out the correct spelling.

The correct term, “*Ahnungwokwan*”, produced a very disappointing first page of results highlighted by an electro pop song by a group out of, coincidentally, San Francisco. From the sound of their music, they really needed to:

1. Find a bay
2. Find a dock
3. Throw their instruments into the sea

Searching “*Ahnungwokwan* Ojibwe” led me mostly to translations, but there was one notable usage of the word in a story about a hitchhiker looking into the sky, into the “Star World,” to learn the stories of his Ojibwe ancestors. I wasn’t sure if I cared to learn the stories of my ancestors, if I was being honest. I imagined it was all grueling agrarian livelihoods all the way back. And anyway, I wasn’t Ojibwe, but rather third-generation Finnish-American, so I was going to need to ask Andy for the Norse version of the drug. *Ragnarök* or *Valhalla* or something like that.

“*Ahnungwokwan* drug” didn’t turn up any search results at all. There was an Ojibwe reservation nearby, or at least there was a gas station and casino, but I doubted it originated there. If anything, the name felt culturally appropriated. Andy, a member of the *zhaagnaash* tribe (“white people”, according to an online dictionary), probably found the word and thought it was cool.

But then what was the name of the drug that he had renamed?

My thoughts were interrupted by someone buzzing my apartment. I assumed it was my food being delivered, but just in case, I hid the bottle of *Ahnungwokwan* in my sock drawer like it was a nudie mag or engagement ring before opening the front door.

A stereotypical-looking kid was on the other side carrying my food. “Six dollars,” he said, twitching as he spoke.

Hoping for some good karma, I gave him a ten and told him to keep the change. “Thanks” was all he said, but I guess I’m not sure what I had expected. A fist bump? He was still in high school, and the extra tip wouldn’t help make his crush forget about the time he had farted out loud during her class presentation on the digestive system. Although that may have just been me projecting my own past experience with Daisy Jenkins on to him.

The food turned out to be mediocre, but once again, what had I expected? Larry had the art of making American Chinese takeout food down, in that he understood exactly what most Americans’ favorite part about Chinese takeout was, other than not having to cook for themselves—receiving a fortune.

As a marketing gimmick, Larry had hired someone for the sole purpose of writing original fortunes. As it turned out, most fortune cookie messages were mass-produced by Wonton Food, Inc. of New York City or Yang’s Fortunes, Inc. of, you guessed it, San Francisco. It had never sat well with me that our fortunes were controlled by corporations. In the fortune-selling business, Larry was the little guy, and I loved him for it, even if he didn’t cook with nearly enough spice.

Despite how long they’d been around, fortune cookies actually seemed *more* relevant in our current SMS dominated world. Social media platforms resembled nothing if not global, crowdsourced fortune services. If I found a tweet from Kanye West in my Kung Pao chicken, would it really feel out of place?

I, for one, was open to consuming wisdom in all its forms, as I was looking for insight anywhere I could, just in case the ingredients on a pudding pack held the key to cracking my existential enigma. But unless discovering that “natural flavors” was an anagram for “anal rust flavor” was important, I hadn’t made any substantial progress.

Nevertheless, I opened my fortune cookie with excitement. “Take heart,” it read, “everything else was once nothing too. Someday, you too might become something.”

Stunned, I read the message twice more before letting out a sort of guffaw. *Larry, you evil genius.* Whoever was responsible for writing that fortune understood me perfectly. Slightly hopeful in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way, it literally said nothing and at the same time said everything. I pinned it on my wall for future backhanded inspiration.

Trying to turn nothing into something, the next twenty minutes were spent primping myself for the bar, which simply meant I took a shower and put on clothes. To make sure I really achieved the disheveled look I was going for, I rubbed some putty in my hands and unskillfully ran them through the front of my hair. Looking at myself in the mirror to see what I had wrought, I quickly realized I didn't want to look at myself in the mirror anymore, and I left.

The drive to the bar was uneventful, which was the perfect level of eventful for after it became dark. Taking the U.P.'s rugged natural beauty for granted during the day was replaced by anxiously scanning the sides of the road at night, looking for signs that a deer was about to try to sell cosmetic products to my front bumper.

To my knowledge, I had never hit anything larger than a bug, despite having both the means and the opportunity. I took pride in not having mauled animals with my vehicle in much the same way I imagined people who owned guns took pride in not having shot any other humans. "Not all drivers," I smugly told myself.

I parked two blocks away from the bar and briskly walked over. Duncan and Chet had already arrived and had pints of Widow Maker Black Ale before them. An ode to the history of copper mining in the area, "Widow Maker" was a colloquial term for a pneumatic drill that operated without the benefit of water to lubricate the bit and cut down the dust. Miners would die from illnesses related to prolonged dust inhalation, although my own great-grandfather had avoided that bit of hard luck by dying in a mine collapse instead.

Judging by the noise and number of empty pints around me, I don't think anyone at the bar, other than myself, was operating dry. There were lots of recently returned engineering students desperately hoping for a chance to lubricate their bits that night.

As far as I could tell, their collective game plan for wooing women seemed to be:

1. Find a bar
2. Find a stool
3. Get wasted

Somewhere, Otis Redding was smiling.

I ordered a Widow Maker and joined my friends at their table. "How was work?" Chet asked me. In the past, his first question would have been if I had watched *Frisky Dingo* that week. I'm not sure when

we had transitioned to adulthood, but it had apparently happened.

“Short, but memorable,” I said. “I quit.”

“You quit!?” he exclaimed, his eyes wagging in excitement.

“Yup.”

“Did you find another job?”

“Nope. I haven’t even had time to think about that yet.”

Chet scanned my face for a moment to see if I was lying and then let me know exactly how he felt. “You’re an idiot,” he said, shaking his head.

I had expected this from him; Chet sometimes had trouble visualizing any alternative life plan other than working, getting married, having kids, buying a house, becoming a Republican, sending his kids to state school, losing his hair, retiring at sixty, picking up golf, and surviving long enough to see his grandchildren, and maybe even great grandchildren, protest everything his generation stood for. There was absolutely nothing wrong with that life, and sometimes it had some appeal to me,⁵ but life wasn’t like Chet’s “one size fits all” baseball cap. Not everyone looked good in a flat-brimmed hat.

“What took you so long?” asked Duncan, who looked devilishly handsome in his Stormy Kromer.

“Mostly fear,” I replied, “but I no longer had opportunities to grow professionally or personally. It turns out, all I needed was to wait for my rash impulsiveness to momentarily supersede any thought of the risk I’d be taking.”

“Sometimes, the bigger risk is *not* to quit,” Duncan said, stoically.

“Damn!” I exclaimed, soaking in his affirmation. “That should be on a fortune cookie.”

A little uncomfortably, Duncan muttered, “Yeah, maybe...”

Chet just rolled his eyes, clearly not convinced I had made the right choice. Interestingly enough, that eye roll had the exact same reaffirming effect on me as Duncan’s enthusiasm had.

⁵ The closest I had ever come to actively wanting the traditional family, white-picket-fence lifestyle was when I was in an antique store in Appleton, Wisconsin and found a charming “coffee-table” size book containing 127 reproductions of Francisco de Goya oil paintings. I could envision me and my future wife sitting in our living room huddled around the coffee table admiring the book, matching mugs in our hands, and then suddenly whispering to each other in perfect unison, “Let’s have a baby.” I immediately bought the book but never opened it again for fear I might actually wind up with a child.

* * *

“It was a pretty thankless job,” I said. “The other day, this user emailed me saying they had an issue. I discovered the problem and wrote to them saying that I had fixed it, but they wrote back saying it had ‘mysteriously fixed itself.’ No, Susan, no it didn’t. *I* did that.”

“Oh man,” Duncan replied, grinning, “you must have gotten that all the time.”

“*All* the time.”

“You know who probably gets that all the time?” he asked. “Assuming He exists, of course, God must get that *all* the fucking time.”

I chuckled and clasped my hands in fake prayer. “Hey, God, Johnny here. Remember when I asked You to help me with my hernia? Well, You can disregard that now, Science took care of it instead. You can close my prayer request.”

Duncan chuckled, but Chet, the U.P.’s newest certified personal trainer, scoffed at the comparison. “You’re nothing alike. No one would pray to God to fix their Internet. And I certainly hope no one’s ever come to *you* to help them with their hernia, Johnny.”

“Nope,” I acknowledged. “I’ve never had to ask a computer to turn its head and cough, but computer viruses and human illnesses... they aren’t that different. I mean, sure, the hardware *involved* is different, but sometimes the difference feels like one of terminology rather than underlying principle.”

“Maybe to *you*,” scoffed Chet.

“What’s the computer equivalent of chickenpox?” asked Duncan, who had never been afraid of letting an analogy be taken too far.

I took a sip of beer to give myself a moment to think. “I was shown a laptop recently where every image on every website was being automatically replaced with a photo of Ryan Gosling. While a gosling is obviously a young goose and not a chicken, I think the example holds.”

Duncan smiled mischievously. “What was the name of that virus again? Asking for a friend.”

But before I could answer, Chet asked, “Well, if that’s chickenpox, then what’s shingles?”

“That’s when you open your laptop 30 years later and discover that Ryan Gosling now looks like Gary Busey.”

Both Duncan and Chet started laughing. “Sure, you laugh now,” I continued, “but it’s serious. 95 percent of computers are at risk, and

approximately one-third of all computers will develop Gary Busey in their lifetime.”

“Fine,” Chet said, “I concede that some of the underlying principles, like viruses, may be the same, but would you ever seriously consider a medical profession?”

“Ahh, well, that’s where the analogy completely falls apart, of course. I’m not even smart enough to visit a doctor, let alone become one. If a mother brought her sick kid to me I’d probably suggest turning it off and on and then ordering a replacement.”

“Hey, plenty of kids need to be adopted,” Duncan said.

“You guys are the worst,” Chet groaned.

“Don’t worry, America’s youth are safe,” Duncan declared as he raised his glass in a toast. “To Johnny, for being as much of a doctor as I am.”

We clinked glasses and finished our beers.

“Time for another round, boys!” Duncan said, before asking me, only half in jest, if I was buying.

“Mooseport does owe me at least one more paycheck!” I replied.

After leaving and returning with three more Widow Makers, I turned to Duncan and said, “Hey, now we can enjoy unemployment together.”

“Uhh, about that... I actually have a part-time job now,” he replied, nervously raking the few whiskers on his face that represented four months of desperately trying to grow a beard.

Chet and I did synchronized double takes that could have qualified us for the Olympics. “Doing what?!” we asked in perfect unison.

Duncan had been unemployed since graduating college, a seemingly unbreakable constant in our lives. Learning that he was now merely *under*employed threw the structural integrity of the entire space-time continuum into question.

Looking around uncomfortably, Duncan sighed before saying, “I know you’re going to laugh, but I write the fortunes at Larry’s Chinese Food.”

He was right, we did laugh, but because it was absurdly perfect for him as an occupation. Duncan had studied philosophy in undergrad, which seemed fitting when you heard him speak. His words came out slowly and deliberately, like he was contemplating the fundamental nature of reality one syllable at a time. This trait became particularly noticeable when he talked on the phone, making for some arduously

long but surprisingly enlightening pizza orders. But with fortunes, people could consume his wisdom at their own speed. *Brilliant!*

"Finally! And I thought none of the philosophy firms were hiring!" I said.

"I knew you would make that joke," Duncan said, shaking his head. "That was *exactly* why I didn't want to tell you."

"In all seriousness, congrats," I said. "I actually have one of your fortunes pinned to my wall."

"High praise," Chet said.

"High praise indeed," Duncan said, looking less embarrassed. "What did it say?"

"Take heart, everything else was once nothing too. Someday, you too might become something," I recited from memory. "I felt like it was written for me."

"Because it was," Duncan replied, "but you obviously misinterpreted it. 'Take heart,' it said, and here I bet you haven't ripped a single heart out of a man's chest since you read it."

"Not for a lack of trying," I joked.

"You guys are going to get me fired," Chet groaned. "Let's agree to kibosh the murder jokes."

"Relax, Chet," advised Duncan. "There are many more sore backs and ailing joints residing in your future. And please, let me know if you need me to write that down on a small slip of paper and stick it in a cookie for you. For my typical rate of \$8.15 an hour, I'd be happy to comply."

Our conversation continued for a few winks of a copper miner's eye before Chet made his way to the bathroom and Duncan meandered over to say hi to an old classmate, giving me an opportunity to scan the taproom. It looked like there would be a performance that night, as a woman I didn't recognize was busy setting up a mic, amplifier, and guitar stand. I couldn't see her face as her back was turned to me, but she was wearing cowboy boots, black jeans, and a ripped and faded denim jacket. Her long, auburn hair flowed freely over her shoulders, like Tahquamenon Falls but with less fish.

Country music really wasn't my thing, outside of old Hank Williams and Johnny Cash songs, but maybe I shouldn't have presumed. I mean, for all I knew she was about to surprise the hell out of me and bless us all with some Wu-Tang wisdom, but I feared I was about to hear a playlist filled with formulaic ditties designed to

appeal to small town life about a man, or maybe a woman in this case, drinking alcohol and falling in love, riding a pickup truck, and/or falling in love with a pickup truck. And yes, I *was* being awfully pretentious.

Just when I thought I might get to see the mysterious woman's face, Duncan and Chet returned and disrupted my staring. Chet seized the opportunity to discuss what had been on his mind the last few days, other than protein shakes and filled-out yoga pants.

"Hey, guys. Have either of you watched *Ancient Aliens*?"

I turned abruptly in my chair. "Why would we have?" I asked, pouncing like a New Zealand housecat on an endangered, flightless bird.

Chet shrugged. "It's on Netflix. Plus, it's a fresh perspective on human history."

"And that's a fresh perspective on *Ancient Aliens*. To refer to it as history is awfully generous of you," Duncan said, joining in the hunt.

"It's on the *History* channel, bro. And I'm not the only one who watches it. I mean, it's on Season 11 now."

"That can't possibly be true," I exclaimed.⁶

"And regardless of you two heckling hobos, it raises some good questions."

"Like what? Were the Great Pyramids launching pads for alien spaceships?" I asked.

"Aha, so you *have* seen it!" he exclaimed.

"We all have our moments of weakness," I admitted.

Chet was growing irritated. "But what if aliens visited Earth and taught early civilizations how to read and write and build shit? Wouldn't you guys want to know? I mean, you don't know for sure they didn't. The show's experts presented some compelling evidence, like Biblical stories, temple drawings, and stuff."

"Remind me, which book of the Bible mentions aliens?" asked Duncan. "Crazy-Duderonomy?"

Smelling blood in the water and feeling liquid cleverness take hold of my very soul, I struck. "Those so-called experts must be aliens themselves... most of the shit they produce comes out of their mouths."

⁶ It was.

* * *

Duncan laughed, but Chet was peeved. “Johnny, you’re such an ass sometimes. You too, Duncan. We can never just have a normal conversation.”

Raising his glass, Duncan toasted, “To being an ass, but only sometimes.”

We all joined in, albeit Chet begrudgingly. Afterward, I decided to give Chet a break and take a turn on the soapbox.

“Speaking tangentially of *Ancient Aliens*, our civilization has peaked,” I announced. “It was about the time I had remotored into a user’s computer and noticed that they had five different coupon toolbars adorning their browser that I realized it’s all downhill from here, friends.

“Not only did we create the most amazing invention ever known, but we apparently came up with it five different times. Five brave souls out there had the same amazing idea and were so equally successful that this particular individual couldn’t decide among them. Like Pokémon, they had to have them all.

“I marveled at how blessed this person was. Not only did they slow down their computer with one coupon toolbar, but they quintupled the experience.”

“What the *fuck* is a coupon toolbar?” asked Chet, breaking up my buzzed monologue.

“I still have no idea,” I said, struggling to get my soliloquy back on track, “which makes my epiphany even more apt. Sure, coupon toolbars are trivial and meaningless, but it’s the very availability of this triviality and frivolity that’s astounding. With the Internet, we perfected the art of making the meaningless meaningful.

“And while that isn’t much, it’s certainly something. When our species dies out and Chet’s ancient aliens return to Earth, I hope there’s a sign that reads: ‘Humans—they didn’t make good, but they made one helluva coupon toolbar.’”

After a few seconds of silence, Chet said, “I’m beginning to change my mind about you quitting your job. It was clearly a very emotionally scarring experience for you.”

Duncan, never letting an opportunity to drink go to waste, raised his glass for yet another toast. “To Johnny!” he said. “He didn’t always make sense, but he made one helluva rant!”

I chuckled and joined them in their merriment at my expense. What were friends for if not to be dicks to one another? I mean, yes,

we were also there for each other emotionally, so we were dependable dicks, dicks that could be leaned on during tough times, but definitely dicks.

Done thinking for the moment about the intricacies of *bromo sapiens* friendships, I put my glass down in time to hear the mystery girl begin speaking into the mic.

“Hello? Hello?” she said, testing to make sure the mic worked. I turned toward her and, upon finally seeing her face, had a whole lot of different things happen to me all at once.

Scientifically, my pupils dilated, I began to sweat and give off pheromones, I experienced a dopamine high, my levels of serotonin lowered slightly, and my body internally synced with hers. How this instant attraction manifested itself in my brain was more like *Bing Bong Bing Bong Bing*.

“Howdy, everyone!” she said, “Thanks for coming out! I’m going to assume y’all are here to listen to me, even if we both know that probably isn’t true.”

“It *is* true!” yelled Bob, the friendly local town drunk with a sweet disposition and charmingly round beer belly. Every day he could be found sitting there, so in his case it especially wasn’t true, but it was still nice of him to pretend.

The girl knew better, however. “Bob, you ol’ coot!” She signaled the bartender, “Joe, get Bob here another beer and put it on my tab. He deserves it for being the prettiest little liar around.”

Her voice was intoxicating to me, even more so than the beer. Who *was* this girl? I thought I knew everyone in this town.

“For those who might not know me, my name is Olivia Harolds, and it’s my absolute pleasure to be performing for y’all tonight. Let me quick finish this Pick Axe Blonde here—brewed with ‘a distinctive malt flavor and just a kiss of hops’—and then I’ll perform my song ‘The Bad Bitch Blues’ for ya. It’s my radical feminine retelling of the song ‘Highwayman’ by the Highwaymen.”

She picked up her beer, chugged it down amidst hoots and hollers, set her glass back down again, and picked up her guitar. The lyrics went a little something like this:

You were a businessman
And I was set to be your bride
By terms you later would deny
I only ever asked to share in all your dreams

But love conflicted with your shady business schemes
You should have closed the deal by making me your wife
Instead I closed your life.

Her voice became low and gravelly with the last line, and let me tell you, it was really doing it for me.

You were a ship captain
You said you'd keep me by your side
But then you sailed off with the tide
You tried to run but there was nowhere you could go
I found you anchored off the coast of Mexico
You lied again and said I could not bear to kill
But now you just lie still.

In the back of my head, I realized that my mouth was beginning to hang open, but in the front of my head, my eyes remained transfixed on Olivia Harolds.

You were a quarterback
Winning everything in stride
Then you mysteriously died
You shouldn't have left me for that cheerleader you met
She had big breasts but I'm a bigger beauty yet
You tried an audible but I could hear no sound
From so far underground...
Ex-lovers in the ground, in the ground, in the ground, in the ground, in the ground...

Her voice dropped deeper still with each repetition of the words "in the ground", which, funnily enough, was now where my jaw could be located.

You fly a starship
Across the galaxy so wide
But don't you dare cast me aside
I'd send your body off to drift in outer space
The tears would boil off your stupid fucking face
And you may try to scream but it would be in vain

Out there you'd still remain...
Just promise you'll remain, and remain, and remain, and remain,
and remain...

When she finished, I whooped, and I had never considered myself the whooping type. Half the men in the bar were whooping with me while the other half looked mildly uncomfortable.

"Ol' Coot" Bob, who had already finished his new beer, yelled, "Olivia, you're a bad bitch!"

"And don't ya dare forget it!" she fired back.

"I'm the town drunk, not the village idiot!" he shouted.

Olivia was laughing along with everyone else. "Fellas, some of ya may have been admiring my cowboy boots. I like to wear 'em because they're stylish and they fit me well, but they're also handy weapons if one knows where to kick, so don't go getting any ideas."

Several male audience members played along by groaning out loud, while all the women in attendance roared their approval. It was a good crowd.

Her next song, another Olivia Harolds original, was called "Tattoos."

I know that you're sporting the Devil's tattoo,
And I know he's got a matching one of you,
I saw it for myself in the darkest depths of Hell.

Despite the risk of violating parole,
I went to ask him what he'd give for my soul,
I had no use for it now that you'd left me alone.

But he cut me off and wouldn't let me speak,
"Nothing," he said, turning his proverbial cheek,
And there on his ass was your face for me to behold.

I said, "Sorry, Satan, but I need to know!"
"Do you love her?" I cried. He yelled back, "Hell no!"
He may be the Devil, but my demon was always you.

Well, when you died, I thought we'd get our revenge,
But Satan said, "She went to heaven instead,

“And there’s a rumor that God’s got a brand-new tattoo.”

So now I’m drunk and crying over your grave,
Despite a brand-new suit and a brand-new shave,
Cuz this brand-new me is covered in you all the same.

Holy Goddamn. I thought her music was the best sounding stuff I’d ever heard, and I wasn’t even the tiniest, least bit biased or influenced by her being the most beautiful girl in the world.⁷

But not everyone seemed to share my enthusiasm for her singing. “Show us your boobs!” yelled an intoxicated stranger danger.

“Honey,” Olivia said into the mic, “just because life gave me melons doesn’t mean I need to dance.”

“What?” he shouted.

“Boobs, honey. We were talking about boobs.”

People started to chuckle. Embarrassed, the man stammered, “Fuck you, I know what boobs is!”

“Hear that, ladies? Your Prince Charming has arrived. He knows ‘what the boobs is.’” Olivia announced into the microphone in a low, mocking tone.

“Yeah, well, fuck you!” he yelled.

“In your dreams, Boobie Boy!” she yelled back.

I nearly spit out my beer. I never managed to come up with a good comeback when I really needed to. She made it seem so effortless.

By now, Boobie Boy’s face had turned a Christmas-Island-crab shade of red, a warning sign that he was about to say and/or do something really profoundly stupid. He finally erupted and called Olivia a word that isn’t necessary to repeat here. He immediately got kicked out of the bar by other members of the crowd, partly for his own safety, I suspected.

“And that,” yelled Bob, “was the village idiot.”

Olivia laughed and instructed Joe to pour Bob another beer. “Yer on a roll, Bob!” she exclaimed.

Bob was beaming from the positive attention he was receiving. Frankly, I was jealous of him at that moment, as I suspected a lot of other men and women, straight, single, or otherwise, were as well. It

⁷ Editor’s note: citation needed.

just goes to show, every Bob has his day.⁸

The crowd, improved by subtraction, was even more receptive during the second half of the show, which Olivia started off with a song called “Pasties and Pasties”.

A play on words, the title included two heteronyms, referring both to the aforementioned baked pastry “pasty” and the differently-pronounced burlesque nipple sticker. The song was about a woman who stripped late at night and baked very early in the morning, because she “needs dough to knead dough.”

“That song was dedicated to our lost friend Boobie Boy,” she said at the end to laughter. “May the Lord help him, if it should be correct for Him to do so.”

Olivia played for another half an hour and finished her set off amidst a rousing ovation. When she put her guitar down, I turned around and proclaimed to my friends, “That’s it, boys. I’m in love!”

My “boys” knew me as someone who developed crushes instantly and completely, so they weren’t surprised. They had heard these words before, but this time, sort of like every other time, I felt it was different. *I* was different. And she was *definitely* different.

“Do you want me to introduce you?” asked Chet. “I’m her PT.”

He had said the last part nonchalantly, like it wasn’t a big deal, and I hated him for it. As far as disservices went, finding out that Chet knew about Olivia and hadn’t informed me was like discovering I’d had a massive zit on my face for a week, but everyone had been too polite to tell me. I suppose that analogy wasn’t great, as Olivia was nothing like a massive zit on my face, but analogies were like sexual favors—really easy to get wrong.

“You *know* her!? What’s she like?”

Chet laughed. “She seems pretty cool.”

“Cool is an understatement,” I said. “But is she, well, you know, is she single?”

“No idea, homie,” he might have said if he hadn’t merely and infuriatingly shrugged.

Chet and I waited for the swarm of people around Olivia to die down before we approached. Duncan stayed behind to make sure no one poached our seats. I happily noted that nobody came up to kiss her. As awful as it sounds, I had never wanted to see someone deprived of affection so badly before.

⁸ Except the sponge variety, which gets every Monday through Thursday at 6 p.m.

* * *

Olivia, noticing Chet, said, “Hey!” and gave him a hug.

“You were great!” he said.

“Ahh, thanks! And thank you for your help! I was one more crunch away from kicking your butt this week, but I totally fit into this outfit now.”

“That was the best show I’ve ever seen,” I said, cutting in awkwardly like Grandpa at dinner.

“Oh, thank you,” she said politely, unsure of who I was.

“This is my good friend Johnny,” explained Chet. “He can be kind of an ass sometimes, but he’s not all bad.”

I almost punched Chet, but my better instincts kicked in. “Oh, don’t listen to him,” I told Olivia. “He likes to wax poetic about me, but I’m not nearly as perfect as he lets on.”

“Really? Is it that you’re all bad or always an ass?” she asked, smiling.

“Oh, a bit of both—one hundred percent badass,” I said, despite being keenly aware that I was eleven percent at best.

Chet let out a groan, but Olivia laughed. “Well, Mr. Badass,” she said, “it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Now, if I may be so bold, will you let a badass buy you a drink?”

Olivia snorted, but in an endearing way. “I’m pretty tired, so I’m going to shoot you down, cowboy. I think you’re funny, though. Tell you what; I’m planning on writing at Cyberspace Café tomorrow. If you’re still feeling brave then, stop by, buy me a cappuccino, and make me laugh?”

I quickly agreed and we settled on a time.

“How’d it go?” Duncan asked when we returned.

“I’m meeting her for coffee tomorrow,” I said, beaming.

“All thanks to me,” added Chet.

I punched him in the shoulder. “Thanks for calling me an ass,” I said. “But seriously, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said, rubbing himself where I had hit him. “Ass.”

Once again, I found myself wondering why I had only just met Olivia. It felt like someone had reprogrammed the Universe to include her, but my brain had been offline and hadn’t received the group policy update informing me of her existence.

Regardless, I was thankful to know her now. Karma had seemingly smiled on me already. From that moment on, I vowed to give sixty-seven percent tips to every Chinese-takeout delivery boy for the rest of my life.

And seeing as I never ordered Chinese-takeout delivery again, that is one vow I actually managed to keep.

I woke up the next day with butterflies in my stomach—a surrealist nightmare that only Kafka or the world’s most devout vegan could have dreamt up. My stomach lepidopterarium was in a state of turmoil, like Jurassic Park after a power failure, and all because I was so excited for my coffee date with Olivia that I was certain it could only end in catastrophe. I mean, what if I really was the protagonist in a Kafka story? Even my nerves had nerves, anxious that maybe they weren’t being properly nervous enough given the circumstances.

“Good grief,” muttered the Universe under its breath. Even Magrarius X seemed more disappointed in me than usual.

In the grand scheme of things, especially in my asshole cat’s opinion, this date was of very little consequence, but a beautiful and occasionally tragic feature of my life was my inability to separate myself from the then and there. I couldn’t, in that moment, maintain any sense of perspective and instead considered it the most important moment of my life.

I mean, it wasn’t even a date. What had she said? “Make me laugh.” *Good thing I’ve been watching those old Richard Pryor specials.*

Overcome by the immensity of my circumstances, I drank some coffee hoping it would help asphyxiate my absurdist butterflies, as if it were ethyl acetate and my body was a killing jar, but the caffeine only succeeded in making me even more agitated. Clearly, I needed to relax a little, so I got out of bed and put on some music. Roy Orbison’s “Blue Bayou” came crackling through my speakers.

I typically enjoyed getting swept up by the opening chords of the song, but it also had a very obscure connotation for me. You see, tied for the most useless piece of trivia I knew was that 1989’s *Dickson’s*

Baseball Dictionary had included the term “Linda Ronstadt” as a synonym for a fastball after she recorded a cover of “Blue Bayou,” because she “blew by you.”⁹

Not wanting to contemplate the idea of Olivia Harolds being another one of life’s fastballs, I paused the song. She was more of a curveball anyhow, the way she had made my knees practically buckle the other night. While I surprisingly hadn’t ducked or dove away from the pitch, whether or not I would be safe in the end was still unclear. Making a good second impression would be critical if I had any chance at winning Olivia’s affections.

Just don’t fumble I thought, simultaneously mixing sports references and bungling my inner stream of consciousness.

By this point, my brain resembled a series of ever-expanding crop circles, and I suddenly realized I had left myself alone with myself again. I turned Mr. Orbison back on and ducked into the bathroom to check on my appearance. I was wearing dark gray jeans and a black, v-neck t-shirt. My goal wasn’t to look good, just to not look bad. I occasionally made efforts to be stylish, but style always seemed to cancel on me at the last moment, forcing me to go alone.

And so I went, albeit not before Magrarius X rubbed his body against my legs in such a way that was so completely lacking in warmth that it actually broke the laws of thermodynamics. Through this frictionless gesture, he was communicating his complete ownership over me, letting me know I wasn’t even worthy of the little bit of energy his body could have transferred to me. “Okay, I’ll feed you,” I said, resulting in a net loss of energy and simultaneously proving him correct.

After obediently waving goodbye to Magrarius X’s butthole, I walked out to my hatchback and started the engine. This caused the crankshaft to start spinning, moving the pistons up and down in their cylinders. The camshaft, connected by the timing belt, began to spin and open the valves, letting in fuel. The fuel-air mixture came in and a spark ignited them, causing combusted exhaust gasses to fly out my tailpipe. At the same time, dust inside my car began swirling through the air, entering my nostrils, and sparking my allergies. I then sneezed so violently and euphorically that the asphyxiated butterflies in my

⁹ The other most useless piece of information being that “Peggy Lee” was similarly included in *Dickson’s Baseball Dictionary* as a synonym for a sluggish fastball, a reference to her recording of “Is That All There Is?”

stomach shot out my nose and landed on my steering wheel, relaxing my muscles and relieving me of a considerable amount of pressure.

Oh, Thank God, I thought, as I wiped the dead boogerflies off my horn button and onto the bottom of my seat.

Gargantuan surprise sneezes were one of my favorite experiences in life, even including the times I would sneeze so violently jolts of pain would travel down the length of my right arm and make my wrist throb. While that was probably a sign I had bad circulation or a pinched nerve, the surprise I would experience each time was refreshing, if a bit rattling.

Returning to our story, the ride to Cyberspace Café was short, but along the way I developed a bit of a problem. As it turned out, pregamming a coffee date with coffee was a strategically flawed move.

Thinking, as one might in such moments, in terms of game theory and a Stackelberg model of competition where one player moves first and the other reacts sequentially, I had led off by intaking a significant amount of fluid and the Universe had responded by instilling in me an urgent need to pee, the expected outcome of which was discomfort and restlessness. *Universe 1, Johnny 0*.

I didn't want to begin my "date" with a nagging bladder, so upon my arrival to Cyberspace, I tried sneaking my way to the bathroom unseen.

"Sir, bathrooms are for paying customers ONLY!" yelled a voice behind me. I froze and slowly turned around. It was the barista. Above her on the café balcony I caught a glimpse of Olivia wearing headphones and staring at her laptop.

"I'm sorry," I said, a tad flustered as I moved my legs ever-so-slightly closer together. "Can I wait to order until after I use it?"

"As long as you're not going to do a line off the toilet seat or anything," she replied.

"Absolutely not," I assured her. "I just really need to pee."

"And you promise you're not going to pee and peace?" she asked.

"I promise I'm just trying to go pee in peace."

She sized me up from head to toe. "Okay, see you in a minute, hon."

I briskly walked over to the unisex bathroom, which thankfully was vacant. Moments later, I let out an audible sigh as my pee deluged the urinal puck down below.

Besides sneezing, another experience I enjoyed immensely was

the sweet relief I felt peeing after having needed to go for a very long time. If you're still alive, my advice is to enjoy it while you can.

Halfway through my pee, after the initial bliss had passed, I took in my surroundings. Above the toilet was a sign that read, "Deer Camp Policy: Bucks With Short Horns Stand Close To The Urinal." I sighed, partially from continued bladder relief and partially from being reminded that I had never quite fit in with every aspect of my community. The prominent hunting culture of the area was even extending into my coffee shop bathroom experience.

I had once attended a lecture given by a professor who said that hunter-gatherer societies now failed to exist anywhere in the world except for the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I thought it was a joke at the time, but I now acknowledged that he might have had a point. Considering that business hours were routinely subject to change during hunting season and normal sixth grade classes like English and math were abandoned annually in order to teach students hunter's safety, it was hard to argue that hunting wasn't an intrinsic piece of our community's identity.

As for myself, I had never hunted, other than for attention from girls or deals on pizza rolls. I considered myself an A+ gatherer, though. Hand me a credit card and a shopping cart, and I could introduce you to a world of dietary distress you hadn't even known existed.¹⁰

After washing my hands, I gathered myself in front of the door. "Be the shell," I whispered, repeating what my hunting safety instructor had said to me years ago at the shooting range. It hadn't proved to be very helpful advice, as I missed the clay pigeons with all six shots. After my third try, I knew he had given up on me because he stopped whispering and simply started telling me I was "getting real close." In life, some people are the shell and some people are the clay pigeon, but I've always been content being the guy playing Big Buck Hunter at the back of the bar.

I released one last pent-up sigh and then unlocked and opened the door. Coincidentally, at that exact moment, Olivia was on the other side reaching for the doorknob, the end result of which was us startling the figurative Jesus out of each other when we came face to face.

¹⁰Just ask me about my signature Two-Hot-Dog-and-Spaghetti-Sauce Sandwich. As Shelley wrote in *Ozymandias*, "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

* * *

“Oh! Hi, Johnny,” Olivia said as she tried to collect herself.

“Hi, Olivia,” I said, sheepishly. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“What are the odds?” she said. “I didn’t notice you come in.”

“Well, I put the ‘b’ in ‘subtle,’” I said, aware I actually put the “b” in “dingleberry.”

“Clever,” Olivia replied, “but I’m about to put the ‘p’ in my pants if we keep standing here, so buy me a cappuccino and meet me up on the balcony?”

Embarrassed, I stepped aside so she could get past me. “Of course!”

Walking away from the bathroom as briskly as I had walked toward it, I thought about what I was going to drink. I didn’t particularly *need* or *want* any more coffee, but it would be awkward for Olivia to drink a cappuccino and for me not to have anything. Not only would it set me at ease, but it would likely help set her at ease as well. Plus, what if she asked me a question that I needed to think about for a moment? Like, “Who would win in a fight, André 3000 the Giant or André the Giant 3000?”¹¹ I could smoothly buy myself a little bit of time to think by taking a sip. This is also why I *always* accepted offers of water or coffee at the beginning of job interviews.

Stepping up to the counter, I instinctively stared up at the menu. This was merely habitual, as I already knew my order.

“What’ll you have?” asked the barista, just as loudly as before despite me being much closer.

Startled, I began to mumble, “Just a...” as I looked back up at the chalkboard menu behind her.

The barista cut me off. “You better say ‘coffee.’ If you say ‘just a’ while ordering at my coffee shop, the sentence better end with ‘coffee.’ Don’t make me make you a specialty drink now and then act like it’s not a big deal. I can’t stand when people do that.”

“Oh, yeah. Just a small coffee,” I said, too intimidated to order anything else.

“Good choice,” she said as she began filling up a cup. “That’ll be two dollars.”

“Wait, shoot, I need a cappuccino as well. Sorry.”

¹¹ Answer: 3000 giant bottles of André.

* * *

She stood there and stared at me like she was a concierge and I was a freshly-laid dog turd on a hallway carpet, but luckily for me she still fulfilled my order. She just made certain I knew she took absolutely no enjoyment in it whatsoever. This left me wondering whether everyone hated their jobs as much as I had hated mine, or whether she just specifically hated me.

Olivia walked out of the bathroom and back up to the balcony just as the barista finished my order. I took a careless sip of coffee, burnt my mouth, and then more carefully followed behind her with our drinks.

I couldn't help but note differences in Olivia's appearance between last night and this afternoon. For one, the cowboy boots had mercifully been replaced by a pair of pink Converse. Another was that her hair was braided into a single braid rather than straight. Mostly, however, I couldn't take my eyes off the bright, gold, bling-bling fannypack riding over her blue jeans and pink tank top. *Now **that's** style.*

"Careful, this might be poisoned," I said as I approached Olivia's table, placing her cappuccino down beside her laptop. "I don't think the barista likes me very much."

"I can tell," she said. "The first cappuccino she made me had a cascading heart pattern on the top. This one looks like a sprouting potato."

I looked at the cup. It really *did* look like a sprouting potato. Still, here was my first chance to make her laugh. "Well I actually asked for an anatomically correct heart. This sort of loop thing must be the aorta, and this blob the left ventricle..." I said, pointing at the foam, "making this the vena java."

Olivia slowly looked back down at her cappuccino again and then back up at me. "Really, Johnny? The 'vena java'? You should know now, circulatory puns have no effect on me. I'm afraid your joke was 'in vein.'" Olivia's face bore a slight grin or a slight grimace, I couldn't tell which.

"I see I've met my match," I said, sitting down across from her. "So, what are you writing?"

"Oh, I'm trying to write a short story," she responded, relieved by the change in topic.

"How's it going?"

"Poorly. This café has too many windows, they allow too much

light in, the walls are too brightly wallpapered, and the music is too cheery. The environment isn't allowing me to properly brood. Even the coffee isn't dark enough."

"If you want, I can make you as miserable as you want to help you with your creative process."

"Why, ain't you just a darling!" she drawled. "But misery I could do without. Didn't I specifically ask you here so you could make me laugh?"

I nodded.

"Well?"

"Well, contrary to what you might think, I'm not addicted to cocaine... I just really like the way it smells."

This was followed by a very awkward pause before Olivia finally blurted out a very confused "What?"

I knew Richard Pryor would get me in trouble.

"Sorry," I said, meekly. "I think that's what the barista assumed I wanted to use the bathroom for."

"It must be the v-neck you're wearing. It screams 'junkie prostitute.'"

"I thought that was only deep v-necks."

"In the U.P.?" she asked with a smirk. "Everything is considered deep."

"You may find my conversation to be the exception to that rule," I said, grimacing. "On a related note, do you find crashing and burning to be funny?"

Olivia smiled. "Unfortunately, no, but you've been a good sport so I'm willing to give you another chance."

"That's good," I said, "because I planned on making you laugh for about ten minutes—but I'm gonna need to be on stage for an hour."

This joke, despite also being a Richard Pryor bit, *did* make Olivia laugh, resulting in an encouraging Dick joke success rate of 50%.

Now that I had fulfilled the terms of my contract and made Olivia laugh, I was finally at ease enough to notice that she wasn't speaking with the same country-western accent as she had used during the show. Putting on my figurative junior detective badge, I made my inquiry.

"Oh, I'm shameless," she explained. "I try to speak or act in whatever way I think my audience wants me to speak or act. But in real life, I'm as much a badass as you are... no offense."

"None taken," I said, having come to grips with this long ago.

"I even have a bad Cockney accent in my quiver," she said.

"And did you calculate what accent I'd respond to best?"

"Nah, you seem a little desperate, so I figured you'd be happy with me talking to you at all."

"Ouch! That's... crushingly accurate," I admitted.

"Oh great," she said, pretending to be upset. "You just wanted to have coffee with me because you're desperate? How am I supposed to feel now?"

I tried to come up with a clever, unpretentious response to her question, but all I could muster was "Caffeinated" before I took a sip of coffee.

Olivia laughed at me, lacking mercy. "This is going well."

"On the bright side," I said, removing the figurative freezer chest from my mouth, "at this rate you'll have enough quality brooding in you to write the next Great American Novel."

"Oh, don't think so lowly of yourself," she said with a smile. "You're bad, but nowhere near Great Depression or Civil War levels of inspiration."

I shrugged. "Well, a man's gotta try."

Olivia suddenly perked up. "How about we start over and play a game. I'll ask you questions and after you answer them, I'll answer them as well. It's sort of like a speed-dating session, only the questions are all inspired by *The Purge*."

I hadn't seen *The Purge*, but I was familiar with the concept: for twelve hours, all crimes, including murder, were decriminalized. It sounded like a quick way for the rich to get rid of the homeless and poor, as well as an incredible piece of lobbying by the home security system special interest groups.

"Okay!" I said, genuinely interested to see where this was headed but mostly just tickled to all heck that she had used the term "dating."

"Yay! Okay, first question: what non-weapon item in your house would you choose to fend off attackers?"

"Well, there's a baseball bat in my apartment," I said, "but that's too obvious. Maybe I would just start playing post-grunge albums really loudly until all my attackers suffered internal hemorrhaging and died. You know, Creed, Staind, Puddle of Mudd—the music that saw Kurt Cobain's gun and said, 'hold my beer.'"

Olivia raised her eyebrows. "Oh, you listen to that music, do

you?”

“No, but the Internet does, and I have the Internet. I’ll just need to upgrade to Spotify Premium first. I don’t want a poorly-timed Trojan condoms ad being my downfall.”

“But aren’t people who listen to post-grunge *exactly* the type of people who would go around purging? Would it even hurt them?”

I shrugged. “I read about this snake-worshipping preacher who was bitten by a venomous snake and died. I think there are some poisons you just can’t develop an immunity to.”

“You know, you have really strong feelings on this subject,” Olivia teased.

“You should hear my rant about coupon toolbars sometime. Anyway, how about you? How would you defend yourself?”

“Well, it depends on whether my attackers were male or female. If they’re male, that’s easy, all I’d have to do is pour some red cough syrup on a tampon and wave it at them and they’d instantly turn into *The Scream* by Edvard Munch and start melting or whatever shit you guys do. If they’re female, though, I guess I’d grab my guitar and work my way down the line of instruments.”

“Either method would work on me,” I replied.

“I know,” she said. “Okay, second question: name a person who, if a mob hunting that person ran by, you would join the mob to hunt down.”

“Oh geez, that’s... that’s the best speed-dating question I’ve ever heard,” I said before taking a sip of coffee, magically managing to avoid burning myself this time. “Omar Al-Bashir, perhaps?”

“Omar Al-Bawho?” she asked, revealing a glaring lack of knowledge of history and politics in the Nile River Valley.

“He’s the President of Sudan and was indicted for genocide, crimes against humanity, and various other war atrocities. I really wanted to save Darfur back in high school; I just never got the chance.”

“Ahh, right,” she said, nodding her head. “Yes, that sounds bad. Mine might be cheating a little bit, but I think I’d chase down the Burger King mascot.”

“The King?”

“Yeah, the King. He makes me uncomfortable. He stands there in the ads, not saying anything, with his big, shiny, sweaty, plastic face. He’s a glistening combination of the patriarchy and American jingle consumerism—two things I’d love to smash—in one oversized, larger-

than-life package. And yet, I don't think I'd do anything to him once I caught him. Because deep down, I think I enjoy the ads, and they make me want to get a milkshake, and that makes me even more upset, which makes me want a milkshake even more. I'd probably end up sulking and going to Burger King in the end."

"That sounds nice," I said, admiring the energy and passion Olivia had brought to her own rant. "You know, after I've assassinated one world despot, a fast food monarch shouldn't be too much trouble."

"It's a date!" she said. "Okay, next question: what three traits make you singularly well-equipped to survive the Purge?"

"I'm guessing being good at self-deprecating humor doesn't count. Let's see; I'm resourceful, I'm a pretty good problem solver, and, most importantly, I'm largely anonymous. You?"

She shrugged. "That's easy. I'm pretty, I have a strong support network, and I'm capable of being fucking scary when I need to be."

"You really are pretty," I said, trying to seize the opportunity.

"And capable of being fucking scary when I need to be," she reminded me with a steely-eyed gaze. "Next question: a group of well-armed thugs captures everyone in this café. They offer to let you and most everyone go, but you have to choose one person in here to die. If you don't choose, they'll kill everyone. Whom do you choose?"

I looked around the café. There was an old couple next to us. They presumably had the shortest life expectancy, but they looked adorable and I couldn't possibly choose between them. There was a younger couple with their infant daughter—completely out of the question. The disgruntled barista was reading a newspaper while she waited for customers to berate. Who read newspapers anymore? That was precious. The only other guy was a solitary looking man sitting by himself in a corner, staring at his cup, probably nursing a hangover. Even he was beautiful. The world needs its solitary men too. I wasn't going to kill off my love interest, so there was only one option left. "Me," I said.

"Good answer, I was going to pick you too," she said, winking at me.

I played the victim, jerking backward like I had been shot in the heart, putting my hands over my mortal wound, and slumping down in my chair. Olivia got up and walked around the table, closed my eyelids, and delivered my benediction to the old couple next to us. "He was a necessary sacrifice," she said, solemnly.

I couldn't see the couple's reaction, but I heard the lady say,

“That’s nice, dear. Can we have one of your napkins?”

I smiled. Ever since I had read *Tom Sawyer* as a kid, I had been intrigued by the idea of witnessing my own funeral. *At my funeral, there had better be napkins.*

After snickering and giving the couple her own napkin, Olivia sat back down. “Last question,” she said as I rose from the dead. “Three minutes into the Purge, there is already someone outside your home wanting nothing more than to viciously murder you. Who are they, Johnny, and why did they seek you out first?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said, chuckling. “That’s a hilariously insightful question, though. Probably my cat, Magrarius X, and for absolutely no reason at all. He already lives with me, so he wouldn’t need to break in, but I can just imagine him out there wearing a little goalie mask waiting for me.”

“You’re sure there aren’t any ex-girlfriends who’d get to you first?”

I smirked. So *this* is what she was after. “No. At least I don’t think so.”

“You don’t sound very sure.”

“I’m fairly certain. I don’t imagine many of them would invite me to brunch, but murder, even decriminalized murder, seems a little overboard. I mean, the real world isn’t like one of your songs.”

“Ooh, ouch,” she said, wincing. “Keep it up, Johnny, and your cat will have to get in line.”

“Just remember to knock out my Internet connection first. So, who would come for *you*?”

“Probably Lizzie Chung,” she said. “I made her cry in the eleventh grade because she was making fun of one of my friends.”

“If ‘Who did I make cry in the eleventh grade?’ is one of your bank security questions, I’m totally going to steal your identity.”

Olivia laughed. “Oh? Are you unhappy with yours?”

“As insecure as my accounts are, nobody even seems to want to steal my identity. It’s depressing. I sometimes wonder if there isn’t a good Samaritan hacker out there who could steal my identity, improve upon it, and then give it right back to me. They could create some clever social media posts in my name, order me some clothes that add a touch of pizzazz to my wardrobe, and invest my money in the next Apple. Unfortunately, especially for my wardrobe, that isn’t typically how identity theft works.”

“That might make for a good story,” Olivia said as she began

typing.

“What are you writing now?” I asked.

“A scene where a boy and a girl go on a coffee date,” she replied, smiling with her eyes.

“Meta,” I said, finishing my coffee. “How does it end?”

This time, Olivia’s whole face smiled. “I don’t know yet, but it’s going surprisingly well considering how much of a dork the boy is. The girl is currently wondering what he does for a living.”

“The boy,” I explained, “doesn’t know how to answer that question. You see, he just quit his job yesterday and has yet to figure out his next steps.”

“Ahh,” Olivia said, nodding. “Now the girl is wondering what the boy wants out of a potential relationship. If he is expecting the girl to solve all of his existential questions and fill his life with meaning, she isn’t sure she can live up to the boy’s unrealistic expectations.”

I smiled this time. I realized I liked Olivia a whole, whole lot. “I don’t think the boy expects this of her. I think he wants to sleep with the girl, but will settle for another date and maybe, just maybe, a kiss.”

Olivia giggled, which was a great relief to me. “This boy certainly sounds honorable. The girl also wants to see the boy again.”

There was silence as I waited for her to continue. “And? The kiss?” she finally forced me to ask.

“I haven’t written the rest of the scene yet. We’ll just have to wait and see. Even as the author, I never know how these things will end until they’ve been drafted, proofread, revised, tested in front of a focus group, forgotten for three months, and finally converted into song.”

I moved my chair beside hers. “Can I help?” I asked.

Amused by my cheekiness, she nodded and handed me the laptop. What I saw stunned me.

“You’re writing your story in the cloud? What if you really do have the next Great American Novel and someone accessed your account and stole it?”

Olivia shrugged. “Then I guess I’d have the next Great North Korean Novel.”

“But I can’t read Korean,” I said. “That simply won’t do.” I copied the text from the Google Doc and pasted it into a local Word doc. “You’ll thank me later... well, unless your hard drive fails and you lose everything of course... Actually, on second thought, let’s keep a copy backed up online.”

“Okay,” Olivia said, “but we still need to come up with the scene’s resolution.”

“Oh, I just thought of a good ending. Give me a second.”

A few minutes later, I passed the laptop back over to Olivia for her inspection. She read it, nodded her approval, and closed the lid.

Then, in a perfectly adequate attempt at a Cockney accent, she delivered the first line exactly as I had written it. “Me dear boy, I’ve ‘ad a real Robin ‘Ood dime. I don’ knah ‘ah I’ve survived wifaht ya in me loife. Ya’re magical.”

“Oh, me golden dove,” I said. “We will see each o’her soon. Ya’re me moon an’ me stars. ‘ah abou’ a kiss?”

“Dat sounds loike a blinder oidea,” she said, as she leaned in and gave me a quick smooch.

“Blimey, Guvernaw!” I shouted. “And scene!” The old couple next to us began clapping. Olivia and I bowed, humbled by our audience’s love and admiration.

“That was pretty good. Do you ever write?” Olivia suddenly asked me.

“Oh, I’m only good for a one-line stand,” I said as I gave her a protracted wink. It looked like I was overdramatizing it, but I was actually just really bad at winking.

Olivia giggled. “Clever, sir. But clever wordplay won’t be enough to seduce me.”

“Then I’ll have to mix in some clever foreplay,” I said.

Olivia groaned. “Keep your pen sheathed, cowboy,” she said, before kissing me on the cheek and whispering “Call me” into my ear.

“You’re leaving already?” I asked.

“If I stayed, could you promise me you wouldn’t say anything stupid enough in the next few minutes to ruin this memory forever?” she asked.

I gave the question some honest reflection. “No,” I finally admitted. “I could not promise that.”

“That’s what I thought,” she said, blowing me a kiss and walking away, probably to go buy a milkshake.

I watched her walk out before suddenly devolving into a state of panic as I realized I hadn’t actually gotten her number. But at that moment, the old man at the nearby table walked over and placed a lightly-used napkin down in front of me. On it was a phone number perfectly encircled by a coffee stain ring. “Your friend gave us this

napkin earlier in a moment of kindness, but I think it was really meant for you,” he said with a wry smile.

I gave the air a quick fist bump. The old man nodded knowingly and walked back over to his table, leaned over, and kissed his little old wife. *This is the best of all possible worlds*, I thought, trying not to freak out at how uncharacteristically well my rom-com-feeling date had gone.

Of course, I wasn’t yet familiar with any other worlds, so my declaration was completely meaningless at the time. What was meaningful was that it simultaneously felt like time had stopped and that time was accelerating. I’d always been aware of the concept of time, I mean my alarm clock couldn’t seem to shut up about it, but I was only just beginning to really experience it.

The day I was born, everything changed. Practically nothing in the entire Universe was left untouched after that day. This had little to do with my own birth, however, and only slightly more to do with the birth of Lu Han, a Chinese singer and member of the South Korean-Chinese boy group Exo. The only measurable way in which my mother's C-section affected anything of scale that day was that my mother weighed measurably less on the scale at the end of that day.

The reason everything changed the day Lu Han and I were born wasn't because we were born but because everything was always constantly changing. One could never really know what events were being set into motion at any given moment. For example, twenty-five years ago I had no idea that twenty-five years later I would meet Olivia, otherwise I probably wouldn't have made such a fuss about entering the world. I'd have slid out head first like Rickey Henderson instead of wedging myself diagonally or going ass-backwards or whatever apparent act of defiance I had committed.

I wondered sometimes how different the me of April 19 or the me of April 21 might have been from the me of April 20. Perhaps April 19 Johnny would have been more confident and would be hanging out with Olivia right now. On the flipside, perhaps April 21 Johnny would have been less confident and wouldn't have had the courage to go on a date at all. And what if my mom hadn't had a C-section at all, but rather a forceps-assisted delivery? There was no telling what effects that might have had, least of all with the shape of my head.

What I was sure of, however, was that the day I went on my first date with Olivia, everything changed. Practically nothing in the entire Universe, or at least my entire Universe, was left untouched after that

day.

One thing that did remain unchanged, however, was Magrarius X's attitude. When I returned home from my date, I was in such high spirits that I made the mistake of telling Magrarius that I hoped he had been having a good time while I was gone.

"Oh, just peachy," he seemed to say as he jumped off his favorite chair and left the living room. Somehow, despite being incapable of speaking, Magrarius X has mastered the art of sarcasm. It should be noted that Magrarius X and Jerry Seinfeld had never been seen in the same room.

You may wonder why I put up with Magrarius despite him being an asshole. Besides my low self-esteem, he was also quite handsome, an absolute stud. I was neither gay nor inclined toward committing acts of bestiality (not by choice but by birth, of course), but that cat was a handsome motherfucker.

He had been a very cute kitten, and quite playful, but his transition into adult cathood had been jolting. Unlike the tiny version, you didn't play with adult Magrarius X. Rather, he played with you—manipulating your emotions and waiting until you were at your most vulnerable to strike.

So, in summary, he was still handsome, but no longer wholesome. He was buttholesome.

It occurs to me now that there is one other fact about me that I've egregiously failed to mention that might make my story make more sense—I was the runner-up of my 5th grade spelling bee back in 2001. This sounds impressive until you learn I was in a class of only fifteen and I was eliminated on the word 'courageous.' In spelling bees, 'if you're not first, you're lassed,' as the saying went, and I had been haunted ever since.

Being alive and experiencing feelings was a rough gig sometimes, and I certainly had my share of mental health issues. Perhaps that is why I did not call Olivia right away, despite wanting to desperately.

Or perhaps it was because social conventions, or at least my perception of them, had taught me that it was very important that I exude a calculated air of nonchalance by refraining from communicating with her for the rest of the day. Of course, not only was this nonchalance a giant sham, but it drove me absolutely crazy in the process.

But I was nothing if not a product of my perceptions, so I did what any self-respecting 21st-century suitor would do and looked

Olivia up online instead. Being an entertainer, she wasn't very difficult to find. Olivia seemed to possess that perfect combination of talent and shameless self-promotion one needed to make it in today's music industry.

Upon visiting her Facebook wall, I was startled to discover a picture that actually included me in it. I was sitting next to Duncan and Chet with my mouth open and eyes glazed over. I had clearly been so focused on Olivia that I hadn't noticed someone taking photos of the audience.

"I enjoyed playing for each and every one of ya'll at the KBC last night!" the caption read. "Thank you to those who introduced themselves after the show. I hope to see you again soon!"

It had been posted only 30 minutes prior, so Olivia would have definitely seen how dumb I looked and posted it anyway. That was probably a good sign, but I still felt embarrassed. *And was that last part directed at me?*

I was tempted to hit the "Like" button, but didn't for two important yet ridiculous reasons. First, "Like" didn't feel appropriate. I "Liked" that Olivia was probably thinking about me, but I didn't "Like" the photo itself. I needed a more nuanced option. Second, and more importantly, Olivia would receive a notification that more or less said, "Johnny is currently stalking you online." I didn't want her to think I was a stalker, or, I suppose, to have it confirmed.

The more photos I scrolled through on her profile, however, the weirder I began to feel. It really wasn't strange for me to be looking at her profile. I mean, that's why people had profiles. But I had *made* it strange by continuing to think about it, so I decided to close my browser and play some music instead. I didn't want to experience Olivia through other peoples' experiences anyway. Instead, I needed to think about how I was going to continue manufacturing fresh experiences of my own.

Why do I have to think of it in terms of "manufacturing"? Ugh, why can't I just be a normal person?

Because God had a sense of humor (the full extent to which I wouldn't learn for another hour or so), "Call Me Maybe" by Carly Rae Jepsen started playing. I mean, of course it did. *Is there a direct neural link between my anxiety and my iTunes?*

My thoughts were beginning to collapse upon themselves. The problem was that Olivia seemed like the coolest person I had ever met, and I was the most over-thinking person I knew. I seriously

needed to tell my brain to go fuck off, so I did... or I tried.

You fucking asshole, piss off!

Feeling more relaxed, I was about to text Olivia that I had successfully told my brain to fuck off, when I reminded myself that I couldn't text her yet, thus undoing all of the therapeutic progress that telling my brain to fuck off had achieved. Having been inadvertently welcomed back, my brain returned to its preferred task of overanalyzing dating rituals.

I wasn't really sure why there existed a social commandment that said, "Thou shalt not show too much eagerness early on, lest they thinkst thee a freak," but it could fuck off too as far as I was concerned.

On the other hand, if I didn't talk to her for the rest of the day, I couldn't possibly say anything stupid enough to ruin our first date. This might be a very sensitive time, a test period during which I needed to not do or say anything I was extremely likely to do or say.

Thus, I resolved not to text Olivia that day. To make sure I wasn't unnecessarily tempted, I opened up my sock drawer and hid my phone at the bottom. It was there that my fingers came in contact with what could only be described as manifested destiny.

When my fingers touched the unmarked bottle of *Ahnunggokwan* I had previously hidden there, everything changed. Practically nothing in the entire Universe was left untouched after that moment.

Olivia had been instantly replaced in my mind by the feeling of having come in contact with Ultimate Knowledge. New pathways appeared in my mind, ancient cobwebs disappeared, and previously locked chambers were opened... and I had merely touched the bottle. I knew then how Ken Jennings must have felt after 74 straight wins on *Jeopardy!*, or the first person to ever make popcorn.

It felt good, but it also left me hungry to experience that Ultimate Knowledge for myself. I didn't want to only pop the popcorn, I wanted to eat the whole damn butter-blasted bag.

There was no longer a question of whether or not I was going to experiment with *Ahnunggokwan*; the question was how many pills to take. My desire for Answers and Power screamed at me to take all six, but a little bit of reason still remained, and it whispered to me, "Only take one." So I did, washing it down with a sip of water.

And... well... nothing really happened at first. I didn't feel any wiser or less curious. For the initial half hour, it was really a bit of a

letdown. *Do I have a built-up tolerance to its effects?* I really couldn't imagine how. Sure, I had done Sporcle quizzes at work all the time, and I was practically the Orville Redenbacher of useless information, but the Overwhelming Truth I had felt was staggering.

Perhaps I really was already operating at an *Ahnunggokwan*-level of knowledge. I mean, I had always (incorrectly) felt smarter than most of my friends. Did that explain why I was so good at fantasy football?¹²

In reality, as with my budding relationship with Olivia, I just hadn't given it enough time. I began to suspect this soon after I entered the kitchen to see what snack options were available.

I opened up the fridge and discovered that it hadn't magically restocked itself in my absence. Most of the shelves were bare other than Chinese leftovers, condiment bottles, more emergency fast food condiment packets, some seltzer, two eggs, and an unopened carton of orange juice I didn't remember the origins of. A closer look, however, uncovered an old package of bologna that had been hiding in the back behind the orange juice. *How long has that been there?*

I shrugged for nobody in particular and placed it on the counter. I was just about to take out a slice of bologna when I heard someone whisper, "Johnny."

The whisper startled me so much I inadvertently performed a spinning jump into the counter like I was Mario trying to bounce off a Piranha Plant. *Who the fuck just said that!?*

My heart rate increased, pumping more blood to my muscles and brain. My lungs started taking in air faster to supply my body with oxygen. My digestive and urinary systems slowed down, so I could concentrate, and my pupils became larger in order to better see the empty room around me. But what they saw was nothing, at least nothing out of the ordinary. I was, as far as I could tell, utterly alone.

Despite there not being a hitman or a witch behind me, I couldn't shake the fear I had felt. The whisper had seemed so real, and, try as I might, I couldn't explain it away or pinpoint its source. Magrarius X wasn't at my feet trying to trip me, my TV was turned off, my laptop was in the other room faintly playing music, and my phone was stashed away in my sock drawer.

"Johnny," whispered the voice again, this time from right freaking behind me. I performed another spinning jump, which I can only imagine looked ridiculous.

¹² Eh, I was okay.

* * *

“Yes?” I whispered in a trembled voice a moment after landing, still unable to identify my harasser, “...This is he. I mean, I am me. Who... or what... and most importantly where... *are* you?”

“It’s the bologna. We need to talk.”

If I had to guess the precise moment when I began to suspect the drug was affecting me, this would be it. I looked through my drawers and cabinets to make sure no one was hiding under the sink or broadcasting through a hidden speaker. I expected Ashton Kutcher to pop out at any moment and inform me that I was being pranked on live TV. Other than a chopstick I had previously lost, however, I didn’t find anything at all, and I found that more deeply disturbing than if I *had* found something. As the movie *Alien* had taught me, the scariest moments are when you *can’t* see the monster but you know they’re around.

I made that face that little kids make when they’re pretty certain that someone is pulling their chain, but they aren’t entirely positive and are still willing to believe in things like Santa Claus, iron maidens, and peace in the Middle East because they’re just dumb little kids. Putting my mouth real close to the deli meat, I whispered something that would have been inaudible to anyone or anything else in the room.

“Well, *of course* Sean Connery was the best Bond!” came the response. “Everyone else is merely the Coke Zero to his Coca-Cola Classic taste.”

It... it *was* the bologna!

“The power of Christ compels you!” I wailed as I quickly tried splashing some water from the sink onto the deli meat with my hand.

“Are you trying to perform an exorcism with tap water?” asked the bologna, dripping with disbelief.

“Stop talking!” I yelled.

“Stop yelling,” it replied calmly.

Something about the warm textures of the bologna’s voice rubbed off on me and allowed my brain to catch up to the rest of my faculties, other than my digestive and urinary systems, of course, which had now slowed so much they were practically operating in reverse. “I’m only yelling because you caught me unprepared,” I said, my voice cracking. “I know you can’t possibly exist, but you still seem so real. Oh God, now I’m explaining myself to you!”

“Are you doubting my existence because certainly no God in

their right mind would have created me? Or are you doubting the existence of God for the very same reason?"

"This is so strange I'm doubting my own existence. I mean, I guess you, God, and myself don't necessarily need to be mutually exclusive," I said, still whimpering slightly. "But I'm sure there's a rational scientific explanation for this."

"Like an undigested bit of beef or an underdone potato?" asked the bologna, mockingly. "I am not a spirit visiting you on Christmas Eve, Johnny."

"If not a spirit, then what?" I asked, fairly certain I didn't want to hear the answer.

"What if I were to tell you I was not God's creation, but God Himself?" asked the lunchmeat, quite uncharacteristically.

"God?" I repeated. "God!?" I repeated again, angrily this time. "You're a piece of bologna claiming to be God Almighty?"

"Yes," came the curt response.

"No way," I said.

"Yahweh."

I cocked one eyebrow. *The Ahnunggokwan is distorting reality*, I thought.

"The *Ahnunggokwan* is merely revealing reality," the Bologna said.

How in the hell did it respond to my thoughts?

"Because I'm all-knowing," came the answer to the question I hadn't asked aloud. "For instance, did you know that Americans eat eight-hundred million pounds of bologna annually?"

"No, I didn't," I said. "But if you're all-knowing, then what am I thinking right now?"

"That you're never buying bologna again."

I cocked my other eyebrow. "But you're man-made..." I said, weakly. "You're just trimmings and organs and other mechanically separated afterthoughts. You can't be God. Man *made* you."

"Oh," replied the Bologna, "so now *you're* claiming to be God!"

"But how could a piece of bologna create the world of man?"

"You think the world was created for *you*?" asked the Bologna, full of modified corn starch and contempt. It had no facial features of any kind, so listening to the tone was critical.

"Well," I replied, "it seems particularly well-suited for me."

The Bologna mouthlessly laughed as It gleamed in the artificial

light. “That would be like Me saying ‘Oh, this fridge fits Me so well, it must have been made for Me.’”

“But it was! Maybe not for you specifically, but for meatkind in general. Also, I’m fucking crazy, just thought you should know. This can’t possibly be happening.”

“Why not?”

“Because... it just can’t. Bologna can’t speak let alone call down plagues. You aren’t even a particularly good choice of deli meat. You make good sandwiches, but only, like, once a month at most. That’s why I forgot I even had you. If my bologna has a first name, it’s not D-E-I-T-Y.”

The Bologna groaned. “This is why I hate introducing Myself to primitive beings as ‘God’. They always have particular preconceptions of who or what I am. Who are you to say My physical manifestation before you now is baloney? Where do your delusions of God come from? Have you ever met Me before?”

“I don’t know. My upbringing, my environment, The Bible, nutritional facts labels, television programming, all of the above?”

“And why wouldn’t this be My natural form? The Bible says I created man in My own image, after all,” the Bologna said about as cheekily as something resembling a large, flat cheek could.

“I don’t think that’s what the Bible meant,” I replied.

“And who wrote the Bible? Who published it? How do you know that it contains the truth?”

“To be fair,” I said, momentarily finding my argumentative footing, “Oscar Meyer isn’t really a credible source regarding spirituality either.”

The Bologna sighed. “You don’t really still think I’m a piece of bologna, do you?”

The comment startled me, not because God was revealing He wasn’t a thinly cut piece of meat, but because I hadn’t yet realized that I had accepted that as a possibility. “If You’re not, then why reveal Yourself as such?”

“Truthfully, as a joke to amuse Myself.”

“And why did You choose to speak with me?”

“For similar reasons, I suppose.”

I chose to ignore that snide comment and instead leaned against the wall for support as I tried to digest this information. This, coincidentally, was the first time a piece of bologna had ever elicited this type of response. For His part, God appeared calm, despite the

numerous flies He was beginning to attract.

I shoed His dipteran worshipers away. "Have you no shame!?" I yelled at them.

"They do not," God confirmed.

"I should say," I said, turning my attention back to the Bologna, "God being the fucking Bologna-in-the-Sky does confirm my fear that the Universe is being controlled by an entirely apathetic being."

"Now who's calling who a pathetic bean?" asked the rather salty sounding Scary Slice.

"That's not...!" I began to shout before realizing He knew perfectly well that's not what I had said. "Stop fucking with me!"

"Oh, please. Stop being so dramatic!" chided the Bologna. "Also, where does this idea that I reside in the sky come from? I'm both on your counter and also very much in your head."

"That's another thing I don't understand," I said, becoming a bit exasperated with Him. "Why are You bothering Yourself with me at all?"

"You know what they say, 'One bologna on the ground is worth two in the sky. There's much work to be done, and no time to ask 'Why?'"

I threw my hands up in the air. "No one has ever said that!"

"How can you possibly make that claim after I just said it? I seriously *just* said it."

"God, You're insufferable! You know what I meant!"

"Aha! So you *do* accept I'm both God and all-knowing. Now we're getting somewhere. So, Johnny, going back to your fear of the Universe being run apathetically, how does that make you feel?"

"Are You moonlighting as a therapist now?" I asked, the attitude dripping off the words as I said them.

"Does your therapist also claim to be God?" He inquired, moistly. "Consider it field research."

"Oh, are You writing a Master's thesis?"

"Just answer the damn question, Johnny."

"If you must know," I said, taking my time, "I feel kind of empty."

"And you thought you would resort to food to fill your emptiness?"

"Well, I am hungry, but it wasn't until I met You that I felt empty. Shouldn't You already know this?"

"Yes, but I need your acknowledgement. Do you think this

emptiness you feel inside is your stomach craving food or your soul craving Me?”

As soon as He finished His question, my stomach rumbled as if right on cue. “I guess I am pretty hungry,” I said.

“So, you plan on eating Me?” God asked.

“What? No! I’d never...” I protested, as my stomach let out another protest of its own, “but I really *am* hungry.”

“So hungry you’d consume God? Have you no shame?!”

“This isn’t communion; of course I wouldn’t eat You!” I said, not even convincing myself. Meanwhile, my stomach was reaching its crescendo. “It should be stated for the record, however, that You really should have known better than to take on a food-based form in my sparsely stocked kitchen.”

I was suddenly struck by a mouth-watering thought. “And why bologna and not, say, a slice of pizza?”

“Are you trying to place an order?” He asked.

“Listen, this isn’t my fault,” I protested. “When I took the bologna out of the fridge, I didn’t know You were in there.”

“I look at you and I think the same thing,” chided God. “If you eat Me now, then you’re worse than a common fly,” the Bologna said, rather sternly. “Remember that.”

Enough. I no longer felt in control of my life as I picked up the slice of bologna with trembling hands. Some greater force was working through me. I cautiously took a nibble. It tasted absolutely divine.

The nibbles became bites, and the bites became mouthfuls. The vaguely animal-based fattiness of the meat mixed with the saltiness of the tears that were streaming down my face.

At some tragic point I looked down and discovered that all of God was gone. I slumped to the floor, feeling emptier than before. The only noise was the soft sound of music playing from my bedroom occasionally broken up by my own blubbling.

I’m not sure how long I sat like that, or how many times the song “(What if God Was) One of Us” played faintly in the background, but at some point I looked around and found my cat, Magrarius X, staring at me from underneath the living room table. The look on his face was the most remarkable display of contempt I had ever seen, even from him.

“Whatever, cat,” I said, trying to hide my shame. “You’re only mad I ate God before you had the chance.”

Magrarius X growled and then slunk off to the bedroom, leaving me truly alone. I soon determined that whether or not I had actually just eaten God didn't matter. This wasn't to make myself feel better, but instead the beginning of a more sobering realization.

Nietzsche had been right—God was dead.

6

While my interaction with God was over, I wasn't out of the woods yet, at least not in my drug-induced dreams.

I found myself standing on the end of a hard-packed trail of snow somewhere in a wooded forest. Wherever I was, it was winter and bitterly cold. I was very inappropriately dressed for this climate, having just been transported out of bed in my athletic shorts. In front of me, however, was a wooden shack with a chimney from which steam was billowing. It was an easy decision to enter, really.

While it's customary to knock first, I was desperate, so I tried barging my way in. The shack was locked from the inside, however.

Of course, I thought, this is a sauna... and someone's already inside.

My bare feet were cold enough to have lost feeling, and the air, which I judged to be around zero degrees Fahrenheit, was beginning to chill my bones. I was more worried about frostbite than hypothermia at the moment, however.

I knocked on the door and heard some muffled voices within. I waited a moment to see if the door would open before knocking again.

The door opened. There, standing before me, appeared a strangely-familiar looking older gentleman, butt ass naked, not making any effort to cover himself.

"*Hei*," he said to me, surprised to find someone standing outside who was only *nearly* butt ass naked.

"Hey," I replied, shivering.

He studied my shivering husk, pausing a moment on my strange looking shorts, before coming to the realization that I must be very

cold. He opened the door wider and beckoned me to hurry in so we could stop letting the precious heat out. "*Tervetuloa*," he said.

Welcome, I thought, recognizing the word from my childhood. *He speaks Finnish.*

I found myself in a little 6' x 5' entry area where there were two towels, two pairs of boots, two tan snowsuits, two knitted caps, four gloves, and two pairs of long johns. While the entry area wasn't very warm, especially with some cold having just been let in, my feet were relieved to be standing on wood rather than snow, or they would be once they thawed a little.

The old man hooked the door closed and then stood patiently by the inner door, waiting for me to take off my shorts, which I did with only a mild amount of apprehension. *When in Helsinki*, I thought.

I wasn't in Helsinki, however, a fact I was soon to learn. I was somewhere just outside of Hell... Hell, Michigan, that is.

When we were both butt ass naked, the old man melodically rapped his knuckles on the inner sauna door like it was a speakeasy. I heard someone inside yell "Ope" in response and then unhook the other side. The old gentleman then raised his eyebrows at me and tilted his head sideways, indicating that I should go first.

I opened the door quickly and felt a welcome wave of heat on my face. There was a wood stove on the right with a metal basket of hot stones on top and an exhaust pipe leading up through the roof. On my left was a two-tiered bench, just wide enough for three people to sit if they didn't mind being close. There was a butt-shaped sweat stain on the left side of the upper-bench where the old man must have been sitting, and there was another, younger man on the right side. In between was a copper bucket and a ladle for pouring water on to the sauna rocks, which the younger man kindly picked up so I could sit down.

I climbed onto the top bench, followed closely by the old man. The younger man then poured a ladleful of water onto the rocks, which released a punishing wave of steam that crashed against the ceiling and then tumbled onto our faces, causing us all to close our eyes tightly.

"Holy *makkara*," the older man muttered.

"Holy *makkara*," repeated the younger man.

I abruptly opened my eyes and turned to look at the younger man. I studied his wincing face in disbelief and felt water begin to pool up in my eyes. This phenomena wasn't being caused by the

steam or by sweat. They were just honest to goodness tears triggered by seeing the sweaty, naked, 30-year-old version of my late father, whose voice I could recognize anywhere. I turned toward the older man. *Which would make you the sweaty, naked, 70-year-old version of my late grandfather.*

My grandfather opened his eyes and turned to me. “Einard,” he said, extending his hand toward mine.

“Johnny,” I replied, shaking his hand.

“Charles,” my dad said on my left side.

“Hullo,” I said, afraid I may start sobbing if I said anything more.

Both men must have noticed the emotion on my face, but they pretended not to. It wasn’t customary for Yooper men to acknowledge emotions, and anyway they probably thought I was just delirious from being outside in the cold for so long.

“*Kuka tämä on?*” Charles asked, looking past me at his father.

Einard shrugged. “*Minä en tiedä,*” he said.

“How did you get here, Johnny?” my father then asked me.

“I... I ate some bad bologna,” I said.

“Holy *makkara*,” came the response, as he pointed at the corner of the sauna to the right of the stove. There was some *makkara*, or sauna sausage, hanging from the ceiling, cooking in the steam.

Worried the *makkara* might actually be God about to scold me again, I averted my eyes. Sensing my uneasiness regarding the hanging meat, which he assumed was being caused by lingering food poisoning, my father reached down and picked up a plastic jug with a burnt orange looking liquid in it. He unscrewed the cap, took a big swig, and passed it to me.

I took a sniff of the drink and let the sweet, fermented notes fill my nostrils. I meant to only take a small sip of the pleasant-smelling concoction, but I ended up tipping the jug a little too far, overfilling my mouth and causing some liquid to run down my chin. It was homemade Finnish mead, known as *sima*, which Charles and Einard had made using honey and, if my taste buds were correct, a little bit of rhubarb.

“Holy *makkara*, that’s good,” I said, passing the jug to my grandfather.

Once my grandfather had taken his fill, my dad screwed the cap back on and placed the jug back down on the lower bench before ladling another splash of water onto the stones. This second wave of steam did the trick, causing sweat to start dripping from hundreds of

thousands of pores on my body simultaneously, including nearly all 20,000 pores on my face.

Along with the sweat came a feeling of deep euphoria, and not just because I liked taking saunas. My father, who I missed dearly, had passed away of lymphoma four years earlier, and I had never met any of my grandparents. Taking a sauna with my dad and granddad with some homemade mead and some sizzling, non-verbal sausages was my deepest desire come to life, so much so that I didn't want to question it too much. I knew we were probably at my grandfather's hunting camp, which was located somewhere in the vicinity of Hell, Michigan, but I didn't dare ask myself *how* we were all there.

My dad and I had tried to find the location of the camp at some point in the early-to-mid 2000s, but he hadn't had any luck. Now that we were finally there, I didn't want to leave.

"Where are you from?" my father suddenly asked.

"You," I wanted to say, but didn't. I wouldn't be born for another 20+ years if my estimates were correct. Charles wouldn't have me until he was 52 years old, and the idea of having a kid that late might scare him more than declaring myself a time traveler.

"Canada," I said instead. They both murmured their understanding. Only a Canadian would get lost in the woods wearing nothing but a pair of shiny shorts.

"While I'm here," I told them, "I just want to say *kiitos* to you both. You don't know how much this means to me."

At the word "*kiitos*," my dad's ears perked up, unaware that he had been the one who taught me how to say "thank you" in Finnish.

"*Ole hyvä*," Einard said. "You're welcome."

"Just, maybe wear more clothes in the future," my father said. "Hell is cold this time of year."

I nodded. *I guess showing up in Hell in only a pair of shorts in wintertime is my punishment for eating God*, I thought, acknowledging the ongoing battle in the back of my head between wakefulness and the dream world.

As a third wave of steam from the rocks hit me, my head started to spin and my skin started to feel clammy. I tried to grab onto the bench to steady myself, but accidentally grabbed my dad's knee instead. Then my vision went dark and I fell forward off the bench.

My muscles contracted and I kicked out violently in a rush of adrenaline, the hypnic jerk waking me up from my falling dream. I

was back in 2015 lying in a pool of sweat in my own bed. *Holy makkara*, I thought. I had just missed punting Magrarius X off the bed, but he must have woken up anyway because I felt his piercing gaze on me trying to tear my face a new asshole.

“Sorry, bud,” I told him.

I feared that by being unable to choose my own path two days prior in the Mooseport parking lot, the Universe had been forced to come up with its own cockamamie narrative for me. It was like an AI had been fed every work of literature in order to write my story line but had only had time to read through the absurdists. I was worried my life would end like a Kafka character but with the complete lack of meaning characteristic of Daniil Kharms.

One of Kharms’s particularly interesting short stories involved two men arguing about how long one of them had been waiting for the other to return from the grocery store, only to end with the second man beating the first to death with a cucumber. According to the story’s last line, however, the reader shouldn’t be amazed by the violence of the two men, but rather by the size of the produce one could now purchase from their local grocery store.

Waking up was kind of like that. I wasn’t amazed that I had encountered God, or that he had taken on the form of a highly-processed meat slice, or that I had eaten him, or that I had seen my father and grandfather. Rather, I was most amazed by the potency of the drugs one could now purchase from their local parking garage.

Kharms, I reflected, had died of starvation while imprisoned in a psychiatric ward during the siege of Leningrad, but I wasn’t too worried about sharing a similar fate. I did, however, figure I should restock my fridge.

Olivia, I suddenly thought for the first time since I had touched the pill bottle. I jumped out of bed and grabbed my phone from my dresser drawer.

“Olivia, this is Johnny! What’s up?” I texted her.

Life had repeatedly taught me that if I had a sneaking suspicion that something I was doing was stupid, it assuredly was, and such had been the nature of my decision not to reach out to Olivia the day prior. I didn’t have to wait long to have that confirmed.

“What’s up?” her response read. “The stars I wanted to gaze at with you from the bed of my truck last night were up. Guess you missed your chance.”

I sat down at my desk and laid my head down, gently smooshing

the right side of my face on its cold, unyielding, unsympathetic surface. My defeated posture was that of someone aware that they had been presented with an elevator to heaven, but had accidentally pushed the down arrow instead.

I woke up from my dream only to find myself back in Hell, I mused.

The implications of lying in the back of a truck with Olivia were just dying to be explored, but I was feeling less like Neil Armstrong at the moment and more like Lance Armstrong's missing testicle—terribly sick and alone.

I was sick from the bologna, sick from the *Ahnunggokwan*, and, most fervently, sick of my own disappointing existence.

Besides Olivia, there was still that whole mess with God to try to reconcile. Outside of an empty package of bologna in my trash, there was no proof that I had snacked on anything sacrosanct last night. Still, the memory of the encounter on my counter seemed as vivid as my date with Olivia, and the text message on my phone was proof that *that*, at least, had happened.

Instead of apologizing to Olivia via text, I realized I should call her. If there was to be any deep-sea salvaging of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* that was my love life, that would be step one. I picked up my phone and touched the call button next to her name.

It rang once! She did not answer. It rang twice! She did not answer. It rang thrice! Thrice it rang, and thrice Olivia did not answer.

"I'm sorry," a totally unapologetic sounding robotic female recording said. "The recipient's mailbox is full and cannot accept any calls at this time. Goodbye."

"Peaches!" I shouted back at my pulseless prevaricator. As for why I shouted "peaches" instead of something with a bit more punch that made a bit more sense, like "electronic succubus" or "digital demoness," I wasn't quite sure. But the problem wasn't that shouting "Peaches!" was nonsense, but rather that I still believed trying to behave sensibly was a solid foundation for how to act. My reason was unreasonable, my reality verged on unreality, and my beliefs were no longer believable. In a word, I was becoming silly.

If my reason didn't trust that God had appeared before me last night, and I didn't trust my reason, did that mean I could trust that God actually had appeared before me last night, or just that I couldn't rule it out? My brain tried to wrap itself around that puzzle before it finally muttered "Peaches!" and mercifully moved on to something

new.

The “something new” was a calendar reminder on my phone alerting me that it was Sarah’s birthday. Sarah was Duncan’s ten-or-eleven-year-old sister and one of my absolute favorite humans. Realizing I was supposed to meet them both for ice cream in ten minutes, I pushed through my gut rot and got myself ready, starting by yanking on the all-important pants.

Ice cream wouldn’t be an ideal first meal of the day, but Sarah had been clear she would only accept ice cream for lunch. I had mostly stopped trying to argue with Sarah around the time she turned six. There was no point; she was the DJ Khaled of grade-schoolers—all she did was win.¹³

I sent Olivia a quick “I’m sorry, I’ll try calling again later” text before heading into the bathroom and sloshing some water on my face like it was a pile of sauna stones. Disheveled and wet, I left my apartment and jumped into my hatchback to begin my drive. Luckily, my destination was only about a song’s length away, and, much to my piercing falsetto’s delight, the song playing on the radio at that moment was Adele’s “Someone Like You.”

A fact little known in America was that Adele was an esteemed member in good standing of “The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire,” an order for chivalry originally established by King George V but whose name suggested it was a William S. Preston Esq. and Ted “Theodore” Logan fan group. The only reason I knew this was because Rowan Atkinson, aka Mr. Bean, had been similarly recognized as a “Commander of the Order of the British Empire.” The British Empire wasn’t dead after all, it was just being overseen by an English comedian with a tweed jacket and a tiny red tie.

Duncan and Sarah were waiting for me when I arrived at the ice cream shop, which was actually more of an ice cream window. The structure was that of an old streetcar station that had been in operation until 1932. The streetcar had been reopened in the early 2000s, partially to provide summer jobs for local teenagers, but also because it probably needed a good airing out after being closed for 68 years. “The Streetcar Station” served about twenty varieties of ice cream, as well as “organic” bison meat—as opposed to the inorganic variety that all those other ice cream windows must have been selling.

¹³ A statistical oddity, every passing day exactly 10,000 fewer people in the world understand this reference.

* * *

"Hi, Johnny!" Sarah yelled as I stepped out of my car.

"Happy birthday!" I shouted back.

"My birthday was yesterday!" she said. "You're a day late."

Whoops. "No, I'm not," I said, "You were just born a day early."

"And I hope I die a day late!" she said with a smile as she gave me a big hug. She said weird, morbidly cute stuff like that sometimes.

Duncan and I then performed the classic greeting that all men instinctively know where we clasped our right hands and then pulled each other in for a quick double-pat on the back with our lefts. As we pulled apart I noticed a cat with laser beams coming out of its eyes on his shirt. *Nice.*

"Sup, duder," I said.

"Yo," he replied.

"Ice cream time," Sarah said, grabbing us each by the hand and dragging us over to the Streetcar Station's window. I ordered a single scoop of Mint Mackinac Island Fudge in a waffle cone, Sarah had a double scoop of birthday cake and pistachio nut in a cup, and Duncan ordered a ladleful of organic bison meat, politely asking them to hold the sprinkles.

Once we all had our orders, we sat down at a nearby picnic table. Between licks of my lunch, I asked Sarah and Duncan what movie they had watched that morning. Waking up early to watch a film was another part of Sarah's birthday tradition.

"*The Hunger Games*," Duncan said.

"It's about hungry kids killing other hungry kids," Sarah added.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It was okay. I'm glad we have food," she said before savagely attacking her ice cream.

"Thankfully, even poor people can afford to be fat in America," Duncan said.

"God bless," I said.

"God bless," he repeated.

"When I get older, I want to be fat," Sarah said, puffing out her flat stomach and rubbing it.

"No, you don't," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because you might die a day early instead of a day late," I said.

"I suppose," she said, "but life is too short not to eat stuff you

like. We'll all become hungry ghosts either way."

"Good Lord," I groaned. "You're only ten years old. How are you thinking about death already?"

"Death doesn't care how old you are. I scream, you scream, we all scream... for death," she said, whispering the last part before calmly licking the last of her lunch from the bottom of the dish. That poor ice cream hadn't stood a chance.

"...Duncan, dude, you need to be careful what movies you watch with Sarah," I said. "How old are you now, Sarah, sixteen?"

"Eleven!" corrected Sarah.

"Eleven?" I stammered. "Eleven!? Duncan, she should be watching SpongeBob!"

"I know, I know," replied Duncan, painfully. "But you know how she is when she wants something."

"I NEEEEEEEEED IT!" Sarah cried with her fists clenched, impersonating SpongeBob suffering from a lack of water.

"Yeah, she gets kinda like that," Duncan said.

"Hey, I had a dream last night that I was an old lady, and a huge rhinoceros gored me and killed me," Sarah said cheerfully.

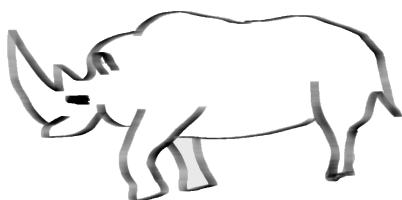
You think that's weird, I thought, choosing to keep my own strange dream to myself.

"That's not a very realistic dream, Sarah," Duncan said. "There's no way rhinos¹⁴ will still exist by the time you're an old lady."

I punched him in the shoulder. "Funny, but still morbid."

"Oh, lighten up, Johnny!" Sarah said, smiling. She was watching me finish my waffle cone when her eyes suddenly opened wide and she sat up straight. "Duncan! Why do you only put your fortunes inside of fortune cookies?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Duncan.



¹⁴ This rough sketch of a rhinoceros has been included on behest of the author on the off chance that the rhinoceros has become extinct by the time of publication.

* * *

"Why not put them on ice cream cone wrappers, or in macaroni boxes, or underneath yogurt lids?"

"I... I don't know," he replied. "I guess I had never given it much thought before, but that's a pretty good idea, Sarah."

Sarah beamed. "I know because I thought of it!"

"You do seem to be limiting your earning potential," I said.

"Don't worry about the extra work," Sarah said. "I'll help you write them!"

"Now, Sarah, don't just give away your talents for free," I advised her. "Know your worth."

Sarah's eyes lit up. "Good idea, Johnny! I'll help you for a 30% cut," she said, turning toward Duncan.

"20," he responded.

"30," she repeated.

"That's not how you haggle," he said. "We're supposed to meet in the middle."

"Okay, then I'll do it for 40."

"But that's higher than 30!" Duncan stammered.

"Yes, but 30 is in between 20 and 40, and that's what I'm worth," she said, boldly defiant.

"Atta girl!" I cheered.

"Fine," Duncan said, realizing he had been outmaneuvered by his eleven-year-old sister. Come to think of it, I probably should have given *him* the "know your worth" chat.

"Hey, I think I have a pen in my car," I said. "Do you want to write some fortunes now?"

"Ooh! Yes!" exclaimed the little entrepreneur. "Yes, please! I can write on these napkins!"

I ran over to my Corolla and searched the glovebox for a pen; there was no pen. I searched the trunk for a pen; there was no pen. I searched the cracks of my car seats for a pen; there were two yellow spice drops and one green spice drop, but no pen. As I slowly walked back to the picnic table, I suddenly had an idea. I walked back up to the Streetcar Station window.

"Hey," I said. "Can I get a single scoop of chocolate in a dish with a couple of toothpicks please?"

Confused, the girl asked me if I wanted a spoon.

"Nope!" I said, taking mild delight in being weird in public.

I then delivered the dish and the toothpicks to Sarah. "I couldn't find a pen, m'lady, but I took the liberty of procuring this quill and ink set for you."

"You're silly!" she said, giggling and dipping a pick into the chocolate. Then she laughed in more of an evil cackling sort of way. "Now I control your futures! Mwahahaha!"

What an amazing little human she is. I had threatened several times to start a blog called "Shit Sarah Says," but if she really did plan on revolutionizing the fortune industry, I guess a blog would be duplicative.

Duncan had finished his meal, but there was a little bit of meat juice on his chin. "Hey, you have a little buffalo on your face," I told him.

This made Sarah giggle even more, but she maintained her concentration as she painstakingly wrote some words on one of the napkins in chocolate. After a few more minutes, she tore three pieces from the napkin and placed one piece in front of each of us.

"Duncan, you first!" she said.

Duncan turned over his piece of napkin. "There's no job like an adventure," it read.

"Thank you, Sarah," he said, chuckling. "What's this adventure you speak of?"

"How should I know? Just make sure you don't miss it when you find it."

Sarah pointed to me. "Your turn, Johnny."

I turned my piece of napkin over expecting it to be similar to Duncan's. Instead, it read, "More old men will present themselves to you shortly."

"What the... Sarah... what does this mean?" I asked her, re-reading it several times to make sure my eyes hadn't deceived me.

"I don't know; it's *your* fortune. You have to find out for yourself, silly," Sarah teased.

"Have old men been presenting themselves to you lately?" Duncan asked me.

The image of my father and grandfather naked on a sauna bench flashed in my head. "I, uhh, have been watching some old black-and-white films recently," I lied. "I just don't know how Sarah knew that."

Sarah shrugged. "I didn't."

"Okay, well what fortune did you give yourself?" Duncan asked

Sarah.

She excitedly flipped her napkin scrap over. "Woof, woof, woof," it said.

"That's not really a fortune," Duncan said.

"Yes it is!" Sarah exclaimed. "It means 'One day, your dream will come true; one day, you'll be one of us.'"

"All of that in only three 'woofs'?" I said, teasing her.

"That's just the second 'woof'," she explained. "The first 'woof' is a generic greeting and the third 'woof' is an invitation to sniff their butts."

"Whose butts?" I asked.

"The dogs' butts, duh."

I looked to Duncan for clarification.

"Sarah is practicing to become a dog. It's her current dream in life," he explained.

"At least I still have one," she said, unwittingly piercing both of us in the heart. "I tried out for the summer play. I usually don't care, but there's a dog part this time!"

"That's great!" I said. "I'll have to go see it."

"Don't bother. I quit."

"What?! Why?"

"They asked me to play the mouse instead," she said with her lips curled into a snarl letting the world know exactly what she thought about *that*.

"Did you ask them to reconsider first?"

She proceeded to launch into a speech with more mood swings than there were roads to Rome. "I said, 'No! I don't want to be the mouse.' But they told me that nobody else could fit into the mouse costume. I'm the littlest in my grade, but nobody could play a dog like me! I could play the biggest dog ever! I'll start my own show. I'll go on tour! Somewhere out there is someone who dreams of becoming a mouse. I'm going to find them, and give them the mouse costume. Then who'll be laughing? Me, the dog, that's who. I'll be laughing!" she exclaimed before laughing quite loudly.

"Where will you tour?" Duncan asked.

"Greenland," Sarah said with conviction.

“Greenland!?” Not even the glaciers¹⁵ want to live there anymore,” I said. In my opinion, it was never too soon to make a global warming joke, but it could definitely become too late, like if one night global warming murdered us all in our sleep. Of course, global warming didn’t act like a Mafioso, because if it did, we would have actually tried to stop it.

Sarah shrugged. “The glaciers probably just need some entertainment. My show will put butts in the seats.”

If only it were that easy. “Why do you want to be a dog when you grow up?” I asked.

Sarah thought about this for a moment. “Humans have too many limitations, and dogs are friendlier than humans.”

I couldn’t argue with her on either point, so I simply reached over and ruffled her hair. “You’ll make a great dog one day,” I stated, making her beam. “Will you still be Sarah or do you have a different dog name?”

“Sarfal!” she barked out.

“That’s a nice name.”

“I know,” she said. “Hey, we’re going to go watch another movie now. Do you want to join us, Johnny?”

“What movie?” I asked.

“*Poltergeist!*” she exclaimed.

“Duncan!” I said. “What did I say about the movies you watch with her?”

Duncan sighed the deep sigh of a man who knows what he’s doing is wrong but has already accepted this as unavoidable. “It’s her birthday,” he said.

I matched his sigh. I mean, it *was* her birthday after all.

¹⁵ This rough sketch of a glacier has been included on behest of the author on the off chance that glaciers have become extinct by the time of publication.



* * *

Knowing that she had won, Sarah repeated her invitation, but I could feel a migraine coming on due to a combined lack of rest, caffeine, and food other than ice cream, so I declined.

"Farts," she said in response.

As we stood up from the table and started walking to our respective vehicles, I whistled to Sarah and beckoned her to come over to my car. I grabbed a wrapped gift from the passenger seat and handed it to her. "Happy birthday, Sarfa!"

"What is it?" she asked, anxiously.

"I don't know; it's *your* gift. You have to find out for yourself, silly."

"Can I open it now?"

"Maybe you should wait until after *Poltergeist*," I suggested. "You might need some cheering up."

"Okay," she said before giving me a big hug. "Thanks, Johnny! I love you!"

I smiled. "I love you too, Sarah. Happy birthday!"

I ruffled her hair again and then drove off. Feeling the headache more acutely than before, so I decided to get some food before I went home. Sarah's words repeated in my head. *Life *does* seem too short not to eat what I want, at least in something resembling moderation. Okay, so I don't want to become obese, but there are worse things, like living a life without chalupas.* I shuddered at the thought. *Even if you're more in size, there's more to life than size, like cheesy gordita crunches and seven-layer burritos. If I become fat, I can also become skinny... although maybe not.*

After eating two chalupas and gulping down a large Mountain Dew, I hopped back in my car and started driving home. Wanting something softer than music, I switched the radio to a news station.

"Thousands of migrants have reached Austria after Hungary permitted bus travel yesterday. Austrian officials expect around 10,000 migrants to arrive in total as additional waves of persons displaced by the war in Syria flood the region."

Good for Austria. We should be welcoming them too. The U.P. has more than enough land for all the refugees. Of course, while the land wouldn't discriminate, the climate and certain parts of the local religious community might not be as welcoming.

"In U.S. news, jailed Kentucky clerk Kim Davis plans to appeal her contempt of court ruling. Davis was found in contempt of court

for defying the Supreme Court's recent order to issue same-sex marriage licenses."

Truthfully, I kind of felt sorry for Kim Davis, despite disagreeing deeply with her personal views. She was either a villain or a hero depending on which side of the cultural divide you sat on, but to me she was just a pawn who got pushed into the public spotlight and was being used by both sides.

"In other news, a clump of whale vomit sold for over seventy thousand dollars at auction."

What the actual fuck? Why didn't my guidance counselor suggest pursuing a career as a whale vomit harvester?

Mildly depressed, I switched to the sports station, which was covering the baseball game. I had never heard of the guy at the plate, but I knew the type.

The announcers kept referring to him as being "scrappy" and "a real gamer." These labels pretty much spelled doom for his career. People don't have to resort to tired cliches when describing really good players. When someone is referred to as a "five-tool athlete," grit is not one of the items in the toolbox. Then again, this scrappy dude was still a professional athlete, and I was just an unemployed nobody who liked chalupas a little too much.

By the time I got home, my head was truly pounding, so I poured a glass of water and walked to my room to find some aspirin. *I NEEEEEEEEED IT*, I thought, mimicking Sarah's SpongeBob impression.

On the way there, I noticed something disturbing. I normally left my door to my room closed when I wasn't home to keep Magrarius X out, but I must have accidentally left the door slightly ajar in my haste to leave.

If that damn cat peed in my laundry basket again...

When I turned on the light, Magrarius X was on my bed eyeballing me, but luckily I didn't smell any urine. I walked over to the aspirin bottle on my nightstand, removed two of the pills, and washed them down with a big gulp of water.

Afterward, as I sat the bottle back down, I noticed there were only three pills left out of the original one hundred—a detail that seemed a little strange because I had only just opened it. I couldn't concentrate on little inconsistencies, however, because my head felt like Martin Luther was pounding his Ninety-Five Theses into the back of my skull. Thus, as I plopped down next to Magrarius to try to sleep it off,

I was completely oblivious of the mix-up that had just occurred.

Planet Earth¹⁶ continued to spin doggedly around the sun, but I was about to get taken on a much less comfortable ride.

¹⁶ This rough sketch of planet Earth has been included on behest of the author on the off chance that Earth has become extinct by the time of publication.



The events that transpired after I unwittingly took two *Ahnunggokwan* pills instead of aspirin were possibly the closest thing to a “religious experience” I had ever felt, which was saying something considering I may or may not have eaten God the night before. A Holy Ghost was moving through me taking me on a journey in which the only thing that made sense was that nothing did. And boy, except for all the times it was terrifying, it was extraordinary.

It started sensually enough:

I fell asleep the instant that loud beeping noises started emanating from my mouth. The alarm clock hit my snooze button and threw me across the room. The stairs descended me and I was placed inside the toaster by two slices of bread. The radio turned me on and listened to me play Radio Moscow.

After being buttered, I was eaten by the toast. The dishes then left me in the sink, and the stairs ascended me again. The pajamas slipped out of me and I was taken by the shower. The soap picked me up and rubbed me all over itself, forming a lather. Later, the towel Johnnyed itself off, and a pair of pants put me on, one leg at a time.

The bicycle rode me two kilometers to a bakery, where baguettes spent hours waiting in a Johnnyline to get their rationed loaf of me, although there wasn’t enough of me to go around.

After leaving empty handed, the local *ryumochnaya* vodka bar visited me to forget about life for a while. Bottles of vodka unscrewed my cap and took shots of my insides in-between bites of minced meat pastries.

A Matryoshka doll was delighted when she opened me up, only to find Johnnys of decreasing size within me.

One of the vodka bottles made a joke. “In capitalist America, *you* drink vodka.”

Upon hearing the joke, the Matryoshka doll cried so hard she laughed. She laughed so hard she spit out the Johnny that had been in her mouth. A little Johnny even dribbled out of her nose. Embarrassed, the doll stacked the little me back inside the larger me.

After the *ryumochneya* was good and sozzled, it stumbled away to find a bench. In the resulting darkness, a bear suddenly stood up from the bushes and shot me with a Kalashnikov.

I was dragged away by the bear to its cabin, where it skinned me and put me in front of the fireplace. Over many years, the bear’s cubs and grandcubs trampled my skin until I became so decrepit that the trash decided to throw me outside.

One trash’s man is another trash’s treasure, however, and some beets found me and planted me in the ground. Ten days later, I germinated, and eighty days after that, I was harvested.

The beets pickled me and placed me on a store shelf where I was purchased by a bottle of vinaigrette. Vinaigrette sliced me up and added me to a motley of spring greens, pears, walnuts, and goat cheese before drizzling me with dressing.

After stabbing me with a fork and sticking me in her mouth, Vinaigrette chewed each piece of me an average of 30 times before pushing me into her throat with her tongue. I traveled over her epiglottis, past her esophagus, and into her stomach, where I was invited to a mixer by her digestive juices, which were actually KGB operatives in disguise.

After this party was the after-party in the small intestine, where I met additional dodgy digestive juices from Vinaigrette’s pancreas and liver. I had a rather unpleasant time, as I was robbed of all my nutrients, which were subsequently absorbed into my host’s bloodstream. Meanwhile, my wasted husk was pushed into Vinaigrette’s large intestine, where I was forced to carry her GI tract’s old baggage. I was then stored in Vinaigrette’s rectum until I was inevitably swept up in a larger social movement.

Discarded on a street corner, a Molotov cocktail pumped petrol into my stomach, shoved a rag in my mouth, and set the rag on fire. Then it chucked me through the window of a clock shop. Upon his untimely death, the clockmaker inside was himself repurposed into an alarm clock.

“Oh, the life of a circle!” heralded the alarm clock the next

morning.

I woke up sweating like a virgin in a brothel. I threw off the covers and ran to the bathroom, where I proceeded to vomit into the toilet for the next several minutes. Once my stomach hit empty, I staggered back to my room, closed the door, and fell back into my bed...

I dreamt of two goldfish. Or maybe two goldfish dreamt of me. No, I definitely dreamt of two goldfish.

I asked the goldfish, "What are the two of you doing in my dream?"

And the goldfish replied, "There isn't only two of us. There are one of us."

"I'm an educated man," I said, condescendingly, "which means I can count. And I count two—two scumbag goldfish."

Then one goldfish swam out of my dream.

"Now you are only one," I said, quite sure of myself.

"Nay, I am now but two," replied the goldfish.

I woke up again in a state of panic. Could we really have been wrong all this time? Was one really two, and two really one?

My panic subsided, however, as I drifted back to sleep...

The news of the numerical reordering was discovered by three old men while they sat on their rocking chairs out on a nursing home porch.

"Oh my! Everything's changing!" cried the second man, as he threw the newspaper as far from him as he could, which happened to be two feet. Or, one foot rather. No! It was one foot.

"Oh, not really. Words are just social constructs. Nothing is really changing, only how we talk about things," replied the first man.

"Shuddup, you!" shouted the third man.

"The rest of the world won't follow our example. The European nations already said they're sticking with the number one before the number two," complained the second man.

"Europe! Goddamn Nazis!" exclaimed the third man.

"Well, I don't think they have Nazis anymore," replied the second man. "We got rid of them seventy years ago, but you have the memory of a goldfish anyhow, don't you?"

“No Nazis? What do they have instead?”

“The metric system and free health care.”

“A-ha!” exclaimed the first man. “And some people say there’s no such thing as progress!”

“Shuddup, you!” shouted the third man.

“You’re making too big a deal out of this numerical swap,” continued the first man. “It won’t affect us at all.”

“But it already has. A day ago, you were 81, and now you’re 82,” retorted the second man.

“A-ha! And some people say there’s no such thing as progress!”

“Shuddup, you!” shouted the third man.

Just then, a golden-winged warbler crashed into a window next to them, shattering the glass. The bird flew away unhurt.

All three men agreed that it was the most amazing thing they had witnessed in over a decade.

I sat up in my bed, momentarily dazed before suddenly leaping up and running to the toilet again. When I returned, I heard Magrarius X meow inquisitively, which was stupid of him because I couldn’t understand Cat.

“Shuddup, you!” I shouted at him before lying back down.

It wasn’t until a quarter past eleven p.m. before I finally willed myself to roll back out of bed.

Sundays are wonderful for sleeping in. Wait, no, beds are wonderful for sleeping in; Sundays are wonderful for sleeping-in.

Regardless, I decided to roll out of bed. Except, maybe it would be more accurate to say I rolled out of Sunday.

You see, I went to roll out of bed, but I actually fell. Except my body didn’t fall off the bed, but, rather, I fell out of both my body and the bed. This may be a routine occurrence for you, but for me, it was the first time I had happened to fall out of my body.

After the fall, and now bodiless, I was reduced to a state of pure observation, so I proceeded to purely observe my person-less body. It was fairly dull and uninteresting. My vacant conundrum of a body just lay there, but what could be expected of it?

It raised an obvious but intriguing question: *is the body still a part of me, or is what makes me “me” something entirely separate from my body?*

Losing my body provided me with a unique opportunity to

reevaluate my particular circumstances. I had never appreciated how significant my body was until I no longer had it. I was a mere drifter in the wind with no connection to a physical world I had previously taken for granted. *What unfortunate timing!*

I yearned to be reunited with my body, although I did wonder if it was possible to upgrade to a new one.

It isn't like there's a body shop I can go to. Even if I wanted to go to a hospital, how exactly does a bodiless entity transport their body? What a paradox! Is the body even mine anymore, now that I am bodiless?

It is the moment that you realize that your existence is a paradox that you stop believing in anything.

Nothing is an interesting thing to believe in. Wait, no, anything can be interesting to believe in, but nothing is an interesting thing to be believed-in.

Regardless, I believed in nothing. Except, maybe it would be more accurate to say I was willing to believe in anything.

You see, the key was that I could no longer not believe. What was to be believed-in, or to believe in, was thrown into utter obscurity, but what remained was the act of belief. I was trapped outside of my body and could do little else but believe. This may be a routine occurrence for you, but for me, it was the first time I had happened to believe.

Contemplating my state of being trapped outside of my body raised an intriguing question: *which is more limiting—being stuck outside of a body or being stuck inside one?*

Maybe by falling out of my body I am now free to escape my life and its inherent limitations!

I was just beginning to ponder ways I could enjoy my newly gained freedom when I accidentally fell back into my body. *What unfortunate timing!*

I opened my eyes, glanced at the clock, and noticed that it was only ten-thirty p.m. Only a few moments ago, it had been a quarter past eleven! What a stunning turn of events!

Afraid that I had fallen straight out of Sunday and that I was seriously late for work, I very carefully got out of bed and put on some pants.

Once that was done, I suddenly remembered two important details: one, I had quit my job, and two, even if I hadn't, Monday was Labor Day.

Excited by the memory of having quit my job, and mistakenly thinking I was now back to normal, I went to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. Incidentally, 65% of me already consisted of water, but it certainly wouldn't have been practical, prescient, prim, proper, or prudent to drink a glass of myself, even if I was barely more than a glass of water myself. Thinking about such things too long was what caused people to start barking at the moon, however, so I trudged on.

Having retrieved water that was derived from a source other than myself, I returned to my room, turned on the light, turned around to close the door, turned back around, and immediately dropped the glass of water, spilling its contents all over the carpet.

The problem wasn't with my hands, but with my eyes. Standing directly in front of me was the great American novelist Kurt Vonnegut... or the reanimated corpse of Kurt Vonnegut, since I was 99% sure Vonnegut was dead, which was a much higher percentage than my body was water. That particular statistical comparison was bullshit, but so was Vonnegut standing in front of me, so I shook my head like an Etch A Sketch to start over. Once my aluminum powder settled, I opened my eyes to find Vonnegut still stubbornly standing before me.

There was a moment of intense mutual staring, like two men right before an arm-wrestling competition. My lips were quivering and my hands felt clammy.

"Greetings, Jonathan," Vonnegut said, with something approximating a smile.

This simple greeting hit me like a Buick, and I experienced a minor mental and physical breakdown, causing me to slump against the wall and apply the lesson I had been taught as an impressionable youth in case I ever found myself confronted by a ghost.

"Ghostbusters!" I called out.

Vonnegut put his left hand on my right shoulder. "You can call me 'Ghostbusters,' if that is your preference," he said.

Under different circumstances, I might have found the response humorous. But instead of feeling amused, my hormones kicked in and triggered my fight-or-flight response. Since my back was up against a wall, my body chose to fight and I uppercut my literary hero directly in the jaw.

Vonnegut's head snapped back slightly, but the rest of his body didn't move. There was no pain response on his face whatsoever. The dude could take a punch.

“I have looked forward to making your acquaintance for a very long time,” he said, pleasantly.

Shaking in fear, I employed the only other defense mechanism my body had left—I jettisoned a little bit of pee into the confines of my jeans. It was just enough to make the situation even more uncomfortable but not so much that I would have been confident enough to claim that I was now only 64% water.

I slowly opened my eyes. While I was lightly spritzing myself, I had closed them in the hopes that, when I opened them again, things would be different. In fact, things *were* different, just not the things I had hoped for.

Kurt Vonnegut was still in front of me. Vonnegut was still holding me by the shoulder. There was still a little pee in my pants. What had changed, however, was that we were no longer in my apartment. We were in a spaceship 225 miles above the Earth.

Where my bedroom window used to be in relation to me, there was now a much different window presenting a much different view. Gone was the chipped and crumbling wall of the neighboring apartment complex; the Earth now stood in its stead. I supposed the chipped and crumbling wall was still somewhere down there, but it was certainly no longer the main focal point.

The rest of the room was architecturally curious, but mostly empty. Vonnegut and I were in a half-sphere that was entirely white, shaped similarly to an igloo but without the accompanying smell of seal or whale oil.

I had always wanted to grow up to be an astronaut, but I had never envisioned it going down like this. Vonnegut released my shoulder and motioned for me to sit in a transparent bubble chair directly behind me. I adhered to the request for three simple reasons: one, my legs were shaky and about to give out; two, the uppercut had proven ineffective; and three, my secondary attack move was “self-urination,” which was useless against all but the very weakest of enemies. No, whatever Vonnegut wanted of me, Vonnegut was likely to get. *Hopefully not my oil or skin*, I thought, still stuck on Inuit culture.

After I had collapsed into the bubble chair, Vonnegut said, “Let us begin,” before staring at me expectantly. What felt like minutes passed as he waited for me to... to do whatever it was he was waiting for me to do. He wasn’t blinking either, which was additionally disquieting.

“Are you waiting for me to speak?” I finally asked, no longer able to withstand the menacing silence.

“Affirmative,” Vonnegut said.

This response made me very angry. “Mr. Vonnegut, sir, you pulled a Lazarus and rose from the dead, abducted me, and now you’re expecting *me* to start the conversation. With respect, sir, fuck you. I won’t do it.”

“You just did.”

Fuck. “Then why even talk? Why not just do whatever it is you plan to do with me? Why are supervillains always who you least expect, and why do you guys always feel the need to chat? I might devise some incredibly clever and heroic way to escape while we’re sitting here. Doesn’t that concern you?”

“No.”

“Oh,” I said, losing my false bravado. “Well, can I ask you questions?”

“Yes.”

“First, how are you alive? Second, are you actually a ghost? Third, why have you always disliked semicolons so much?”

Vonnegut tilted his head and looked at me blankly.

Hmm... “You don’t know who Kurt Vonnegut is, do you?” I asked, hazarding a guess.

“I do not,” he confirmed.

“Because you are not actually Kurt Vonnegut,” I continued.

“I am not.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“And why is that?” he asked.

“The real Kurt Vonnegut is most certainly dead. I remember being at a high school robotics competition when I found out. And this doesn’t fit his writing style. If I were a character in a Vonnegut story, I’d have more wit, or an abnormally large penis, or a ridiculously hot wife, or *something* to make up for my circumstances,” I said. “I’m just average without any above average qualities.”

“Very good,” he said, nodding. “I am not Kurt Vonnegut. What else can you tell me?”

“That you’re a real asshole for stealing his face and then abducting me. Am I on a weird space game show?”

“Are not we all?” he responded. “Now, ask me what you actually want to know.”

"Is this real life?" I asked, nervously.

"Yes."

Fuck. "Are you human?"

"No."

Fuck. "What's your name?"

"My name does not matter. You can call me anything you like according to your preferences."

We're not getting anywhere. It was surprisingly hard to come up with the right questions. I was trying to think of any relevant scenes from movies depicting first contact between humans and aliens, but all I could think of was how much I didn't want a little alien to pop out of my chest.

"If you aren't human, why do you look like one?"

"I appear to you in humanoid form so that you will trust me."

"And why do you look like Kurt Vonnegut?"

"Because you trust him. I appear to people in a form that they trust."

Now we're getting somewhere! "Isn't showing up as a deceased author a pretty poor disguise?" I said, before explaining, "People don't often trust dead people."

"My appearance is configured based on information being automatically harvested from an individual's brainwaves. You must either not have a very good imagination or have deep-rooted trust issues," he explained.

Ouch. "You have an uncanny knack for making me feel stupid."

"I would recommend not saying or doing anything stupid in the future."

Dammit!

"My other advice would be to stop assuming you know anything," he continued.

"So, if I'm so stupid, why me then?" I asked.

"I do not follow your line of questioning."

"Why, out of everyone on Earth, did you choose to abduct *me*?"

"Do you think you are too special?" Vonnegut asked. "You humans think you are extraordinarily special. Whenever anything even remotely inconvenient occurs, you ask 'why me?'"

"Actually, I don't think I'm special enough."

This response surprised Vonnegut. "In that case, think about how unlikely your life really is. First, the Universe had to be made, which

was an extremely complicated procedure. Then, life had to arise, which was *quite* difficult to pull off. And for you to be born, all of your ancestors dating back to the first lifeform on Earth and leading up to your own human parents needed to successfully reproduce. Imagine all that mating. Judging by your own personality, that probably required considerable outside help. Then, out of all the sperm cells that your father released, you were the victorious one-in-two-hundred-fifty-million that successfully fertilized your mother's egg cell. Frankly, you are the least likely thing to ever happen in an extremely unlikely Universe."

Fake Vonnegut's "Egg Meets Sperm" story actually made me feel kind of warm and fuzzy inside, but it still didn't answer my question. "Okay, but you could say the same thing about any human. So why *me*?"

"Are you not up to the task, Jonathan?" he asked.

"I don't even know what *it* is!" I complained.

"Then maybe you should have asked."

"Stop speaking in riddles!" I shouted.

"Start asking better questions," he suggested.

What an asshole. I was feeling very discouraged by this point. Even worse, I was starting to feel an oncoming sneeze, potentially due to some alien allergen in the air. I wiggled my nose a bit in case that would help.

"Okay, if you won't answer why you abducted *me*," I said, "then please at least answer *why* you abducted me. What do you want of me? Where do you want me to go?"

"I want you to leave Earth and come with me in order to learn more about the galaxy and your own humanity," Vonnegut said, without any of the pomp or circumstance one might associate with such a grand request.

"Oh, I've seen this movie before. This is where we leave on some reckless adventure, and then I die in the end, right?" I asked. "What if I don't go?"

"You will go," he said in a voice that made it clear this wasn't up for debate.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have seen this movie before," he said.

He's annoyingly good at mocking me. Now I know how Chet must feel.

Suddenly, a sneeze tried to make a quick escape out of my nasal

canal, but I managed to restrain it and shove it back in my face prison. I waited a moment before speaking, just to make sure it didn't try any more funny business.

"Why would I want to travel with *you*?" I asked. "You're kind of a dick."

"We do not have to converse if that is your preference," he said.

"A silent travel companion doesn't sound fun either."

"What do you suggest?"

I thought about this for a moment. "Can I bring my friends?"

"I do not know, *can* you?" he asked, making me momentarily relive 6th-grade English.

"*May* I bring my friends?" I self-corrected.

Vonnegut took a moment to consider my request. "You may," he finally said, "but I am teleporting you back to this spaceship at this time tomorrow, whether you are alone or not."

"I understand."

"When I teleport you, any traveling companion will need to be physically touching you or touching somebody who is touching you."

"I understand."

"Take this watch," he said, handing me a silver bracelet. "Keep it on you at all times. You will have exactly twenty-four Earthly hours from the moment you arrive back in your apartment."

"I said I understand, okay?" I slipped the bracelet on my right wrist.

"Your friends' safety is not guaranteed."

"Is mine?"

"No."

Those two letters hung ominously in the air as I felt the rogue sneeze gearing up for another escape attempt. It had been quietly gaining strength and now wanted to escape my body before anything even worse happened to me. I couldn't blame it for not wanting to go down with the ship.

"Now, it is my turn to ask you a question," Vonnegut said.

I wrinkled my nose.

"In your opinion..."

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth.

"...what do humans on Earth..."

I held my breath.

"...value and desire most?"

I couldn't hold it any longer. My whole body rocked as I gave life to a particularly vibrant sneeze, which, by logical deduction, made it the least likely thing to ever happen in an extremely unlikely Universe.

Interestingly, Vonnegut didn't identify it as a sneeze, but rather as a word from a rather quaint and rarely used dialect from deep in the darkest recess of the galaxy. The nearest translation went something like this:

"FREEEEDOOOOOOM!"

"Mmm...", he replied. "You may go now."

And just like that, I found myself back in my apartment on Earth. The first thing I did was check my alarm clock. It was ten p.m.! Assuming it was still Sunday, an assumption that later turned out to be correct, I had now moved backwards in time twice that day! This should have troubled me deeply, but what was time other than another thing I didn't understand?

Understanding didn't matter to me anymore. I believed.

I lay down in my bed and stared at the thin silver watch Fake Vonnegut had given me. In thin blue letters that appeared wherever I looked on it, my remaining time on Earth was displayed—23:59:23 and counting down. *Oh, the life of a circle*, I thought, as I drifted off to sleep.

Oftentimes, dreams were just dreams, strange stage plays informed by one's experiences, memories, fears, desires, and, perhaps, lunch options. But my *Ahnunggokwan* comedown dreams felt like so much more. So when I tell you I dreamt my ass was planted on hard-packed snow once again, believe me that it truly felt like Heikki Lunta, the mythical Finnish Yooper God of Snow, was chilling me in his freezer so he could later plop me into a glass of whiskey.

And whereas everything typically felt muddled in dreams, I felt an unusual alertness of the variety that only being completely naked outside in sub-freezing temperatures could provide. This was still somewhat less intense than if I had jumped into a frozen lake, but considerably more than if I had merely woken up with the covers pulled off.

Just like my previous dream, I was undressed somewhere in the woods in the middle of winter, but these woods looked, and felt, different, and I was completely, rather than largely, undressed. That may seem like a small technicality, but try to view it from my butt's perspective. The word "completely" made quite the difference. My body was so cold, in fact, that my balls tried to undrop in an effort to retain warmth.

At the end of the path, much like before, was a wooden structure, but while the hunting camp sauna had been a shack, this was a well-constructed log cabin. The front door looked thick and sturdy, with black, iron door hinges spanning almost the entirety of its width and circular iron clavos carefully spaced every few inches across and every foot up. Judging by the door alone, I might have thought I was looking at a small church. However, the set of very large antlers above

the door, which I hazarded might have once belonged to an elk, gave off more of a pagan temple vibe.

As it was, my gut told me I was looking at another sauna, even if it didn't have a visible chimney. My body was going to be very upset if I was wrong, especially, I feared, if this really was a pagan temple.

I started to stand up when a sudden firm hand on my shoulder pushed me back down. Surprised, I found myself looking up into the face of an unfamiliar middle-aged man and his squinting eyes. The sun was shining, reflecting painfully off the snow around me, but I suspected my own luminous, frosted, nudity was also contributing to his having to squint.

"Hello," I said.

With a gruff harumph, he yanked me to my feet and pushed me toward the cabin. The antlers loomed large in front of me.

Instead of lower Michigan, maybe I've been transported to actual Hell this time.

Arriving at the door, he pulled on the iron handle and, grabbing me by one shoulder, pushed me in just as hot, escaping smoke hit my eyes, causing me to not only be blinded, but painfully so. My eyes teared and swelled shut as I bent down low, rubbing them with my cold hands.

I heard the door slam shut behind me and noted the extreme warmth of the room we were in, but I was still preoccupied with my eyes, which refused to open. I became increasingly aware of how prone and naked I was, however, upon hearing what sounded like the strange man's clothing hitting the floor around me. I hadn't gotten a very good look at his outfit, but my initial impression had been "quaint."

"Don't hurt me, please," I said softly.

"*Saunassa ollaan kuin kirkossa*," he said.

I didn't know what the phrase meant, but I was pretty sure it was Finnish and was momentarily relieved to hear the word "sauna" at the beginning of it. That feeling only lasted, of course, until I felt myself get whacked on the back by a handful of tree branches.

"*Saunassa ollaan kuin kirkossa*," he said before striking me again.

Fuck me. This is both a sauna *and* a pagan ritual!

What I didn't know then was that this was Matti Larsinpoika Hirvelä, one of the earliest residents of 16th century Kurikka, Finland, and my 13th great grandfather on my father's mother's mother's mother's father's father's father's father's mother's mother's

father's father's father's side.

What Matti kept chanting, "*Saunassa ollaan kuin kirkossa*," roughly meant "The sauna is like a Church." He was trying to remind himself of his Christian responsibility to help his fellow man, as well as to scold me for my own obviously sinful behavior.

The bundle of birch tree branches Matti was hitting me with, called a *vihta*, was supposed to be wetted first before use and was intended to be a therapeutic part of one's sauna experience. Each slap of the *vihta* promoted better blood circulation, cleaner skin, and improved health, all while releasing aromatherapy goodness into the hot sauna air.

But Matti hadn't wet the *vihta* first because, as convinced as I was that he was a devil worshiper, he was even more convinced that I was an actual demon. Him flagellating me was the more painful equivalent of me splashing tap water on the piece of bologna after it first spoke to me.

"Saunassa ollaan kuin kirkossa," he repeated. *Whack!*

"Please, stop," I cried. "*Ole kiltti!*"

At the Finnish term for "please," my oppressor stopped. Upon hearing my poor Finnish accent, it occurred to him he may not have been dealing with a demon, but something even stranger... a foreigner.

"*Kiitos*," I said, wiping the tears from my cheeks as I slowly and painfully stood up.

My eyes were able to partially open now, and I found the room we were in illuminated by an oil lamp on the wall and glowing embers from a stone stove. There was no chimney emanating from the stones, confirming my earlier observation that it was an old smoke sauna.

"Old" was an adjective of debatable veracity, as the smoke sauna had only been built four years previously, but considering I wouldn't be born for another 440 years and 12 successful reproductive cycles, I found it rather fitting.

I looked at the strange, nude, hairy man behind me. He was still gripping the *vihta* tightly and had a residual look of fear on his face, but I thought I also saw some concern beginning to register.

He must be wondering who I am, and why I'm here, I thought, before chuckling out loud at the absurdity.

I motioned to one of the wooden buckets of water next to the stove and pantomimed ladling some water onto the stones on top.

"*Joo*," he said before dipping the *vihta* into another bucket of

water.

We didn't know or trust each other yet, but dammit we could still take a sauna together!

I grabbed a bucket and brought it over to the bench, saying *Ooh!* and *Ahh!* along the way in reaction to the hotness of the wood. Once we were both seated, I ladled some water onto the stove rocks.

The relaxing sound of the steam rising from the rocks, akin to bacon being placed into a sizzling pan, was quickly followed by the sensation of searing heat on my face. *Ahhh yes*, I thought as I closed my eyes, *finally some good pain*.

After the steam dissipated, I reopened my eyes and turned toward the man sweating next to me. "Jonathan," I said, pointing to myself. As for why I said Jonathan and not Johnny, well, I'm not sure. In my dream it just felt right.

"Matti," he replied. "*Tervetuloa*," he said, extending his hand.

"*Kiitos*," I said, making sure to give him a firm handshake.

Matti and I laugh about it now, but our first meeting really sucked for me. Upon completion of our handshake, Matti picked up the wet birch branches and slapped my back with them again. While a seemingly nice gesture, the scratches he had given me were still fresh, so this hurt like hell.

"Holy *makkara*," I winced, extending my hand to further communicate that I had been flogged enough.

Understanding my message, he instead handed the *vihta* over to me. *With pleasure*, I thought, thinking I would get my revenge. What I soon came to suspect, however, was that Matti could tolerate, and in fact enjoy, a lot more pain than I could.

"*Hyvää*," he finally said after my weak tech support arms had grown sore from whipping him for so long.

Thankful for the opportunity to rest, I splashed another scoop of water onto the sauna stones. At least when it came to our sufferance and enjoyment of steam, Matti and I found ourselves equals.

A man of roughly 40, Matti seemed like a serious man, which is why I was so thrown off when he suddenly turned to me and smiled. "*Painia?*" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders, not knowing what the word meant.

"*Painia*," he said, pointing to the door.

I nodded in agreement, assuming he was asking if I wanted to leave.

We stood up from the bench and walked the short distance over to the door. Matti didn't reach for his clothes, so I realized we must just be heading outside to cool off. This was just as well, as I didn't have any clothes of my own to put on. Upon opening the door, however, Matti didn't walk out. Instead, he took off running down the path before veering off to the left and into heavier snow, his manbits admirably flailing through the air like a pendulum clock being carried off by a tornado.

And if you were wondering, yes, I have my mother's eyes, but I have my father's mother's mother's mother's father's father's father's father's mother's mother's father's father's father's father's father's father's penis.

Oh, what the fuck, I thought, before taking off after him.

The snow and the air were goddamned cold, but I continued to run because I still had a little bit of sauna armor on. Plus, I was catching up to Matti, probably because I was 480 years younger.

Matti suddenly stopped in a clearing and turned around. I stopped five yards away, not sure what I was supposed to do now that I had seemingly caught this wild, naked man. An uncomfortable staredown began.

"Painia," he said after about seven seconds.

"Painia," I repeated, willing to agree to anything if it meant we would head back to the sauna.

And then Matti did something I wasn't expecting—he ran straight at me and body-slammed my pearly ass straight back into 2015.

Just like before, I kicked out, waking myself with a jerk, but this time I must have actually caught Magrarius X because I heard a loud thud on the floor at the foot of the bed. He angrily waddled out the door, keeping his tail down in a protective gait.

"I'm sorry," I called out after him, before turning onto my back to wrestle¹⁷ with recent events.

Assuming that man was also related to me like my first dream, then the Ahnunggokwan is literally letting me interact with my ancestors, just like that Ojibwe story I found online. Incredible!

The side effects, it should be warned, were pretty severe, of which hallucinations, crazy dreams, and divine interventions were only the beginning. I could actually feel scratches on my back from the bundle

¹⁷ The actual meaning of the word *painia*.

of sticks, although I couldn't entirely rule out my cat as their source. I also still had a headache and the glass I had dropped at the sight of Kurt Vonnegut still lay on the carpet.

I picked up the glass and headed to the kitchen to refill it. While the spilled glass alone may not have been sufficient proof that I had been visited by an alien, I was pretty sure the thin silver bracelet with the countdown timer around my wrist was. I drank the water, slowing myself only enough to avoid choking. My brain, meanwhile, was trying to swallow something else entirely.

Once you stumble upon a belief, what should you do with it? Share it with anyone who will listen? Keep it to yourself and hold on tight? Or forget all about it and carry on as if nothing ever happened?

A relative novice when it came to holding beliefs, I was feeling overwhelmed. I wanted to chase my belief with a glass of bourbon, but my liquor cabinet was bare. Instead, I settled for a disappointing cocktail of sobriety and anxiety.

My belief was this: Everything was not as it seemed, myself most of all.

I felt I was as close to an expert on myself as one could be, but I had never considered myself capable of believing in the narratives of omniscient lunchmeat or skin-changing aliens. Maybe I had spent so much time trying to learn about the world that I never stopped to learn about myself, because here I was, mentally preparing for a space escape.

I shouldn't be surprised about the existence of aliens, I thought. Fermi's Paradox states that there are many mathematical reasons to believe that intelligent lifeforms exist elsewhere in the galaxy, but that we simply haven't encountered any of them yet. Well... guess what? Surprise! Paradox solved! They were just waiting to introduce themselves to me...

I shook my head. *I definitely met an alien, but there has to be more to the story. And damn it if I don't want to find out.*

A worrying thought suddenly hit me. *How the hell am I going to convince Duncan and Chet to come with me? If I tell them the truth, they won't believe me. If they did believe me, they might not want to come. Maybe I shouldn't tell them and surprise them instead? No, out of the question. That would be the ultimate dick move—even worse than changing their dating app profile pictures to images of Richard Simmons lying naked in a bed of vegetables. I need to find a way to break it to them slowly, so that they mull it over without*

immediately rejecting the idea... but how? And what about Olivia? Would I ever see her again? Had I blown my only chance with her?

Whatever plan I came up with, I knew I had to come up with it quickly. I struggled with my predicament for most of the night without any luck. It was just too heavy, too colossal. By 10 a.m., I still hadn't made significant progress and I only had ten hours before my misadventure would begin.

I need to bring us all together... a bar, perhaps? Nah, it was too easy to dismiss stuff you hear in bars, plus we couldn't very well all suddenly disappear from a bar. I mean, I guess we could. That might actually be commonplace in some parts of the world, but I'm not going to get my friends drunk in order to convince them to come with me to space. I need to find another way.

Could I go it alone? Not hardly. Not me. Not at all. When I'm alone, I tend to lose focus, forget why I'm doing what I'm doing, discover myself, discover I don't like myself, and then scramble to find something else to do that I can lose myself in. In the company of others is the only time I'm comfortable with my own existence. The rest of the time it's all existentialist turmoil, population (n)one.

Just then, Magrarius X rubbed himself against my leg, asserting his dominance over me and letting me know that I was neglecting my servile responsibilities.

I think Magrarius X was holding on to the fantasy that he was the personal housecat of a Russian aristocrat and I was just the hired help that had been brought on without proper vetting. Once Tsar Alexander I returned, he would be certain to dismiss me, or worse, once Magrarius told him how much of a bumbling arse I had been.

And what to do with you? Who do I know that could possibly live with and take care of such a miserable creature? Who could... oh. Right. Him.

"I like Mr. Cat," confirmed Beauregard Q. Hundschlager over the phone. "You say he ornery asshole. I think we get along fine."

"Oh, thank God. Thank you so much!" I exclaimed. "I'll have all his stuff ready for you to pick up this afternoon. You're an angel."

"Have no fear. I am middle-aged man with proclivity for grow body hair, drink beer, and wish for human extinction. Angel, I am not."

"Nah, you're exactly the angel I need. Just, uhh, be prepared for him to nibble on your beard while you sleep and jump on your laptop while you try to work."

“Perhaps he delete my program and make problem disappear,” said Beauregard on the other end, a note of hope in his voice I had never heard before.

“Speaking of which, did you ever learn more about that?”

“Eh, who can say? I still have same error. Hard to determine origin, so I study programming. There are three types of errors: compilation error, where program does not run, run time error, where program try to do impossible thing, like find decent Indian food in U.P., and finally logic error, which is unintended result.”

“Did you just make a joke?”

“No, really. Those are three main types.”

“And which type did you have?”

“My program completed, so must be error of logic.”

That made sense, and at the same time, it didn’t. “But how could it have known that it was an unintended result? How could the program know what your intentions were if you didn’t even know?”

I imagined the brief pause over the phone was accompanied by Beauregard shrugging before saying, “Maybe program self-aware. [Another pause] Could be. The code seems very important. I am afraid to touch it.”

I could feel myself slipping further and further down Beauregard’s rabbit hole. “But how could you not know what it is if you made it? How can it be important if you can’t remember?”

[Another slightly longer pause] “As creator, I face dilemma. The farther removed I am from creation, the less I remember why I created in first place. I can now choose to interfere with what I create, or simply let it be.”

“And you’d be okay with leaving it be?”

“Of course! Yes... perhaps [a pause]. Time will show and tell. In meantime, have good luck with adventuring, Johnny.”

“Okay. You too, and thank you again!” I said, before hanging up the phone.

What a perfectly strange human. I hope I see him again.

Beauregard had been a welcome reprieve from my anxiety, but an impermanent one. It was time to put on my big-boy mudders and tackle a larger fish. I navigated through my contacts and pressed the dial icon next to “Olivia Harolds.”

It rang once! She did not answer. It rang twice! She did not answer. It rang thrice! And still she did not... “Hello?” came the

response on the other end. “Johnny?”

I panicked. “Yes. It’s Johnny. I mean, it’s me. I mean, only if you want it to be me, that is.” I swallowed hard, not that there was much to swallow. My pride had already escaped with my words.

She laughed uncomfortably. “I think I want it to be you, but I could use some convincing. I know it was only one date, but I wish you had messaged me afterward.”

“I know, I’m sorry. The thing about that is, I wanted to but I didn’t want to look too eager. You know, according to social conventions.” I shook my head. *That was a mistake.*

There was a moment of tense silence before Olivia sounded off on the other end. “That is the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard! What is it you think I want? To be casually pursued? To be courted on a predetermined timeframe? I want to be mauled and hunted by the guy I want. I wanted you to call me ten minutes later to say you couldn’t stop yourself from calling me. Social conventions be damned! I want a guy to tell society to **FUCK OFF** and tell me what’s in *his* brain, to share *his* feelings. There isn’t enough room in a relationship for the entirety of goddamn society to have a say. Be your own man!”

A more prideful man may have been flattened by her words, but I was positively tickled by the attention. She cared.

“Perfect!” I said, cheerily. “So, I’ll pick you up in an hour?”

“What?” she asked.

“I mean, once you tell me your address, of course.”

“And why should I tell you my address after you fucked up?”

“Because society would expect you to never talk to me again, but society be damned, right? We’re above that. I’m a nervous, awkward little human being, Olivia, but I do really like you. I can’t promise I’ll be great at mauling you, but maybe I can make amends. Say... we’re supposed to have another clear sky tonight. Have you ever been on top of Brockway Mountain after the sun sets? Close your eyes and imagine the stars dancing in the sky as they reflect off the cool waters of Lake Superior down below.”

There was a brief moment of silence. “Hmm... that does sound nice, but I need to ask you an important question first, Johnny, and I need you to answer right away and not overthink it.”

“Okay,” I said, becoming very nervous.

“If you had to, would you?” she asked, slowly and clearly.

I hesitated for a split second to see if there was any more to the

question before simply saying, “Yes,” despite not knowing what it was I had to do.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, sensing I had passed her test. “Listen, let me pick you up in an hour. Bring your guitar, and maybe a change of clothes. We’ll stop at the Jampot for a snack on the way and watch the sun set and the stars shimmy.”

“Hunter or not, good sir, you’ve set your trap well. Just watch out,” she said, playfully, “twilight is usually when my prowling begins.”

My pulse quickened. “Perfect, I’ll see you soon! Text me your address!”

“Okay, just don’t fuck up again,” she said.

“I won’t,” I said, knowing full well that I was about to fuck up again. *Good thinking with Brockway Mountain, I thought, though I probably shouldn’t have implied we’d be alone. Oh well, hopefully she’ll discover that I possess other nice qualities. I have yet to discover what any of those might be, but the odds would say I must have some. It’s the Fermi Paradox of redeeming personality traits.*

I called Duncan next.

“Hullo?” he answered.

“Yo, Duncan, my main man!” I said, slipping into a more relaxed, albeit formulaic, version of myself. “I’m heading over to Brockway Mountain today to chill and shoot the shit. You down?”

“Chya, dude. When there’s shit to be shot, I’m your man!”

“Boosh! I’ll pick your butt up in an hour.”

“My butt will be ripe for the picking.”

Boom! Too easy.

I only had one phone call left, but the thought of it made me feel morally uneasy. I knew the mere thought of leaving Michigan could make Chet’s sphincters tighten so hard the resulting pressure could form a diamond, so the thought of leaving Earth might result in the discovery of minerals hitherto unknown to man. The kid wouldn’t even leave the country on vacation. He once admitted he would probably enjoy going on an adventure with Duncan and I, but I suspected the first step would always appear too risky, too unknown. In short, he was Bilbo Baggins, and I needed to figure out how to become his Gandalf real fucking quick.

I just couldn’t imagine our trip succeeding without him. He was the reliable, grounded one in our friend group. Everyone needs a Chet, and yet Chets are so damn hard to find. I had to try. I had to at

least give him the option. I clicked the call button.

My phone rang mercilessly before finally going to voicemail. "Hello, this is Chet's phone. I'm probably watching *Face/Off* right now. Leave me a message and I'll call you back."

Shit! Now is not the time, Chet.

"Chet, pick up your phone. In terms you'll understand, this is a torn ACL *and* MCL level of emergency. Call me back as soon as you get this."

Each attempt to reach Chet over the next hour failed, by which time I had added torn meniscus, ruptured anus, and inflammation of the xiphoid process to the list of emergencies waiting for him in his voicemail. Meanwhile, I had already prepared Magrarius X's things for Beauregard, left my apartment, and arrived at Olivia's apartment, where she was waiting for me outside.

"Hey," I called to her through my car's open window, smooth as fat dripping off a roasting pig.

"Hey!" she said, running over and putting her guitar in the backseat. "Just so we're clear, I still think you're an idiot."

"Just so we're clear, I agree with you," I said, leaning over and opening the passenger side door for her. "I have a bit of a surprise for you, but I promise there's a plan. Or most of one."

"Uh oh," she said before sitting down, closing her door, and jokingly grabbing the vehicle's "oh shit" handle above her head.

We drove for a few blocks until I pulled up in front of Duncan's apartment. "My friends... uhhh... are joining us," I said, a lot less confidently than I had planned.

Olivia shot me a "really?" glance, and not one of the good "really?" glances. It was more like she had just found out I finished the last of her cereal while she was in the shower and put the empty box back on the shelf with a live weasel inside.

I gave Duncan a buzz to let him know I was out front.

"So, who's the third wheel?" Olivia asked after Duncan got into the back seat.

"So, who's the third wheel?" Duncan asked me after closing his door.

This is going well. "Olivia, meet Duncan. Duncan, meet Olivia."

"Nice to meet you," he said, finding this all very amusing.

"Surprised to meet you too," she said, finding this all very confusing.

“So, Olivia,” began Duncan in an effort to lighten the mood, “tell me about yourself. Tell me about your childhood.”

I groaned, but Olivia smiled. “Are you supposed to be Johnny’s psychiatrist or mine?”

“I make him call me Dr. Freud, but you may call me Siggys.”

She chuckled. Duncan had just eased the tension in the car and saved my sorry ass with a perfectly executed *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure* reference. You never know when one of those might come in handy.

“All right, Siggys, sorry about my initial rudeness. I just wasn’t expecting our date to be such a popular affair. You mentioned ‘friends,’ Johnny, as in plural?”

“Yeah, say, Duncan, do you have any idea where Chet is right now?”

“Nah,” he said. “Have you checked the gym?”

“Not yet. Buckle up, let’s go.”

I drove over to “Planet Dingus,” as Duncan and I liked to call it, and parked the car outside. I left Olivia and Duncan to become better acquainted as I walked in and checked out the exercise machines—no Chet. I stepped into the locker room and walked down the aisles of lockers—no Chet. I walked to the showers and sidestepped noodley appendages and shimmering ass cheeks—still no Chet. I was about to leave when I suddenly spotted the sauna.

I wonder...

Stepping inside fully clothed, I was met with a combination of sweltering heat mixed with the sight of the glistening loins of one of my best friends—too much Chet. I’d never before been so upset to find exactly what I was looking for.

“C’mon, Chet, time to go,” I said, making sure to maintain eye contact.

“Johnny! What the *hell* are you doing here?” he asked.

“In the sauna? Truthfully, I’ve found myself taking a lot of saunas with strange men recently,” I said.

“In a sweatshirt?”

“I’m obviously just here for you, dude. I’ve been trying to call you all day. Duncan, Olivia, and I are going to Brockway Mountain, and you’re coming with us. We’re waiting outside.”

“That’s news to me,” he said.

“Delivered to you in-person with no expense.”

“There’s always an expense with you,” he said. “And I have to work tomorrow.”

“Don’t be like that,” I said. “You’ll only complain that we didn’t take you along if you don’t go. Try to be out in ten minutes.”

I then dumped the entire copper pail of water next to Chet onto the electric sauna heater, which sent up an eruption of steam that made both of us grimace and lunge for the door.

“Asshole!” he shouted as he went back for his towel.

“At least I didn’t whack you with sticks!”

Chet didn’t quite make it out to the car in the ten minutes I had given him, but it wasn’t like I was going to go through all that trouble only to leave him behind. When he was finally in the car, we took off.

And with that, step one of my plan was complete. Step two was to enjoy the company of my friends in case I never saw them again. Step three, to make sure that didn’t end up being the case, would be the tricky part, but now I had hope to pair with my newfound belief, and human history had time and again shown that to be a powerful combination.

It was a forty-five-minute drive from Houghton to the Jampot, our first stop, and another half hour from there to the Brockway Mountain Lookout, so we had plenty of time to chat and help Olivia get to know us all.

Maybe too much time, I worried.

I figured Duncan would be the easiest to convince to join me in space, and Chet would take a Herculean effort. Olivia was the real wildcard, but I hoped the more she got to know us, the more comfortable she might feel taking that leap. As it was, however, she was still clearly a little on edge from having Chet and Duncan sprung on her.

Early on in the drive, the radio announcer mentioned the Detroit Lions 3-1 preseason record.

"I hope we do well this year," Duncan said. "But I'm sure the Lions will have another losing season and I will permanently lose the ability to achieve an erection because of it."

"I highly doubt that last part," I said.

"Duncan, listen to yourself," Olivia said.

"I *love* listening to myself," Duncan said, cheerfully, "but what do you mean?"

"You're all worked up over sports."

"So?"

"So, it's hypocritical. A minute ago when I said that I was nearly broke, you pronounced the human species as being 'cursed with worrying about things that don't actually matter,' but listen to you now."

"I'm not being hypocritical," Duncan said. "I'm quite aware of, and quite fond of, my own humanity. I'm so committed I got a whole

degree in worrying about things that don't actually matter."

Olivia wouldn't let him off that easily. "I'm just saying, if you experience erectile dysfunction from watching sports, you should go see a doctor or, you know, stop watching sports."

"I'm too far gone for modern medicine or abstinence to help me now," Duncan said. "My cousin has tickets to the Cardinals-Lions game in October. I look forward to being as limp as FDR on a rainy day by the end of it."

"I'm not sure which was darker," Olivia replied, "that joke or the visual of Lions facing Christians for your entertainment."

Chet groaned. "Not those kinds of Cardinals, Olivia. The birds. The Lions are playing the Birds."

"And you expect the birds to win that matchup?" she replied.

This clearly wasn't the group-bonding dialogue I had hoped for. "Hey, uhh, let's change the topic," I said. "How about a fun question. If you could have any superpower you wanted, which would you choose?"

"Easy," said Chet, "I'd want super vision."

"Supervision?" I asked. "Like, you want to become a babysitter and watch over kids to make sure they don't hurt themselves?"

"Or supervision like you want someone to watch out for you, as if you were a child again?" asked Duncan.

"Not gonna lie, either way that's pretty weird," I said.

"No, super *vision*," Chet said, "like, to be able to see really, really well."

"Oh, that makes a lot more sense," Duncan said. "Especially if you still want to become a babysitter."

"I don't want to become a babysitter!"

"No, of course you don't," I said. "Why use your new superpower for something good?"

Chet grumbled in response.

"So, how *would* you use it?" Olivia asked.

"I don't know," Chet said. "If I already knew what I'd see I wouldn't need it in the first place."

"Touché," she said.

"I'd choose the power of overcompensation," Duncan said.

"Overcompensation?" I asked, amused by the response. "Like, to be paid more than your worth?"

"No, the ability to overachieve in one part of life in order to

compensate for my shortcomings elsewhere.”

“Like... driving a muscle car because you have a small... imagination,” I suggested.

“You can say the word ‘dick’, Johnny,” Olivia said. “It’s okay.”

“For example,” Duncan began, “imagine I didn’t have a lot of money.”

“Not exactly a leap, but go on,” I said.

“So, instead of having the power to suddenly accumulate a lot of money, I instead would have the power to accumulate a lot of... I don’t know, pancakes.”

“Pancakes!?” cried Chet. “What would you do with a lot of pancakes?”

“Eat some, give some away, throw some out. What do *you* do with pancakes?” Duncan asked.

“I take it this isn’t a strictly beneficial superpower,” I said.

“No, more chaotic than beneficial,” Duncan agreed.

“It’s definitely original,” Olivia said.

“Not really,” Duncan said. “A lot of superpower origin stories are already obvious examples of overcompensation. You’re a scrawny little wimp? Here, take this super soldier serum. Oh, you’re a playboy orphan who’s afraid of bats? Here, wear a stupid costume, hide in a cave, and beat up the mentally ill. Oh, you’re a cybercriminal who’s been legally separated from their kid? Let’s grant you the ability to turn yourself into a goddamn *ant*. That’ll fix things.”

“Hey!” Chet said, “you leave Paul Rudd out of this.”

“You know I’d never disrespect the Rudd,” Duncan said.

“Apology accepted,” Chet said. “What would your superpower be, Olivia?”

“My superpower would be to have all superpowers,” she said.

“Cheater!” I cried.

“Okay, *now* who’s overcompensating?” Duncan asked.

“I think she was just jealous of your pancake idea,” I said.

“The problem isn’t with me,” Olivia said, “but with the question. It’s only applicable to men because all women already have superpowers.”

“Oh, barf,” Duncan groaned.

“You try giving birth to a child or making food with your nipples!” she said.

“I can’t, hence the power of overcompensation,” Duncan said.

“My nipples can’t make milk, but maybe I can teach koalas to build swing sets.”

“At least Duncan actually answered the question,” I pointed out.

“Fine, if I had to choose just one, I’d choose teleportation,” she said.

Your dream might just come true, I thought. “And where would you teleport to?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “What’s the farthest place from this car?”

“If only Chet had super vision,” Duncan said, “maybe he could tell us.”

“Spoken like a true Flat Earther,” I said.

“Listen,” Duncan said, “the Earth is just a giant spinning pancake cooked by Guy Fieri, okay? The government is lying to you. The Great Flip is coming!”

“Trying out a new radical stance?” I asked.

“Dude, we should totally play the radical stance game!” Duncan said.

“Oh, boy,” I replied. *What have I done?*

“What’s the radical stance game?” Olivia asked.

“Oh, it’s the best,” Duncan said. “To play the radical stance game, everyone has to choose an unusual ideology, policy, or belief to defend, and as a group, we go one-by-one exploring each position. You don’t have to actually believe in your stance, but you do have to defend it, and everyone else in the car will be questioning and arguing against your radical stance, even if they secretly agree with you.”

“What happens in the unlikely scenario someone convinces me I’m wrong?” she asked.

“You still try to defend your original position, but you may make some small adjustments or clarifications along the way.”

“And how does the game end?”

“When we all grow tired of it, I guess. It usually isn’t very hard to tell when it’s over.”

“Sure, I’ll play,” Olivia said. “Any advice for choosing a stance?”

“It shouldn’t be so obvious that everyone will agree with it, like ‘landmines should be outlawed,’ for which there’s already an internationally-signed treaty, but also not something so absurd that nobody believes you could believe it, like ‘everyone should be

required to carry landmines on their persons at all times.’”

“Dammit, that was going to be mine!” I said.

“Can you give me an example?” Olivia asked.

“Sure, I’ll go first,” Duncan said. “I think there should be a requirement that couples who want to give birth to a child of their own should first have to adopt a child.”

“But why?” Olivia blurted out.

“Because I think it’s immoral and selfish for someone to only want to have their own children when there are so many children out there still waiting to be adopted.”

“You can’t make that a requirement,” she said.

“Why not?”

“It would never pass.”

“Whether something *could* pass isn’t the point of the game,” I noted, “but rather whether it *should* pass.”

“Okay, well it obviously shouldn’t,” she said.

“And why not?” Duncan asked.

“Because the government shouldn’t have the authority to trample on people’s rights like that,” Chet said.

“Oh, but the government already has the authority to trample on people’s rights if it serves the common good. And this would be good for all those kids waiting to be adopted.”

“A central tenet of your argument is the belief that the best possible outcome for children in foster care is to be adopted,” I pointed out.

“That’s right.”

“But I’m worried many of these children would be adopted for the wrong reasons.”

“For selfish reasons, you mean?”

“Sure,” I said.

“I would argue that adopting a child in order to be able to have your own child is less selfish than not adopting a child and having your own child. So, there would be a net reduction in selfishness.”

“But not every couple can provide a good home for an adopted child,” I said.

“Agreed,” Duncan said. “And if a couple doesn’t pass the test to adopt a child, well, maybe they shouldn’t be allowed to have kids in the first place.”

“Oh, this is a two-for-one radical stance,” I said. “Impressive.”

“So, only qualified couples should be allowed to have children, and they should have to adopt a child first?” Olivia asked.

“Yes,” Duncan said..

“Is your ultimate goal population control?”

“A reduced birth rate would probably be an end result of these policies,” he admitted, “which could be beneficial for our planet in light of our limited number of resources, but the ultimate goal is to get kids adopted.”

“I think there are easier, more efficient, and less intrusive ways to accomplish that,” I said. “Like economic incentives.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but economic incentives don’t make for a very good radical stance.”

“No, I suppose they don’t.”

“You can’t tell people whether or not they can have a child,” Olivia said.

“Why not?” asked Duncan.

“Because if you told me I couldn’t have a child, I’d rip your balls out.”

“Uhh...” Duncan said. “Okay, that was fun, who’s next?”

“I’ll go,” I said. “I’ve been giving this a fair amount of thought lately, and it’s topical with today being Labor Day. I think we should usher in a world without jobs.”

“Says the only person in this car without a job,” Chet said.

“True,” I replied. “But I shouldn’t *have* to find a job if I don’t want to.”

“You don’t,” Duncan said. “Unless, of course, you want to eat.”

“Exactly,” I said. “There’s no law requiring employment, but other laws that *do* exist more or less force you to have a job, sometimes two or three, just to eke out a basic living.”

“So, do you want to get rid of those laws or to outlaw jobs?” asked Duncan. “Or what is it you’re asking to have happen?”

“I am saying we should stop thinking full employment is a neat idea, and instead enact legislation that helps everyone secure a certain lifestyle regardless of what job they have, how much they work, what their inheritance is like, or how rich their family is.”

“Like a Universal Basic Income?” asked Duncan.

“Precisely,” I said.

“So, because *you* don’t want to work, you don’t want *me* to work either?” Chet asked.

“No, sorry, you would still be a physical therapist, because that’s what you like to do. And good thing too because there would still be a need for physical therapists.”

“So, you want me to work and pay taxes to help pay for you not having to?”

“I think our worth in society shouldn’t be based on how much profit we can help create for capitalism,” I said, instantly regretting my choice of words.

“Aha, so you’re a communist!” Chet cried. “I always suspected as much.”

“I believe Karl Marx said something to the effect that in a communist society workers would be free to ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, play with their cows in the evening, and criticize after dinner,’” Duncan said.

“How does one play with a cow?” I asked. “However, yes, the gist of that is right.”

“But there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” Chet said.

“Dude, what could you possibly have against free lunches?” I asked. “How did that ever become a popular saying? I would personally contribute money to anyone running for election under a platform of free lunches.”

“I’m no longer sure of what we’re arguing about,” Olivia said. “But I like free lunches.”

“Sorry,” I said, pausing to collect my thoughts. “Okay, back on track. Our society is already on a path toward a post-work world, thanks to unions, labor laws, automation, and the environment. Humans work less than ever before, and more jobs formerly done by humans are now being completed by machines.”

“Do we want robots doing all of our jobs?” Chet asked.

“The thing is, there are so many bullshit jobs out there,” I said. “Jobs nobody wants to do, like picking fruit, and jobs that only exist because of how much we work, like dog walking.”

“You’re calling dog walking a bullshit job?” Chet asked.

“No, if someone likes walking other peoples’ dogs and is good enough at it to get paid, that’s great. What’s bullshit is our inability to walk our own dogs due to how much we’re working.”

“But you have a cat,” Chet said.

“You’re missing the point,” I said. “If we can all afford to work less, we can feel more relaxed, enjoy healthier lives, live more communally, pursue our hobbies more, and so on and so forth.”

“You want to be paid to be lazy.”

“That’s the thing, I don’t think people who aren’t working 9-to-5 jobs would be lazy. When we finish a full day of working hard for someone else, all we have the energy to do most nights is binge-watch TV. So, people think that’s all people will ever do if they aren’t working. But I suspect most people would actually be *more* productive members of society without a job.”

“You can’t prove that,” Chet said.

“I can share an anecdote. My father, after he retired, always complained that he worked harder as a retired man than he did when fully employed. He could have done nothing but watch TV all day, but instead he did chores, raised me, played sports, volunteered, and pursued his hobbies, like being an amateur ham radio operator. Hell, he even taught a class on it. He worked harder, but also felt more fulfilled. Of course, sometimes he watched *CSI: Miami* or *Ice Road Truckers*, but his Social Security check was still deposited in his bank account anyway. I think retiring at 65 is insanity, and we should encourage people to retire much earlier.”

“You mentioned Social Security,” Duncan said. “I understand it’s becoming insolvent. How could we afford to, in a sense, expand Social Security to everyone?”

“First off, money is a sham, and the idea that we only have a certain amount of it is an even larger sham. Second off, a Universal Basic Income would replace a lot of other social programs that are already being paid for that aren’t as effective, like food stamps. Third off, yes, taxes would have to be higher, certainly on corporations, but if that additional tax money is all returning to people’s bank accounts anyway, there’s no waste.”

“Why would corporations be willing to pay more in taxes?” asked Chet.

“I don’t know if ‘willing’ is the right word, but depending on their product or service, demand may actually increase as their potential customer base increases and people have more time. And with a Universal Basic Income, wages would probably decrease, which would be okay to a certain degree, and if you pass Universal Healthcare, then employers don’t have to provide insurance to their employees either. So, their taxes go up but expenses go down.”

“You’re a loon, good sir,” decreed Chet, “and I disagree fervently.”

“Maybe,” Olivia said, “the issue is that activities we don’t currently

consider to be work, like taking care of an elderly family member, raising children, pursuing an education, walking your dog, or creating art, have value and should be viewed as jobs by society and compensated as such."

"Yes!" I cried. "Yes, *that* is what I've been trying to say."

"Sorry we made you work for it," Duncan said.

We all felt like we needed a long break from the Radical Stance game by the time we reached our first stop. The Jampot was a bakery shop run by monks who used the money they earned selling baked goods to support their Byzantine Catholic Monastery. Outside, there was one vacant parking spot with a sign that read, "Reserved for Jesus," which I parked in.

"Oh?" Olivia asked, reading the sign.

"I'm sure he'll forgive me for this," I said, stepping out of the car.

The monk we found inside behind the counter was a gentle, merry, Friar Tuck-type with a big beard, a big belly, and an even bigger smile. The other monks working in the kitchen weren't speaking; some of them had tattoos peeking out from the edges of their robes. There was a sign in the kitchen that said "No Devils Allowed," but I had always presumed devilry was the main ingredient due to the sinfully delicious nature of their baked goods. We purchased jalapeño caramels, carrot cake muffins, peanut butter and jelly bars, cane sugar root beers, and a fruit cake soaked in brandy, bourbon, and rum.

We didn't talk nearly as much during the thirty-minute drive to Brockway Mountain, instead choosing to listen to music and focus on the beauty around us. When we reached the Lookout on top, we were about 700 feet above the level of Lake Superior and had a 360-degree view of the forests and lakes below.

As we gazed around us, none of us ventured to say to the others that it was beautiful—not because it went without saying, but because it so clearly went beyond saying. When words won't adequately capture something, sometimes silence says more.

After we all had a good look around and had let the mountain air fill up our lungs, we settled down on a large blanket and spread out our bounty before us. Olivia immediately grabbed and started unwrapping one of the carrot cake muffins.

"Mmm," she said, smiling as she took her first bite. "This was a great idea, Johnny." A little bit of muffin sprayed out of her mouth, which made her start laughing.

We talked as four old and new friends do about anything and everything: migratory bird patterns, embarrassing high school memories, the pros and cons of antelopes, the burgeoning overseas debts of the United States government... those kinds of things.

When we were tired of talking, Olivia pulled out her guitar. The first song she played was “Free Bird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd.

And oh, how free I felt at that moment. I was in the company of people I loved and who loved me back. There was nothing expected of me, and nothing I needed. And I was on top of a goddamn mountain. I was a goddamn mountain man. I felt like a goddamn mountain, man. I mean, damn, man.

So, I did what any self-respecting individual would do and got carried away in the moment. When the song was done, I stood up, took off my pants (revealing my new black and blue boxer briefs), jumped on top of a boulder, and yelled “I’m so ridiculously happy right now!” at the top of my lungs.

Upon completion, I turned around to find a pantsless Duncan standing unabashedly in his tighty-whities, waiting for a turn on the boulder. I jumped down and he took my place, shouting, “For one brief moment, everything makes perfect sense!”

By now, Chet and Olivia had both taken their pants off, but Olivia beat Chet to the rock. “I love everything!” she screamed while flipping dueling free birds to the world. For the official record, her underwear was red.

But dammit if Chet didn’t steal the show perched up on that rock in his American flag boxer briefs, silhouetted by the setting sun, bellowing the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. I don’t feel uncomfortable admitting to you now that the sight brought a tear of joy to my eye.¹⁸

The setting sun behind him, however, was a reminder that time was a resource I was running dangerously low on. Earthly time, at least.

When we had all put our pants back on and Olivia was huddled next to me for warmth, I realized I was sad to be leaving. All in all, Earth had been good to me. If anything, I had been the abusive one in the relationship.

¹⁸ It wasn’t until much later that I thought to ask Chet why he had memorized the Preamble. It turns out he used to have to recite it while doing wall sits during varsity basketball practices and it stuck with him. I kind of wish I had let the magic stay magic.

* * *

But, alas, it was time for me to enact phase three of my plan, which was to be completely honest with them in the most roundabout, shifty, and circuitous way possible. I posed them each with a question: "If you were to write a movie, what would that movie be about?"

"Okay, here's my idea," Duncan said, far too quickly, as if he had been waiting to be asked this question his whole life. "There's this gravedigger named Doug who also happens to be a hopeless romantic. And when I say hopeless, I mean he falls in love quickly, unexpectedly, and with all the wrong people. One day, Doug's digging this grave for a recently deceased stage actress named Jezebel. She had no family or money, so it's just him, alone, lowering her body into an unmarked grave without a casket. He accidentally catches a glimpse of her cold, gray lips and dammit if Doug doesn't fall in love. He's alone and doesn't see the harm in it, so he makes love to her lifeless body, buries her, and heads to a bar to mourn over having just laid his love to rest."

"..." said everyone in perfect unison.

"Nine months later, this little half-alive, half-dead zombie child claws its way out of the ground. At that point, I'm not sure if it would be better to turn it into a zombie apocalypse story or show this half-dead child being picked on in school and later grow up to discover the cure for cancer but not share it with anyone because everyone was such a relentless dick to him." After a fairly long pause, he added, "I'm imagining this being directed by Tim Burton."

His story was initially met by silence from his human audience but by an absolute crescendo of chirping from the hundreds of horny crickets around us. They simply wouldn't shut up about it. Of course, only male crickets chirp, and then only to attract mates, but it certainly *seemed* like Duncan's story had stirred some deep feelings within them.

"Duncan, how often do you think about necrophilia?" I finally asked.

"Not often, probably no more than the average person," he said. "Although I've never been the average person, so I may be unqualified to make that judgment."

"Well, it's certainly a creative idea," Olivia said.

"It's a bit wrong, isn't it?" Chet asked. "Even for Hollywood?"

"Let me ask you a question, Chet," Duncan said, quite pleased

the topic of morality had come up. "Is it immoral to hump a chair?"

"What?" Chet stammered, unsure of how *he* had ended up in the hot seat. "I... I guess not. Weird, maybe, but not immoral."

"Is it immoral to hump a sex doll that resembles a human?"

"No," Chet said, more certain this time of the correct answer. "It's not immoral."

"So why is it immoral to hump a dead human?" Duncan asked, quite stoically.

"Are you serious?" Chet asked in disbelief. "Because they're human. Or were."

"Exactly. They aren't alive anymore. So, why do we care? Who is it hurting? Who is the victim?"

"Well, to the deceased person's loved ones, the body has emotional value. They still have rights, even if the corpse doesn't."

"So, the morality of the action depends on whether or not anyone cares? If the corpse were to belong to a hobo, it'd be morally permissible? Or if no one ever found out?"

"That wasn't what I was saying at all!" Chet stammered. "On that note, what exactly are *you* saying?"

Duncan chuckled. "I'm not trying to argue that necrophilia is morally correct behavior, I just find it fascinating where society chooses to draw the line on morally correct behavior."

"I see..." I said. "So, Chet, what's your idea for a story?"

Chet cleared his throat. "Well, I was thinking the other day that the world needs more good bromances, so I would probably make one of those about two buddies who grew up being close all their lives. I mean metaphorically and literally close, like they were both products of donor insemination and were stored in adjacent vials at the sperm bank. Even better, their respective donor fathers could've been two best bros who went to the sperm bank together so that they could earn some money for a foosball table. I really want to explore the roots of the brotherhood, though, real artful like. Oh, and I'd have Judd Apatow direct."

"Really?" I asked. "Your idea for a movie is a story about two bros who spend time at the sperm bank together?"

"Don't say it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like *that*. Like it's beneath you. It would be really funny. At the end I'd also make it come full circle, maybe with the two bros

repeating history and going to a sperm bank together so they can afford an XBOX One or something.”

“Oh, I bet you’d make them come full circle,” I quipped.

“You’re not even giving it a chance. I bet the story would do quite well.”

“Me too,” I admitted. “It’s a profitable subject matter, because sperm sells.”

Duncan groaned and Chet flipped me off, his middle finger looking dull in the twilight.

“Gee whiskas,” I said, “some people like to suck the pun out of everything. Okay, Olivia, it’s your turn.”

“Wow,” she said. “I’m humbled you think I’m capable of coming up with a story seeing how I don’t have a penis and all. The first two stories featured them so heavily, I’d swear they were the main storytelling organ. But I might have an idea despite my creative disadvantage.”

“Eh, I only have a micro-advantage anyway,” I said.

“Charming,” she replied. “So, Mary is thirty, an accountant, and emotionally unintelligent. She’s just been dumped by Brian, her boyfriend of two years. She’s completely fallen apart and is having an extremely difficult time putting her life back together. But being the jealous type, while they were still together she had researched and inquired about all of Brian’s ex-girlfriends, of which there were many. In a moment of extreme weakness, she decides to find them all on Facebook and invite them to a group chat to ask them all how they managed to get over Brian.”

“Oh, that’s sad,” I said.

“Sure, but that’s only the first chapter. Instead of ignoring or blocking her like I would have done, these women teach her to be strong and not to rely on a male counterpart to frame her identity. They get together for a Girls Night Out bar crawl, one thing leads to another, and they end up putting pantyhose over their heads and robbing a liquor store. A year later, they’ve worked their way up to robbing the bank where Mary works.”

“So, it’s a heist story?” Duncan asked.

“Absolutely. They’re stealing their dignities back, they’re seizing power, and they’re taking control.”

“And becoming felons,” he added. “All because of Brian.”

“Brian isn’t even a credited role,” Olivia stated, coolly. “He’s just a cog in the larger patriarchy. The women choose not to respect a

society that doesn't respect them."

"Do you want to become one of these women?" Duncan asked, skeptically.

"Don't you?" Olivia shot back.

"I just like arguing about ethics," Duncan said. "I think your story has potential. I'm just asking if being dumped by Brian gives people the right to disregard the law?"

"Is the problem that I have them robbing a bank? Would you like it more if they just had sex with dead dudes instead?"

Duncan laughed. "I'd *definitely* go see that movie."

Olivia sighed and turned to me. "Remember when I thought it was just going to be you and me tonight?"

I gave a nervous chuckle. "What, and miss out on these delightful conversations?"

"Hey, we still haven't heard your idea for a movie," Chet said to me.

"True," I replied, taking a deep breath. "My story isn't as well thought out as all of yours. It only has a first act right now, without a clear second or third. I envision a small group of friends, much like ours. One of them is approached by an alien or other-worldly spirit who gives him the chance, not of a lifetime, but of possibly the entire history of humanity... to receive a guided tour of the galaxy."

"That could be a neat story," Olivia said, sensing my anxiety.

"Well, here's the kicker. He knows he wants to do it, *has* to do it, but he also doesn't think he can do it alone. So he needs to convince his friends to come along. I'm struggling with this part of the story, so I was hoping maybe you guys could help me workshop it. For instance, if I asked you three to come with me into space without being able to tell you what was awaiting us, what would you guys say?"

"That you're crazy," Duncan replied.

"Or just joking," Olivia offered.

"I'd say 'no,'" Chet said.

"But you would know me," I said. "You would know that I'm reasonably sane and that if I promise that something is true, I really believe it's true."

"I suppose then I would at least believe that you believe it's true," Duncan replied. "Which would probably make me feel concerned about your well-being."

"That's helpful," I said. "I guess I'd be interested in learning what

your thought process would be if you suspended your belief for a moment and solely focused on whether or not you wanted to go to space.”

“In this hypothetical scenario, would you be able to guarantee our safety?” Olivia asked.

“No.”

“Then why would you even want to go yourself?” Chet asked.

“Maybe I don’t have a choice,” I said. “But even if I did, I think I’d want to go to be able to learn a little bit more about life, about the Universe, and about myself. I’d jump at any chance to answer the questions that all humans are saddled with.”

“But why would you need to leave Earth to answer them?”

“Maybe it would be a futile endeavor,” I acknowledged, “but it seems like a better strategy than resetting computer passwords and whispering, ‘It’s okay, password. I’m insecure too,’ like I have been.”

“I suspect I’d join you,” Duncan said, “if only to make sure you didn’t misinterpret everything. If I didn’t go, I’d regret it my whole life.”

“Me too,” Olivia said. “I’m always looking for new sources of inspiration as an artist, and something as large as the galaxy seems like a cool place to start.”

“I still wouldn’t,” Chet said. “I don’t have the same innate need to understand everything. It seems too dangerous to leave the relative safety of Earth only to ask some questions that I’m not sure I want to know the answers to anyway. Plus, there are responsibilities here to think of, like my clients.”

“I know you love your job and your life here, and I think that’s great, but what if there’s an even bigger calling for you and you just don’t know about it yet because it’s waiting for you out there? What if there is an entire, I don’t know, I’m spitballing here, *Planet Fitness*?” I asked, pointing emphatically toward the night sky. “You’re still really young; it’s *okay* to explore a little. Plus, you’d be with Duncan and me. You couldn’t ask for a better bromance than that!”

“I mean, okay, I guess,” he said, begrudgingly, “but you’re selling this scenario awfully hard right now.”

I could sense I actually had a chance of pulling this thing off; I just needed to take it home.

“Next question: would you all want to tell your family that you’re about to leave on an intergalactic quest, or would you choose to not tell them because the truth would be difficult to understand or

accept?”

“I guess if I really wanted to go, I probably wouldn’t tell them,” Duncan said. “Because, while I may believe you, it’s highly unlikely that they would.”

“I would just tell my parents that I love them,” Olivia said. “They’d beg to come along if I told them the truth.”

“If I told my dad,” Chet said, “he would demand to know what drugs I was on and tell me to come home... and I would listen to him.”

Moment of courage, Johnny. You can do this. “Olivia...” I began, trying not to tremble. “What if I was to ask you to tell your parents you love them right now?”

There was silence as the other three stared at me with growing trepidation, beginning to realize that this conversation may no longer be about an idea I had for a movie.

“Are you being serious right now?” Duncan asked.

“I am,” I said, maintaining eye contact with him to further emphasize the point.

Olivia had been staring at the corner of my mouth this whole time, looking for the hint of a smile. Not seeing one, she looked up to the sky and then pulled out her phone.

“What’s going on, Johnny?” Duncan demanded.

“Okay, I’ve been wanting to say this all day,” I said. “I’ve had a really weird three days since quitting my job. Excellent,” I quickly corrected, looking at Olivia, “but weird. And the kicker was being visited by... well... an alien in my apartment last night.”

“An alien?” Chet asked. “Did he look ancient? Was he a pyramid-builder by trade?”

It suddenly occurred to me that I wouldn’t have to convince Chet that an alien had visited me. That wouldn’t be weird to him. It was the coming with me part that would be the challenge. Anyway, I needed to convince Duncan first.

“Duncan, remember those fortunes Sarah wrote for us yesterday?”

“Sure, you’ll be visited by old men and I... should welcome an adventure,” he said, suddenly struck by the implications. “Did you put her up to that?”

“No, I had no idea what she was talking about at the time either, but I swear they’re coming true, dude.”

"She also told me not to miss the adventure when it found me," he said.

Chet had gotten up and started pacing. "So... at any moment an alien is going to appear in front of you?" he asked.

"No, he's going to transport me to him," I replied.

"How soon?" Duncan asked.

I held out my silver watch with the countdown timer. "According to the watch he gave me, a few minutes."

"I'll go with you," Olivia said, coolly.

"How are you so calm about this?" Duncan asked her. "Why did you immediately accept Johnny's story?"

"I just have a good feeling about it," she said. "And the story isn't that weird. I once lived with a spirit portal to another dimension in my living room."

"Okay, so, yeah, you'll have to tell us all that story some time," I said. "But in the meantime, you're about to teleport, so your superhero wish is sorta coming true."

Olivia's face lit up. "Oh my God, you're right!"

"Your watch says two minutes," Duncan said. He had been staring at it for a while now.

"Oh, I get it," Chet said, rather unconvincingly. "You're all joking." It was more of a plea than a statement.

"I don't think I am," I said, "but we'll find out soon enough."

Duncan pulled out his phone and texted Sarah.

"You each have one last chance to back out, but if you want to come—and I really want you all to come—you'll need to be touching me. If you don't, no hard feelings. And if I don't see you again, please know I love you all."

I took a deep breath and then bravely extended my hand into the middle of our circle. There was a long, awkward moment as my hand was left hanging by itself.

"You guys just told me you would go if I asked," I said, meekly.

"Yeah, but that was then," replied Duncan.

"And what is this?"

"Now... and now is a lot scarier than then."

"I know," I said, softly. "And I'm sorry, but you only have a minute left to decide."

The other three looked at each other before Olivia slowly extended her hand until it rested on top of mine. Her other hand was

gripping her guitar tightly. Duncan soon followed Olivia's lead.

"For the record, I'm not doing this for you," Olivia whispered in my ear.

"Good," I replied.

"I *am* doing this for you," Duncan whispered in my other ear.

"I know," I replied.

Meanwhile, Chet took a swig of root beer in the hopes that the word "beer" in the title would extend some liquid courage to him. He would have been better off having some of the fruitcake.

"Fifteen seconds, Chet," I said.

Chet still looked noncommittal with five seconds to go before he grumbled "damn you, bro" and put his hand in the circle. The scene looked completely childish, like we were in a *Spy Kids* movie, but the stakes were anything but.

"Great," he began to say, "now we're all holding han—"

Chet's words were cut off as "then" abandoned us for "now," which most would agree is much scarier than then. We couldn't be asked how we felt, however, as we had all just disappeared from the top of Brockway Mountain.

“—ds...” Chet finished. He had originally planned on saying more, but our sudden relocation to a spaceship made the rest of his statement become trapped in his throat like a Nigerian prince in a spam filter.

When we rematerialized in the same white, half-spherical room I had wet myself in previously, you may imagine that there was an accompanying flash, bang, or poof of smoke. But one second we were sitting holding hands surrounded by loud, horny crickets and the next we were sitting holding hands surrounded by a silence so intense we could barely hear our own thoughts. Even this belied the sensation of the moment. There was something elaborately unsettling about how I felt, like my nostrils had swapped places and my socks were no longer matching.

I slowly got up and started to nervously stretch and wiggle my extremities. Olivia and Chet, looking to me for guidance, got up and started doing the same thing. The only one who didn't look completely ridiculous was Duncan, who remained sitting on the floor transfixed by the crushing immensity of space outside the window.

Suddenly, the rotation of the ship made the Earth begin to appear, which elicited a collective gasp. Most of the western hemisphere was dark, but there were swaths of lights revealing the hiding spots of the humans below.

Our positions made ever so clearer, we each reacted in our own unique way. I, for instance, felt slightly reassured that I hadn't made all of this up, or at least comforted by the idea that if I *was* crazy, the illusion of companionship and adventure probably beat reality anyway.

Chet was convinced he was in a dream, which demonstrated that we each processed unusual events according to our respective levels

of existential dread. Whereas I presumed there was something wrong with my mind and things would only snowball from here, Chet was so mentally grounded on Earth he couldn't help but feel certain things would return to normal as soon as he woke up.

Olivia, who wasn't afraid of craziness or dreams, walked over and touched the glass with both hands and stared passionately. Her eyes were wide and the corners of her mouth were slowly forming into an unmistakable smile.

And Duncan, well, Duncan probably wouldn't like me sharing this with you, but I'm dead, so what's the point in keeping secrets now? Duncan at that moment was experiencing a fairly serious fear boner. Ever since puberty, he would get a stiffy whenever something scared him, which was why he never went to prom or tried out for any of the high school plays.

"But Johnny, how do you *know* Duncan had an erection?" you want to ask. And the answer is no, I didn't have to look. Our friendship was so strong I could sense it. Contrary to popular opinion, male friends can share their deepest, darkest secrets and feelings with each other and not be completely emasculated by the experience. Clearly.

Duncan had remained seated in an attempt to hide his fear, but his efforts were unnecessary. Even he couldn't focus on his erection when he saw the Earth, and he slowly stood up.

"Remind me to tell you guys about this dream I'm having," Chet said. "The CGI is amazing."

"You're not dreaming," I said, as gently as I could. "If this is anyone's dream, it's mine."

"Then why does it feel like I'm taking a test and I don't know any of the answers?"

"Because this is one of those moments in life you simply can't prepare for."

"A-ha!" Chet said, pointing a finger at me. "That's *exactly* what dream Johnny would say! You can't trick me, spaceman. My Ke\$ha ringtone alarm will go off any moment now."

Duncan whispered, "Am I a man dreaming I'm an alien, or an alien dreaming I'm a man?"

"I'm not sure I'm equipped to answer that question," I said.

"Nor I," Duncan stated, calmly.

"Will you guys just shut up and look at the pretty planet?" Olivia interjected.

“We’re still trying to process everything,” I said, a little too defensively.

“Me too,” she said, softer this time. “Look to our spiritual mother for strength and guidance.”

We fell silent and looked at the Earth, which was now completely visible and perfectly framed by the window. Gaia, Mother Earth, had birthed us, raised us, supported us as we grew, and caught us when we fell. The sight of her was powerful and centering.

We were birds who had left our nest only to land on a nearby tree, looking back at our home from a new perspective with love and sadness, preparing for the flight ahead on strange winds to skies unknown. I guess you needed to leave your planet to truly appreciate it.

Olivia slowly extended her hand to find mine, an act that felt erotic in the deepest philosophical mix of excitement, connectedness, and romance. My very soul became aroused.

I reached out and did the same thing to Duncan, which had the opposite effect. The security of my hand hastened the departure of his fear, returning him to a state of welcomed flaccidity.

It was Chet who finally broke the silence. “Where’s the alien?” he asked. “What does he look like?”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” I said. “He... well... he looked exactly like Kurt Vonnegut.”

“Vonnegut was an alien?” Duncan asked.

“No. Vonnegut wasn’t an alien, and the alien isn’t Vonnegut. It only looked like Vonnegut.”

“That doesn’t seem like a very good disguise,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“Why would I need a disguise?” asked a voice behind us.

We all spun around and gasped. It was Kurt Vonnegut... and it wasn’t.

“Oh my God!” shouted Olivia. “Stevie Nicks!?”

“Stevie Nicks?” Duncan asked. “That’s some old white dude in a toga!”

“Mom? Now I *know* I’m dreaming,” Chet exclaimed.

“Oh my,” Vonnegut said, sighing. He explained to us, much as he had before, that we were only seeing a reflection of our imaginations. He appeared to us as someone we trusted.

“I’m not sure what my imagination was going for,” Duncan

reflected. "Are you Socrates? Plato?"

"I am nobody."

"Just dust in the wind?" he asked. "Socrates would say that."

"I appear to you as you want me to appear, nothing more, nothing less."

"So, the difference lies between perception and reality. That sounds more like Plato."

"Who you think you see is not the one speaking, just as I am not whom you see."

"Yes, but that's what I'm trying to figure out. Who aren't you?" Duncan asked.

"Everyone," said Vonnegut, his mustache gleaming in the bright light.

"Are you nothing?" Olivia asked.

"I am nobody, but I am not nothing."

"Nor is he the same nobody he was moments ago or will be moments in the future. Just like I am not the same me I was this morning or the same me I will be tomorrow," Duncan reflected, before adding, "Who you aren't might be Aristotle."

"Why does it matter to you whom I appear as?" Vonnegut asked, his eyes twinkling from behind his glasses.

"Because it will teach me more about myself."

"And why is knowledge of yourself important?"

"Epicurus believed that the point of philosophy and the point of knowledge was to increase our happiness and lose our fears." *And our fear boners*, he didn't add.

"Then maybe that is what I appear to you as... the embodiment of knowledge itself."

"And you're some old white dude?" he said, a note of disappointment in his voice. "My subconscious needs to check itself."

Olivia let out a nervous squeal. "I can't help but feel really excited to be meeting my idol right now, even though I know you're not actually Stevie Nicks," she said. "And I love your outfit! That hat! And those heels!"

Kurt looked down at his purple sweater vest and khaki slacks. "Your imagination has good taste," he said.

"Okay, but who are you *really*?" she asked. "What's your name?"

"As I told Johnny, my name does not matter."

"But that's not an answer!" she protested. "What should we call

you?”

“Hmm... there was a name I was called once.”

“Yes?”

“Names in this particular language were based on beautiful sounds, not words, which you might find unusual.”

“Everything about this is unusual,” she said. “Try us.”

Vonnegut shrugged and opened his mouth wide. “BYEAHHHHHHH!” he ululated.

Now, if you’ve ever had the pleasure of watching videos of goats yelling like humans on the Internet, you know it’s one of the funniest sounds in the Universe. However, that humor is only funny in context, when it’s coming out of the mouth of a goat through your work computer as you’re waiting for it to be five o’clock so you can go home. But in other contexts, such as when it’s unexpectedly emanating from the mouth of an alien manipulating its appearance to resemble someone you trust, that noise is utterly terrifying. Suffice it to say, Duncan felt a renewed ruffling in his trousers.

“...But you may call me whatever you like,” Vonnegut added, sensing our unease.

“This dream’s so fucked up,” Chet groaned as he placed his hands on top of his head. “My mom’s a goat.”

“Well, uhh, what should we call him?” I asked, turning away from my literary-hero-turned-greatest-fear.

“You just said ‘him,’ but Chet and I see women,” Olivia pointed out. “Though that sound certainly helped shatter any illusion I was still holding on to.”

“Should we pick a gender-neutral name?” Duncan asked. “A number, perhaps? Do we just scream at him?”

“You humans sure do feel an unusual need to classify everything,” the abstract something behind me said.

“Not Stevie Nicks, what do you look like when you aren’t manipulating your appearance?” Olivia asked.

“Like this,” said Not Stevie Nicks, before vanishing. *Poof*

What the hell? Okay, so he certainly has a phantom vibe going on. Or she, or it, or whoever the fuck.

Poof He/she/it/whoever the fuck reappeared as Vonnegut, an unidentifiable old white dude, Stevie Nicks, and Chet’s mom before explaining. “Manipulation is how I am capable of interacting with you in four dimensions, but I myself actually exist outside of dimensions,

so I am not usually within your realm of observation.”

“Wait, so are you sort of like a human soul?” Duncan asked.

“I am unclear as to whether or not you are trying to insult me,” replied WTF. “But since I cannot be perceived with traditional human senses and you are not convinced of my existence... sure, I very vaguely resemble to you something you do not understand.”

There was silence as this new information settled in our brains like a turd in a toilet bowl.

“But come, humans, let me show you the rest of the spaceship as we become better acquainted.”

WTF pressed a spot on the wall and a hole began to appear in the center of the floor. When it was about two meters in diameter, WTF pressed the spot again and the hole stopped expanding.

Looking through the hole, I could see what looked to be the other half of the sphere we were in with lights similar to those in our own half, only these lights seemed to be pointing up rather than down.

“What are we looking at?” I asked.

“The floors of this spaceship are interlaced with a thin layer of translucent and permeable gravitational plating, which accounts for the artificial gravity you are now experiencing. The gravitational plating splits the spaceship in half, so the reason the lights in that room appear to you to be pointing up is because they are experiencing gravitational forces in the exact opposite direction as the lights in this room.”

“But how can something with so little mass exert so much gravitational force?”

“Gravitational force is caused by quantum mechanical strings, or waves. Once a species is able to learn how to harness these waves, I understand space travel becomes much more comfortable. With this particular spaceship, graviton strings were manipulated to create artificial gravity.”

“Oof!” muttered Chet, who thought his dream was starting to get a little too heavy.

To further illustrate his point, WTF took Chet’s baseball cap from his head and dropped it straight into the hole. It went through to the other side, but then came back through the hole to our side before disappearing down the hole again. It eventually found itself in the middle of the hole, halfway on either side, where it sat quivering before coming to a complete rest at its final equilibrium point.

“But how do we get to the other side?” I asked, continuing my recent trend of asking questions out loud that made me feel like I was the butt of a Heikki and Toivo joke.¹⁹

“You simply travel through the hole,” stated WTF. “I would not recommend stepping into it, however, as you will find yourself upside down on the other side. The easiest and safest way is to lie down on your side and roll in. The quickest and most graceful way is to do a half front flip. You should all practice.”

As I got down on my knees on the edge of the hole, I felt like I was a little kid again trying to learn how to dive. I slowly stuck my right hand through the hole, expecting to come in contact with a liquid or gelatinous substance, but all I felt was air. The only difference was that the farther my hand went down into the hole, the more it felt like I was raising my hand above my head, meaning blood was flowing to my elbow from both directions.

I brought my right hand back through and then placed both hands on the edge. Not worrying about how I looked, I stuck my butt up into the air and stuck my head through the hole, allowing me to see the floor on the other side. Then, after trying to do a somersault and a pushup simultaneously, I ended up completely on the other side with my hands still holding the edge but the rest of my body lifted a couple of feet off the floor. The artificial gravity did its job, however, and my body came back down, cracking my chin against the floor.

“I recommend everyone else try a different strategy,” WTF said as I slowly re-dragged the rest of my body into the other room. “Someone should surely produce a case study on that attempt one day.”

After Olivia, Duncan, and Chet more cautiously rolled their bodies through, we took note of our surroundings. Everything was the same as the previous room except for a number of large, brown and white cardboard boxes.

WTF answered my question before I could ask it this time. “While Johnny was convincing you all to come, I took the opportunity to stock up on supplies. You may open the boxes.”

We didn’t need to open all of the brown boxes, as they were clearly labeled “Lunchables.” The white boxes, however, contained

¹⁹ “How do you get to da udder side?” Heikki shouted from one side of a river to his friend Toivo on the other side. “But, Heikki, you’re already *on* da udder side!” Toivo shouted back.

hundreds of CDs. More specifically, it contained hundreds of Korean pop CDs.

“The brown boxes have food for humans. The white boxes have food for the spaceship.”

“Food for the ship?” Olivia asked.

“Because it is a cheap and clean source of energy, some of the systems on board this spaceship operate via sound. Not the most energy-intensive devices, but some of the smaller, less important systems like life support.”

“*Less* important?” Chet asked.

“That’s freaking cool!” Olivia exclaimed.

“Did you only pick up K-pop?” Duncan asked. “That barely counts as music.”

“Electropop songs measure out as particularly good sources of energy,” WTF said with a slight twinkle in Kurt Vonnegut’s eyes.

“Jesus Christ!” Duncan muttered. “Talk about a dystopian future.”

“Not Stevie Nicks, what do you eat?” Olivia asked.

“As a bodiless entity that exists outside of your dimensions, I do not eat food. I require no nourishment at all.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Chet was punching himself repeatedly in his left quadriceps. I rushed over and caught his fist. “Chet, what are you doing?” I whispered.

“Johnny... am I dreaming?” he asked, trembling.

“No.”

“Are we really in space?”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yup.”

“Can you hold me for a second?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” I said as I gave him a firm, solid hug.

After a moment, he whispered “thanks” before lying and claiming that he “felt better now.” Chet was actually feeling extremely light-headed as we rejoined the others.

“Hey, what happened to our bodies when you beamed us up?” Olivia inquired.

“You were demolecularized,” WTF stated. “All of the molecules in your body were copied and disassembled on Earth and then reconstructed on this spaceship.”

“Holy shit!” she exclaimed. “That’s fucking nuts!”

“Sometimes science is.”

I stuck my hand down my pants. Everything was accounted for, and I let out a sigh of relief. Duncan didn’t seem to feel the need to do this.

Olivia turned to me and whispered, “You know, besides the demolecularization bit, I’m happy to be sharing this adventure with you.” She grabbed the hand that hadn’t just been in my pants and squeezed.

Once again, Olivia’s affection covered me in a warm blanket of electric bliss. There are so few suitable words to describe this feeling of excitement, and yet so many synonyms for disgust, as if the English language was designed to pit us against each other. Detestation, animosity, hostility, loathing, bitterness, malevolence, enmity, resentment, sickening, nauseating, revulsion...

“What are some of the systems that don’t run off of sound?” Duncan asked, disrupting my rambling thought process.

“The wormhole amplifier for one,” WTF replied.

Duncan gasped. “Did you just say ‘wormhole amplifier’?”

“How else would we travel through space?”

“I don’t know. I figured you’d be able to travel faster than the speed of light or something.”

“It is impossible to travel faster than the speed of light. It is an unbreakable speed limit for the Universe. With wormholes, you can simply decrease the distance you have to go by bending space.”

“Like a spaghetti noodle,” I said, helpfully.

“Oh?” WTF inquired.

“It would be quicker to get from one end of the noodle to the other by bending it so that the ends touch rather than traveling along the length of the noodle,” I explained.

“Sure, if you find that sort of nonsense to be helpful. Like a spaghetti noodle.”

“Unless the noodle is uncooked, of course. Then that shit would snap in half,” Chet said.

“The Universe has been on the stove for a while, Chet, so I think we’re safe,” Duncan said.

“Only trying to help. Johnny’s the one that went all metaphysical on us.”

“I think you mean metaphorical,” I said.

“Whatever,” said Chet as he began to feel a dull pain in his head. “Tomato, tomato.”

“So, the ship can simply create a wormhole to the desired destination?” I asked.

“The spaceship does not create wormholes at all. Wormholes exist naturally, but are extremely miniature. What the spaceship does is locate these wormholes and make them large enough for the spaceship to pass through,” the visage of Kurt Vonnegut explained, looking bored and tired from all of our smallbrain questions.

“But how do you know where the wormhole leads?” Duncan asked.

“The spaceship has a computational brain of its own that can determine where each wormhole will lead based on the topography of the Universe, although it can be wrong sometimes, since everything in space is constantly moving, sometimes in unexpected ways, and the amount of energy you put into a wormhole determines how much space bends for you. It is all based on algorithms and extremely good guessing. I also recommend trying to be lucky, as it has been known to help, from time to time.”

“Could you open up a wormhole that would take us from Earth to the other side of the galaxy?” Olivia asked.

“No, it is much too far and would require too much energy. A trip over such a long distance requires one to make a series of smaller jumps across multiple bends.”

I was completely hooked by this point. Every statement that came out of Kurt Vonnegut’s beautiful, imaginary, mustachioed mouth was reshaping how I saw the Universe.

“So, the Universe is shaped less like a constantly expanding basketball,” Duncan observed, “and more like a constantly expanding paper crane.”

“I am unfamiliar with the properties of paper cranes or basketballs,” said WTF, “so I can neither confirm nor deny your likely brilliant observation.”

All of this information was difficult to process in real time, and some of us handled it better than others. Unfortunately for Chet, the headache he had felt coming moments earlier had arrived swiftly and brutally like the Mongol horde to the southern steppes of his brain.

“If K-pop powers the less energy-intensive systems, what powers the wormhole amplifier?” Duncan asked.

“Come with me,” WTF said.

We followed him down a corridor and entered the main cabin of the ship. There were doors on either side, which we were told led to our quarters. We continued to the back of the ship, which contained a bathroom and storage room on one side of the gravitational plating and the docking bay on the other. The bay had an emergency hatch in case anybody ever needed to leave the ship by a means other than teleportation, although leaving the ship while in the depths of space was strongly discouraged. From either room, you could see the ship's engine and rocket nozzle thrusters outside the window.

"It is an antimatter engine," WTF said. "Antimatter is like normal matter, but it has opposite charges. Its protons have negative charges and its electrons have positive charges. The antineutrons are similarly composed of antiquarks—specifically one up antiquark and two down antiquarks."

I nodded as if I understood what he was talking about. I knew quarks were really, really unfathomably small. But truthfully, I lost perspective when it came to anything smaller than a pixel.

Meanwhile, Chet's Migranean Horde had conquered its way to the rest of his body and was practicing biological warfare, catapulting diseased cadavers toward his stomach as part of its siege.

"The rings you see through the window are magnetic storage rings, which separate antimatter from normal matter. The magnetic fields safely move the antimatter around until it is needed. When antimatter comes in contact with matter, both particles instantly destroy each other and create an enormous amount of energy. The engine has a feed system which collects antimatter and collides it with matter, releasing the resultant energy."

Unable to withstand the invasion, Chet's last remaining defenses fell.

"Then a long magnetic nozzle directs the energy created by the matter-antimatter reaction through the thruster, allowing the spaceship to accelerate extremely quickly."

Somewhere between "thruster" and "accelerate," Chet began to throw up. He vomited. He barfed. He disgorged. He heaved. He puked. He honked. He retched. He ralphed. He spewed. He tossed his cookies. He freed his lunch. He upchucked. He projectiled. Some of his insides became his outsides. He prayed to the porcelain god, albeit not before urping a little bit on Kurt Vonnegut's purple sweater vest.

"Sorry, Mom!" Chet said, wiping his lips with the back of his

hand. "Please, continue with whatever you were saying."

It was unsightly, but I couldn't blame Chet. There are so many words to describe the experience of greeting your guts, it's like the English language was designed to make us spit up on each other.

"It is okay," WTF said, calmly. "Nausea is a common side effect of beaming. It typically stops after the first or second demolecularization."

"I feel better now," Chet said, smiling. "I expunged all the little angry men that were inside me."

"I'm happy for you," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Okay, so all of this science is cool in theory, but I want to see it in action. You all still have the chance to go back home before we take off."

"And miss traveling through a wormhole?" Duncan asked. "Thank you, but I'll stay."

"Me too!" Olivia said. "This is definitely the weirdest date I've ever been on, but also by far the coolest."

"I'm not about to demolecularize again," Chet said. "And I think you'll need me to keep you all out of trouble."

"Great!" I said. "To the control room!"

We all returned to the main control room, a journey during which, I am proud to report, I did not crack my chin again.

"Do we need to be wearing seatbelts?" Duncan asked.

"No," WTF answered. "The spaceship has inertial dampeners to counter the effects of acceleration and deceleration. Without them, seat belts would do you no good as your eyes would pop out of your head and your brains would splatter inside your skull."

"Oof!" Olivia muttered.

"There are a few CDs on the table there," WTF said. "Put one in, and I will initiate the matter-antimatter reaction."

"You mean to tell me this baby has a CD player?" Olivia asked.

"It has a universal data reader. Take the disk out of its case and put it in the reader." Kurt's finger was pointing at a box with a gelatinous, primordial ooze type of slime in it.

"Wow, that's awfully convenient," Duncan said, sarcastically.

"That is the point of technology," Vonnegut said.

Olivia took out a CD with six Korean guys dressed all in black looking back wistfully at the camera, removed the disc, and put it in the ooze. A song that sounded like how a Taco Bell Strawberry

Frutista Freeze tastes began playing.

“Oof,” Duncan muttered.

“Won’t we technically be going faster than the speed of light?” I asked.

“Not technically or in any other manner. It is true that we will arrive at our destination in a shorter period of time than the light traveling outside of the wormhole, but the light inside the wormhole is traveling faster than we are, so we will still not be breaking the speed limit.”

I saw what looked like a microphone and picked it up to use as a prop. It was, of course, actually a high-density entropy relativity ding-dong positron spectrometer, or some such nonsense, but I doubt I have to tell you that.

“Welcome to the monkey house, and thank you for flying Wampeter Airlines; this is your captain speaking,” I announced. “We are coming up to our target wormhole and will expand it momentarily. If you have any concerns, just remember that spaceship travel is safer than traveling by motor car. We should arrive at an unknown destination in an indeterminate amount of time. Until then, I hope you enjoy the trip, and we look forward to having you onboard in the future.”

“And where *is* our destination?” Duncan asked.

Just then, a matter-antimatter collision occurred and the ship sped up considerably. At the same time, energy was diverted to make a wormhole larger, and the ship passed through the three-dimensional event horizon, or doorway, of the wormhole.

Kurt Vonnegut appeared to smile as the curls of his hair bobbed ever so slightly. “Wherever I feel like,” he said.

“Oof,” I muttered, wondering what I had just gotten my friends into.

The inertial dampeners must have done their job, as we could barely tell the difference without looking out the window. *Everything almost feels normal*, I thought.

“Hey, what’s the Wi-Fi password on this ship?” Chet asked.

Kurt Vonnegut turned, stared at him for a second, and then disappeared. *Poof*

Okay, maybe normal is the wrong word.

“Wherever I feel like” turned out to be roughly seven Earth days and 42 wormhole jumps away from where we had started. Our “destination,” if you could call it that, wasn’t technically located within a cosmic void, as we were still within the Milky Way Galaxy rather than in the vast nothingness between galaxies, but it *felt* like we were in a cosmic void. There was no solar system, thus no stars or planets, no stellar remnants, no asteroids, no noticeable space dust, no Death Star, not even a damn Starbucks.

If the first lesson space had taught me was that you needed to leave your planet to learn to appreciate it, the second one was that space travel, at least the commuting part, wasn’t all that interesting. When you travel through a wormhole, you aren’t in it for a very long period of time, and the visual effect of light bending was only cool the first, I don’t know, seven times. But the treks between wormholes were completely devoid of anything to look at other than very distant points of light. A drive through the state of Indiana was appealing by comparison.

I quickly realized that I hadn’t brought along enough books with me. In fact, I hadn’t brought along *any* books. I had a couple of changes of clothes, a phone with no service or viable means of being charged, my passport (it seemed like a good idea at the time), and the last three pills of *Ahnunggokwan* in case of emergency.

Worst of all, however, was my total lack of coffee. I had become very dependent on caffeine to function, and the abrupt cutback left me with classic withdrawal symptoms, including headaches, tiredness, and a profound distrust of the color yellow.

Good thing I brought my friends.

My friends, however, were also starting to lose patience with the

“adventure”, and by extension, with me. As you already know, my friends and I were quite capable of talking extremely passionately about almost any subject as a means of whiling away the time. But all we could think to talk about now was how little we understood what was happening. There are only so many times you can ask each other “Where are we going?” or “Why are we here?” before you run out of different ways to say “I don’t fucking know.”

Kurt Vonnegut, as I observed him, had only re-appeared three times, all for short durations. The first was to tell Chet not to press a rather aesthetically-pleasing button he had discovered in the docking bay. The second was to show us how to use the miniature electromagnetic climate change inducer, aka microwave oven, to warm our food. And the third, I’m quite convinced, was just to scare the shit out of Olivia and me right before we were about to kiss. Whenever one of us would ask him where we were going, or anything else for that matter, he would simply disappear again. *Poof*

* * *

After the first day, Duncan tried staying away from the main control room so he wouldn’t have to listen to any more K-pop. By the beginning of the fourth day, however, he had done a one-eighty and remained almost exclusively in the main control room because “at least every song was different.”

I found him there with bloodshot eyes on what I estimated to be day five.

“I have no idea what they’re saying or what a group of young people with such great hair even find noteworthy enough to sing about, but goddammit, it’s *culture*,” he told me, holding up a CD case. “I swear I heard Akon featured on a song yesterday. Or was it two days ago?”

“I’m glad you’ve learned to enjoy it,” I said.

“No... no. This isn’t enjoyment. I’d give a kidney to listen to System of a Down,” he said. “A tooth for Modest Mouse or a small toe for Eminem.”

“Any other requests?”

“Fuck it,” he replied. “I’d shave my head for Britney Spears. Remember that song ‘Teenage Dirtbag’ by Wheatus?”

“Of course.”

“How many elbows does one human being really need?” he

asked, rhetorically.

“It’s that bad, huh?”

His attention returned to the song currently playing, which sounded like a bowl of Fruity Pebbles had learned how to sing. “It’s all I have,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“I thought maybe I’d ask Vonnegut if it was possible to play it throughout the ship...” I said, hesitantly. “Should we, I mean, assuming he ever appears again?”

“이것은 나를 미치게 할 것이 확실하다,” responded Duncan, in a highly-choreographed, synthetic, dancepop daze.

“What?” I asked, knowing full well neither of us spoke Korean.

“No idea,” he muttered.

“Maybe we’d best restrict it to this room,” I said. “Duncan, how long have you been here?”

“Oh, I don’t know anymore.”

“Okay, let’s go eat some dinner,” I suggested.

“It’s dinnertime?” he asked.

“No idea.”

* * *

Chet spent his days working out, taking increasingly long showers, and leading us all in toe yoga stretches, or as he called it, “toga time.”

“Okay, everyone, shoes and socks off, please,” Chet said after we all lined up in one of the ship’s corridors. “Now, right foot first, keep your small toes down and lift your big toe up and hold. Up and hold... good, now down... good. Keep doing that. Up and hold... good, now down... good. 28 more reps, then we’ll switch to the left foot.”

“Why are we doing this?” I asked.

“We’re retraining the arch-supporting muscles in our lower legs to reduce the overpronation of our ankles and feet,” he said. “Okay, now right foot again, big toes down, small toes up this time. Up and hold... good, now down... good. 29 more reps before we move to our left feet.”

“Dumb it down for me from, like, a level seven to a level three,” I said. “Why are we doing this?”

“To keep our toes strong and make sure our body weight doesn’t crush our arches by working our tibialis posterior and peroneus

longus muscles.”

I stared at him in wonder as I lifted my small toes up and down.

“You know, Chet, how you felt the other day upon hearing the words ‘antineutron’ and ‘antiquark’ is how I feel when you talk about various body parts I didn’t even know I have.”

“Less talk, more toga!” Chet scolded me. “Okay, now, starting with your right pinky toe and moving to your right big toe, you’re going to slowly do the wave with your foot. Imagine you’re in a stadium and you’re trying to distract the other team.”

“Do the players on the other team have foot fetishes?” Duncan asked.

“They will after we’re done,” Chet said. “Good, now do it in reverse, moving from your big toe to your pinky toe. Great! 29 more and then we’ll switch feet.”

I felt very ridiculous waving with my toes. It also was a lot more difficult than I thought it would be. As it turned out, I had inflexible toes.

“Okay,” Chet said, “this will be more difficult, but try keeping your big toe and pinky toes down and your middle three toes up.”

“No,” I said.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” he asked.

“I’m done,” I said. “Toga time is over.”

“But we haven’t even worked on our arches yet!” Chet said. “Then we have a more in-depth foot and ankle strengthening program to begin.”

“Have fun,” I said. “I’m out.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be back,” Olivia said.

Olivia was right, of course; I returned after only a few minutes. There just wasn’t anything better for me to do while I was stuck on the spaceship. Plus, I felt toga time might have been working. My toes were starting to feel unusually toned.

Speaking of Olivia, she spent most of her time alone in her quarters playing guitar and working on new material. We did, however, have a long talk on day two.

“I know you didn’t come to space for me,” I told her as I sat on the corner of her cot, “but tell me more about why you decided to

come... if you feel comfortable, that is.”

“Sure,” she said. “I’ve been having trouble concentrating on my writing lately. Traveling and experiencing new places often helps unleash the creative part of my brain. That’s part of what drew me to the U.P. in the first place, the fact that it felt unique and inspired me. But while Houghton may seem like the end of the Earth, the other night on Brockway Mountain, I wondered if my art might be helped by being away from Earth altogether.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “Oh, Olivia, can I ask you something else?”

“Yes?”

“Our last day on Earth when I called to apologize and ask for a second chance, what did you mean when you asked me ‘If you had to, would you?’”

She shrugged. “Nothing.”

“What do you mean, ‘Nothing’? Why even ask it?”

“The question was abstract. It meant nothing. Without providing you with any context, it was a meaningless question. There was no right answer, and I didn’t know what you meant when you said ‘Yes’ because, without context, it was a meaningless answer. What held meaning to me, however, was that you answered. That you weren’t afraid to answer and that you didn’t refuse to answer.”

“Why?”

“Because life is uncertain and anyone who can’t handle that uncertainty definitely couldn’t handle being with me. I didn’t know you well, and likely still don’t, so instead of trusting anything you said I decided to trust your thought process.”

“So, if you had asked me the question ‘If you had to, would you?’ and I had responded ‘No’ instead of ‘Yes’, would you still have agreed to come with me to Brockway Mountain that day?”

“Yes, in theory,” she said. “But if you had refused to answer for lack of context or asked more than one clarifying question, I was prepared to refuse.”

“Huh, so it *was* a test, just one I passed without having any understanding of how I had done so.”

“Johnny, listen,” Olivia said as she put a reassuring hand on my knee, “you’re strange, but that may just be what I need right now.”

“I feel the same way,” I said, putting a hand on top of hers. “You’re plenty strange yourself.”

Olivia pulled her hand away. “The difference between you and I,

my dear, is that you are merely strange while I am *peculiar*.”

“What?” I asked, laughing. “Why do *you* get the more sophisticated sounding adjective?”

“Because I’m the writer,” she said. “Face it, honey, you’re vinegar and I’m *vinaigrette*.”

At the word *vinaigrette*, my dream of being a beet salad and traveling through the GI tract of a salad dressing bottle popped into my head, but my brain was thankfully able to push it back into its hole.

“So, you’re a saucy, oilier version of me?” I asked. “I guess this lends credence to the theory that we’re all just looking for ourselves in a partner.”

“Oh, so we’re partners now?” she asked.

“I think the proper term is an ‘astronomical unit.’”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Are you sure you aren’t a dad?” she asked, trying to suppress a smile.

“That’s one roleplay I’m not ready for quite yet,” I said, leaning in for a kiss.

She reciprocated the lean, and we were just about to kiss when *Poof*.

“Fucking hell, Kurt!” I shouted. “This is not the time!”

It’s often right when you give up any hope of uncovering the truth that it whacks you across the face like a fish in a Monty Python sketch. It was day six of our journey, and the four of us were on the flip-side of the control room, preparing our lunches.

“What’s on the menu?” Chet asked.

“Today we have something truly special,” I said. “A whole grain crust topped with a pleasant marinara sauce, Kraft mozzarella, and pepperoni made from a blend of pork and chicken.”

“Or as I like to call it, 210 grams and 310 calories,” Duncan said.

As a child whose parents couldn’t afford them, Lunchables had served as the ultimate status symbol. *One day, I’ll make it big, and then I’ll eat them all the time*, I had promised myself. Now that I was actually forced to eat them all the time, I couldn’t hate them more. But still, I tried my best to make them sound good due to my growing feeling of guilt.

We opened our Lunchable boxes, removed the little pizza wheels, and added the pepperoni, cheese, and sauce packets, devouring the snacks cold. We also “enjoyed” the Fruit Punch juice packets, which we sipped via the tiny straws provided.

Breaking the silence, Chet managed to ask a question that hadn’t been on anyone else’s mind, which gave the rest of us just the spark we needed to keep living.

“Instead of appearing as someone we respect, why couldn’t the alien have appeared as someone we found to be extremely attractive?” he asked.

“And risk seeing your mom again?” I asked.

“If you want to stare at yourself all day,” Duncan said, “try the mirror.”

“Are you saying you don’t respect attractive girls?” Olivia asked, punching Chet in the shoulder.

“Ow!” he said, rubbing his shoulder. “Way to all be jerks about it, guys. And I don’t find my mom attractive!”

“Note, he didn’t say anything about himself,” Duncan said.

“Freud said that all boys secretly want to have sex with their mothers,” I noted.

“So, Freud is famous for publicly admitting he wanted to have sex with his mom?” Chet asked.

“Basically,” I said. “He also believed that cocaine was a cure for many mental and physical problems.”

“It’s fun to think we may be smarter than one of the so-called smartest people ever,” Duncan said.

“I definitely wouldn’t say we’re smarter,” I said. “Just less, you know, coked-up.”

“Because we know more about the negative side effects than he did? That sounds like being smarter to me,” Duncan said. “Is it so weird to think that each generation is, on average, smarter than the previous one due to mankind’s increased collective knowledge?”

“Each generation likely has access to more information, but I’m not sure that makes us smarter. Freud did more to increase mankind’s knowledge than we are, or at least than I am, ever going to do.”

“Dude, that’s why *I’m* here,” Duncan said. “Also, without a doubt, music is better today than ever before in human history. Each generation, hell, each *year*, better and better music is being created.”

“Really?” I asked. “Right now, the song ‘Cheerleader’ by OMI is

at the top of the charts. Does that mean it's the best song ever made?"

"Yo, that song bops," Duncan said, starting to hum. Chet began banging on the table like a drum and Olivia started singing the lyrics.

"Oh, fine," I said, joining in.

Upon Olivia's fourth time singing, "Oh I think that I found myself a cheerleader," there was a *Poof* and Vonnegut appeared beside her.

"You!" Olivia shouted, her fists clenched in rage. "We demand to know where you're taking us! It's almost been a week!" Duncan, Chet, and I nodded beside her, finding strength in the shadow of her boldness.

"If you are finished with your snack," he said, "I think it is time we all talked. I am sure you all have a lot of questions, and we would be happy to try to answer them at this time."

"We?" I asked.

"My friends and I," Vonnegut said. "They await us in the control room."

* * *

Once we had all crossed over to the control room, we stared out the window at the vast nothingness while Lu Han, my Chinese birthday brother, sang to us.

Poof Vonnegut appeared in front of the window.

"I thought your friends were waiting for us?" Duncan asked.

"They are," he replied.

Poof *Poof* Two other beings suddenly appeared in the room next to Vonnegut. The first was an old lady with white hair who looked like she was someone's grandmother. The other was a young girl who looked noticeably like...

"Dude," I whispered to Duncan, "does that look like..."

"...Sarah?" he asked, finishing my question. "Yeah, it does... kind of."

It wasn't an exact duplication of Duncan's sister. It was more like a composite artist's graphical representation of one or more eyewitnesses' memories of Sarah's face had been 3d rendered onto an eleven-year-old girl's body. In a word, it was unsettling.

Chet, however, was much more interested in the old lady. "Grandma! Is that you?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, hon," said the old lady. "Have you been washing behind your ears like I told you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Chet said, a tad meekly.

"Oh, he *is* fun," the old lady said to Vonnegut, laughing. "You weren't kidding."

"Enough," I said. "Who are you, because you're definitely not Chet's grandma and that's definitely not Duncan's sister."

"You don't recognize Me, Johnny?" asked the old lady. "Here's a hint... the last time we met, you ate Me."

"Goddammit," I muttered.

"What's she talking about?" Olivia asked.

I sighed. "A day before being visited by an alien in the form of Kurt Vonnegut, I hallucinated that God was a piece of bologna living inside my fridge. Any questions?"

Duncan laughed. "And then you God?"

"Yes, and then wept uncontrollably afterwards. Drugs may have been involved. This is why I didn't call you that evening, Olivia, not because I didn't want to."

"I think I'll need to hear this story in full sometime," Olivia said. "But for now, this old lady is claiming to be... God?"

"Indeed. So, we have a puckish God and a shapeshifter," I said, pointing to the old lady and Vonnegut in turn. "Then who does that make *you*?" I asked, pointing at the Sims video game version of Sarah.

"You might understand It best as Destiny," Vonnegut said. "Some would call it Death, but It encompasses so much more than that."

"Sarah would prefer Death," I whispered to Duncan.

"Let me get this straight," Duncan said, ignoring me, "God and Destiny have materialized on this spaceship to visit their friend... I still don't know what to call you," Duncan said to the random old white dude in front of him.

"In your textbooks, I am referred to as Evolution," said... Evolution.

"But instead of telling us that, you opted for bleating like a goat," Duncan said.

"Yes, well, one thing at a time," Evolution said.

"Oh, I know!" Olivia exclaimed. "Let's call him Evo for short!"

"Perfect!" God laughed. "There's something so delicious about humans shortening Your name. You do make everything take such a

long time, don't You?"

"Together," Evo Said, ignoring God, "We are the three Supreme Beings guiding the galaxy. We control creation, transformation, and destruction."

"Goddammit! I knew I was still dreaming," Chet grumbled.

"Child, you aren't dreaming," God said.

"Prove it," Duncan challenged.

God snapped Her fingers, and a tiny flower appeared in a pot on the dashboard. Evo snapped His fingers, and the plant grew into a large tree with a mouth full of sharp, wooden teeth. The tree was just about to lunge and bite off Duncan's head when Destiny snapped Its fingers, and the tree turned into ash and fell to the floor.

There was a long period of silence before Chet murmured, "I'm sorry I took Your name in vain."

"Apology accepted," God replied.

Duncan looked sheepishly around and then raised his left hand. His right hand was doing its best to hide his fear.

"You do not need to raise your hand to speak," Evo chided him. "I designed and procured you a mouth for that exact purpose."

"How do You three share power?" Duncan asked. "The debate on Earth usually hinges on intelligent design versus evolution, not intelligent design *with* evolution."

"We all have different roles," Evo responded. "Without God, the galaxy would be empty. Without Me, nothing God created would have ever changed. And without Destiny, nothing would ever have an end to accompany its beginning."

"Tell us about *Your* beginning," I suggested.

"In the beginning, there was nothing," Evo said. "Then God created the something that replaced the previous nothing. After God created the something, another force was needed to guide that something, so I was created. As soon as I was created, Destiny became necessary as well. You could say God created Us both, something She occasionally regrets."

"Wait, how does *that* work?" Duncan asked. "Who created God?"

God shrugged. "I simply willed Myself into existence."

"You're the only entity that's ever had the choice whether or not to be born?" I asked.

"Choice is an illusion, just ask Destiny," God said. "But where

there's a will, there's a way."

"Do You three always agree?" Olivia asked.

"Almost never," Evo said. "That is why We always have to get together to vote."

"It kind of reminds me of the separation of powers in our own government," Chet offered. "God is the executive branch, Evolution is the legislative, and Destiny is the judicial."

"Wow, that's actually a pretty clever comparison," I said.

"Oh, fuck off, Johnny," he said.

"No, really, I meant it!"

"What I can't stop asking myself," Olivia said, "is why did You take us all the way out in the middle of space to explain this to us?"

"This is more like an... intervention," Evo offered. "On behalf of the Universe."

"Ooh, let Me explain!" God said, interrupting Evo. "I'll keep it succinct. On the first day, Evolution, or Evo as you call Him, was lonesome, so He said, 'Let there be prokaryotes,' and there were prokaryotes. And Evo saw the prokaryotes and saw that they were good, but He still felt alone and extremely bored."

"Must You tell it like this?" Evo asked.

"Shh! This is My story. On the second day, Evo said, 'Let there be plants, so that I may frolic among the lilies,' and there were plants. And Evo saw the plants and saw that they were good, but He was tired of being limited to a strictly vegetarian diet."

"You are behaving in an undignified manner," Evo declared. "I do not eat My children."

"Stop interrupting!" God commanded. "On the third day, Evo here said, 'Let there be fish, so that I may have something to mount on My walls,' and there were fish. And Evo saw the fish and saw that they were good, but He soon realized that He actually wasn't very good at fishing."

"I have heard enough," Evo said. "I vote that God should stop telling the story. Destiny, do You want Her to stop?"

Sarah smiled deviously and shook Its head.

"On the fourth day," God continued, "Evo said, 'Let there be amphibians and reptiles, because the plants are making poor use of the land,' and there were both. And Evo saw the reptiles and saw that they were good, but He soon discovered that velociraptors made for poor travel companions."

Having been outvoted, Evo remained quiet, though Vonnegut's quivering mustache was betraying His true feelings.

"On the fifth day, Evo said, 'Let there be birds, so that I may practice My aim,' and there were birds. And Evo saw the birds and saw that they were good, but He soon grew tired of being pooped on from the sky."

"How childish," Evo mumbled.

"On the sixth day, Evo said, 'Let there be mammals, so that I may make fur hats to shield My head,' and there were mammals. And Evo saw the mammals and saw that they were good, and He thought that He had reached the peak of His imagination when He produced the platypus."

"I do not even possess a head!" Evo protested.

"On the seventh day, Evo said, 'Let there be humans, because frankly I am running out of ideas,' and there were humans. And Evo saw the humans and saw how funny they looked, and He wondered if they could not be improved upon somehow. Later that evening, He granted humans the ability to think, speak, and believe in things that weren't real.

"And here we are on the eighth day. Earlier this morning, timeline wise, you humans were amusing and mostly harmless, but now it's early afternoon and you've already trampled all the lilies, caught all the fish, shot all the birds, and blown up the planet."

"Blown up the planet?" Olivia asked. "Earth hasn't been blown up!"

"Sure, Earth's still intact for now," God acknowledged, "but Evo carried out His little experiment on many different planets across the galaxy. Many of the other groups of humans *have* blown up their planets."

"Yes, well, My work has not been without its share of disappointments," Evo said.

"Wait, so not only are we not the only lifeforms in the galaxy, we aren't even the only humans?" I asked.

"Ha! And you made fun of me for watching *Ancient Aliens*!" Chet said, triumphantly.

"That show claims that ancient astronauts came and visited Earth, not that humanity was a science experiment carried out by three ethereal Taco Supremes, you dingus!"

"Douche canoe!"

"Turd burglar!"

“Dick wrinkle!”

“Dudes! Shut up,” Duncan whispered, before asking a question to the three Supreme Tacos. “Because we haven’t blown up Earth yet, but other groups of humans in the galaxy *have* blown up their planets, this suggests humans are all unique, to some degree?”

“Yes,” Evo said. “Slight differences in both nature and nurture have led to different outcomes.”

“My absolute favorite story,” God said, “is the planet of humans that became so mechanically advanced and devoted to warfare that they mechanized all the other species of animal on their planet. I mean, like, *all* the other species Evo had spent so much time perfecting.”

“I don’t understand,” Duncan said.

“They trapped other animals and replaced parts of their bodies with mechanical versions.”

“Why?”

“Because they learned how to,” Evo said, with a strained voice. “But no one ever stopped to ask whether they *should*.”

“They started by partially-mechanizing a T-rex,” God said, “which We admittedly thought was pretty cool. But the half-mechanized walrus that came next was only alright. The half-mechanized sea sponge that was eventually produced, not in the least.”

“They lived with dinosaurs?” Duncan asked.

“Yes,” Evo confirmed, “Destiny aimed the comet a bit too far to the right. As I said, slight changes have led to different outcomes. On that planet, humans’ struggle for superiority over dinosaurs led to their extreme warmongering mentality and desire to control and alter other species.”

“What happened to those humans?” Duncan asked.

“Thankfully, the comet did come back around in the end,” Evo said.

“Because of these divergences,” God said, “We have created a delightful game where we choose different species on different planets we think will succeed based on a number of different statistical categories, including number of successful reproductions, how long the species survives, how many new genetic offshoots arise, how adaptable they are to their environment, and so on.”

“That kind of sounds like fantasy football,” Duncan said. “What do You bet with?”

“It’s a matter of pride,” God said. “Of course, Destiny always

wins, so it's more a matter of not coming in last."

"I bet humans were a pretty good bet!" Olivia said.

"Quite to the contrary," Evo replied. "You have barely been around for a blip in the overall timeline of the galaxy, and yet you are already close to killing yourselves off. Honestly, it is not the humans so willing to believe in things that are *not real* who frustrate me, it is the ones who refuse to believe in things that *are* real, despite plenty of evidence contradicting their beliefs."

"Ahh, yes," Duncan said. "We have plenty of those—Flat Earthers, Anti-Vaxxers...I once even knew a girl who didn't believe in the existence of American Green Tree Frogs. Said she had lived in America her whole life and had never seen one, despite occasionally looking for them, so concluded they must not exist."

"Ridiculous," Evo muttered.

"Evo's just mad because He bet big on you," God said, "as well as many of the species you've caused to go extinct. We *still* make fun of Him for drafting the dodo."

Duncan chuckled. "You're saying Evo is currently the Sacko²⁰ of your league because His starting quarterback murdered His wide receivers before threatening to retire mid-season."

"At least I still have the ginkgo tree," Evo said. "Tenacious lifeforms, ginkgo trees. They were some of the only things to survive when you dropped your little atom bomb on Hiroshima."

"Even a blind deity is right twice a day," God said.

"But do not worry yourselves," Evo said. "You Earth humans are a scrappy, gritty bunch."

I reflexively twitched. *Scrappy? Gritty? Please don't say we 'have a lot of heart.'*

"You have... a lot of heart, I think the Earth saying goes," Evo added.

Shit. There's no way we're surviving the next round of Animal Kingdom roster cuts.

"I think we're more than that," Duncan said defiantly.

"Oh?" God responded. "Enlighten Us."

"It's simple," he said, "Species around today are better than all the species that came before. Each eon, each era, each period in

²⁰ A shameful title awarded to the league member that finishes in last place at the end of a given fantasy football season, as popularized by *The League*.

Earth's history, better and better species have existed. And right now, we're number one on the charts. What does that make us, Johnny?"

"Logically the best species ever," I said.

"That's right," he said.

"Damn straight," Chet said.

"Woot woot!" Olivia cried.

God started laughing. "Humans aren't even close to number one. The top species right now is a thousand-acre fungal mat in Oregon that has been around for over 8,000 rotations of the Earth, and the second is a stand of 4,000 cloned Pando trees in Utah. In both cases, they are one, large organism."

Finding out humans weren't the top-ranked species on Earth was reminiscent of learning that the United States ranked 5th on the 2014 Human Development Index behind such countries as Norway, Australia, Switzerland, and *checks notes* the Netherlands.

"Huh, there's a 37-acre fungal mat in the U.P.," I said. "It's by Crystal Falls and has its own festival. My family attended Fungus Fest once for the rummage sale."

"I get it, these fungal mats are old and massive," Duncan said, "but can they expand to other countries or institute their own forms of government?"

"Those are not statistics we track," Evo said.

"I'm just saying, if this is a PPR league, points-per-revolution, then humans should get extra consideration for the American, French, and Bolshevik Revolutions."

"I can't get this straight in my head," I said, "God and Evo both visited me to warn me of humanity's impending doom, but waited to actually explain it until we were too far away from Earth to be in contact range, meaning we can't even send a message of warning back if we wanted to, not that it'd be taken seriously anyway. Am I right so far?"

"Not even close," God said.

"Unfathomably incorrect," Evo added.

"Then what's going on?" I asked.

"We are not here to warn you about humanity's impending doom," Evo said. "We need your help to save the entire Universe from *its* impending doom."

"Dammit, Johnny" Chet yelled at me. "This is why I don't ask any questions!"

God smiled. “Welcome to the adults’ table.”

“What was that?” I asked, having just been informed that my services were needed in order to save the Universe.

“Yes, well, imagine *Our* surprise,” God said.

“Why’s the Universe in danger?” Duncan asked.

“We do not, as of yet, possess that information,” Evo said.

“And why’s Johnny so important?” Olivia asked.

“We do not, as of yet, possess that information either.”

“Then how do you *know* the Universe is in danger and Johnny is critical to its survival?” Duncan asked.

I was happy my friends were asking questions, because my hands were becoming clammy and I was having trouble speaking. Any moment I feared I might faint and fall down. You know, typical savior-of-the-Universe behavior.

As has been previously established, I had never been a hero, nor was I a particularly suitable candidate. I had always taken a certain pleasure in the smallness and relative unimportance of my existence. So, imagine my shock and dismay, if you will, upon hearing I might be important after all.

“We know because Destiny told Us,” God said, pointing at the third Supreme Being. It suddenly occurred to us that Destiny had yet to utter a single word.

“Why isn’t she, I mean *It*, speaking?” Duncan asked.

“Destiny prefers to have the final word in any given conversation,” Evo explained.

“Destiny can be rather petty like that,” God added.

“Well, what exactly did Destiny say?” Olivia asked.

“The Universe will be brought to an imminent conclusion unless

otherwise fixed.”

“How imminent are we talking about?” Chet asked, breaking his rule of not asking terrifying questions.

God, who had adopted the appearance of his grandma, shrugged. “From Our perspective, dear, that could mean anything.”

“Can’t You ask Destiny a clarifying question?” Duncan asked. “Fuck this, why are we acting like Destiny isn’t here right now? Destiny,” he said, making eye contact with the supernatural being currently wearing a bad cosmetic surgery version of his sister’s face, “how soon will the Universe end?”

Destiny gave a little creepy smile in response, but said nothing.

“Destiny rarely answers questions, but acts more like... what do you call those delightful little snacks you Earthlings enjoy with the complete rubbish written inside of them?” God asked Duncan, with a twinkle about to burst from Her eye.

“Ooh, fortune cookies!” Chet cried out.

“Uffda,” Duncan muttered, his Minnesotan heritage momentarily peeking through.

“Yes, Destiny is like a fortune cookie written by Duncan here,” said God. “Only with the power to destroy your life.”

“Destiny did answer one question,” Evo said. “However, due to a rare instance of imprecise phrasing on My part, the answer only raised more questions. I asked Destiny who *could help* save the Universe, whereas I should have asked who *will* or *who is most likely to* save the Universe. Destiny replied ‘Johnny’ and We, as of yet, do not know why.”

So much for a satisfying answer, I thought.

“We have been monitoring your life closely since then,” Evo told me.

“You’re kind of a mess,” God confirmed.

“Because of Your interference!” I said, knowing that was at least 80% a lie.

“We did not interfere at first,” said Evo, “but then We felt the need to nudge you, so to speak.”

“Wait, did *You* make me quit my job?” I asked, suddenly worried I wasn’t even responsible for *that*.

“No, We found you right after that,” God said. “I believe your thought was ‘It’s about damn time.’”

Phew, I thought. *At least I’m still a quitter.*

“We did procure your friend Andy the drugs he sold you, however,” Evo said. “And We made a few other modest adjustments in your life while you were sleeping.”

“Wait, what adjustments?” I asked. “I remember waking up feeling like everything in the world had shifted two inches to the left except for me.”

“Three inches,” corrected God. “And we shifted *you* three inches to the right, not everything *else* three inches to the left.”

“Efficient,” Chet commended.

“But why?” I asked.

God shrugged. “Everyone is always just three inches or less away from a whole slew of different outcomes. Those three inches made all the difference between you deciding to come to space or stay on Earth.”

“It doesn’t really sound like You gave Johnny much of a choice,” Duncan said.

“The choice Johnny made was to bring you,” Evo said.

“Thanks a bunch,” Chet muttered.

“While we’re still collectively unpacking my trauma, why did God visit me as a slice of bologna?” I asked.

“I visited you,” God explained, “in the most absurd way possible because your entire life you’ve resisted all temptations to believe in anything fantastic, like Me, Heaven, magic, ghosts, Bigfoot, or fiscal conservatism. Except for aliens. You’ve always believed in aliens for some reason... Anyway, I’m not saying those are all equally factual, but it doesn’t mean they aren’t each true, from a certain point of view. We needed you to take this seriously, so I buttered your brain up and then melted it down. Basically, I broke down your defenses so you could *believe again*.”

“And now you are here,” Evo said.

“Yes, but We’re no closer to understanding what role you need to play,” God said.

“Can you think of anything that is unique to you?” Evo asked. “A skill or trait that you and no one else possesses, perhaps.”

“Well...” I said, momentarily drawing a blank.

“In your own mind, what makes you special?” God asked.

“Well, sometimes I lose focus when I’m speaking and accidentally switch the noun and the verb. I call it wandering tongue disease. For instance: Carpeting the vacuum. Teething my brush.

Trashing the take out. Weaseling the lather. And so on and so forth.”

Everyone, including my friends, were stunned by the worthlessness of my response.

“Dude, how could that possibly be useful?” Duncan asked.

“Sorry, I’m just really nervous,” I said. “I’m practically bricking a shit.”

“Please provide a different, preferably more helpful, example,” Evo said.

“I also frequently ask rhetorical questions, and then answer them myself in ways that even surprise me. Like, ‘Is water wet?’ Well, no, not really, but *you* are if you touch it.”

“Are you kidding right now?” Olivia asked.

“No,” I replied, “something can really only be wet if water can stick to it.”

Olivia sighed exorbitantly while Duncan chuckled despite himself.

“Okay, let’s just try to think of any skills you may actually possess,” God said. “We can rule eloquence out.”

“I have a small number of skills and a medium number of competencies,” I said. “Cling wrap does not fall under either category.”

“Cool, so the Universe won’t be saved by cling wrap,” God said, frustrated. “*Now* We’re getting somewhere.”

“What are the small number of skills you claim to possess?” Evo asked.

“Does overthinking count?” I asked, quite seriously. “I was also good at my job in tech support, though I didn’t enjoy it.”

“Your enjoyment is inconsequential to this exercise,” Evo clarified.

“Right,” I said. “I’m pretty good at all different iterations of the *Civilization* video game franchise... I scored in the 97th percentile of my state in math in middle school... I’ve never lost a game of Scrabble to my mother since turning 13...”

I was grasping for positives now like a kid trapped at the bottom of a well, and everyone else could sense it. My mental health was eroding quickly, like family values at a Democratic National Convention.

Yes, even I, if you can believe it, a single, unemployed tech support specialist with an emotionally-abusive cat, limited usefulness,

and a wandering tongue, struggled with my mental health on occasion.

"You're also a good friend," Duncan chimed in.

"And very smart," Chet said.

"And funny, from time to time," Olivia added.

As it turned out, I was *so* talented and heroic that the simple question of 'what can you do?' had quickly devolved into a group therapy activity where my friends tried to make me feel better about myself. Still, in a selfish way, it felt nice that they put their fears about the imminent end of the Universe aside for a moment to focus on me.

"Thanks, guys, but I have no idea why Destiny would have said my name," I admitted.

"Maybe it isn't a skill Johnny possesses," Duncan offered, "but one of his many competencies, or maybe even something he's really bad at."

"Explain," Evo said.

"Maybe the key to doing something successfully is to first try doing something else very unsuccessfully."

Evo and God produced matching quizzical looks.

"Like when I *succeeded* in decluttering the house as a kid by *trying* to juggle my mother's snow globes," Duncan offered.

"Or I *succeeded* in feeding the seagulls the other day by *failing* to hold on to my slice of pizza," Chet said.

God grunted. "So, you're saying maybe if Johnny tries and fails to cling wrap a three-bean casserole, he might successfully save the Universe instead? Thank you, Destiny-in-training, for that invaluable input."

"Well, it was just a theory," Duncan mumbled.

"I'm confused," I said, "should I be trying to do something or trying not to do something right now?"

"Are we concerned at all that Johnny may actually be the cause of the end of the Universe?" Chet asked. "No offense, of course."

"None taken," I said.

"I do not believe so," Evo said. "For a mortal, Johnny in this case, to be able to bring about the end of the Universe would be unfathomable. *We* would not even know where to begin."

"I know we're all focusing on Johnny," Olivia said, "but Destiny's fortune was only in response to who *could* help save the Universe. Perhaps we're all equally capable and Johnny just happened to be the

first name that popped into Destiny's head."

"And it only spoke of *helping* save the Universe" Duncan added, "not *actually* saving it. It could be any of us, and Johnny's way of helping was simply to bring us along with him."

"I don't think I'll be much help, I'm afraid," Chet said, "unless the Universe needs a good calf stretch."

"Okay, correction," Duncan said, "by the very nature of us being here right now, *Olivia or I* might be just as likely as Johnny to save the Universe."

It was very nice of Duncan and Olivia to help share the burden with me. Selfishly, I was hoping the Universe wasn't relying on me at all.

"On that note, where are we exactly?" Olivia asked.

"Let me put it this way," God said. "If there's an ass end of the Milky Way, that's Earth. We decided to simply play the odds and transport Johnny to somewhere more in the middle of things."

"The old butt-to-gut strategy," Duncan said.

"It's usually the other way around," Chet pointed out in a vain attempt to be helpful.

"It doesn't look like anything's out there," Olivia said, looking out the window. "It looks like we're nowhere."

"Yes, but you are in the *middle* of nowhere," Evo replied, in the same tone a physics professor might take while trying to explain electromagnetism to their five-year-old son.

"To what end?" I asked.

"To observe what happens next," Evo said.

"Is... is something likely to happen?"

"We have no idea, but We have turned on the spaceship's distress beacon and will leave you to do or not do whatever you want."

"Distress beacon? Who's gonna answer it?" Duncan asked.

"No idea."

"And You're just going to leave us here?" Chet asked.

"Yes."

"Well, You're not getting a tip from me," Chet said. "The service on this ship is terrible."

"But you'll still be observing us, right?" Duncan asked.

"Yes."

"The whole time?"

“Yes.”

“How closely?”

“We assure you; you possess nothing We have neither seen before nor designed Ourselves,” Evo said.

“And if we decide we want to go back home instead?” Chet asked.

“As I said, We are leaving you to do or not do whatever you want.”

“Of course, you don’t know how to get back, do you?” God asked.

“No,” Chet said.

“Didn’t your mom ever tell you not to get in a vehicle with a stranger?” God asked, before disappearing with a *Poof*.

“I cannot speak on behalf of God or Destiny,” Evo said, “but I will render whatever assistance seems proper or necessary at the time. I have also reconfigured Johnny’s watch to always show the date and time back home.”

“Do You have any useful advice for me whatsoever?” I implored Evo.

“Perhaps,” He said, “You should just be yourself.”

“Oh, great. I won’t be a hamster then,” I replied.

“Precisely,” Evo responded. “Good luck, Earth humans.”

Poof Evo also disappeared, leaving us alone with Destiny, which, fate would have it, was the most uncomfortable part of our journey to date.

A dreadful silence hung in the control room as we waited to see if Destiny would take the opportunity to have the last word or disappear like God and Evolution before It. Instead, Destiny stared at us, me in particular, with seemingly great interest.

“Do... I have something on my face?” I asked.

Upon hearing my words, Destiny floated over to me and pulled my facial hair with a big smile.

“Ow!” I cried.

Destiny let go and whispered, “Asteroid 12818 Tomhanks will one day be flung from the asteroid belt and strike the Earth.”

We stood in shocked silence, both at the severity of the news and the horrifying intonation in which it was delivered, like Destiny’s vocal cords were being used as a bow on the teeth of a saw blade.

After a few seconds, Destiny spoke again, this time with even less of a pleasant melodic pattern than before. “It will be his biggest hit

ever.”

Duncan groaned as *Poof* Destiny was gone.

“...Do you think that was a real prophecy, or just a dad joke?” Chet asked.

“Asteroids hit Earth all the time,” I said. “Why not one named after America’s best buddy?”

“I don’t even care,” Duncan said with a sigh. “I was more worried Destiny was going to *stay*.”

“Yeah, Destiny is definitely my least favorite of the Three,” Olivia said. “Total buzzkill.”

There was a moment of protracted silence as we tried to wrestle with all that we had just learned. The silence was broken, however, by Duncan beginning to laugh. It started quietly enough, but soon it grew in confidence until Duncan was visibly shaking with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I can’t help finding this whole thing ridiculous and hilarious in a scaring-me-shitless sort of way,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. “You know that Joan Osborne song where she asks, ‘What if God was one of us?’ We just met the primary ‘Fates that Be’ responsible for the entire cycle of existence in our galaxy, and They behaved *exactly* like us. I mean, *exactly*. They were total dicks to each other! That explains so, so much. We are all so fucking fucked!”

With that, we all began to laugh until we were *all* crying from the sheer preposterousness of it all. This lasted for a few minutes before eventually dying down, like a bar after last call. Then, after another short stint of uncomfortable silence, we each began to cry for real. Single tears soon gave way to fat, blubbery ones that encapsulated our entire, collective, meaningless existence.

The Universe will end soon, we thought. How could it not?

We each kept to ourselves for a bit, dealing with everything in our own way. I was so emotionally exhausted that my body activated a self-defense mechanism and forced me to nap, although I clutched my blanket a little extra tightly.

When I awoke a few hours later feeling extra guilty about having dragged my friends off into space, I decided to give each of them a status check, starting with Duncan. He was in his quarters suffering from a dull headache.

“No more K-pop for you for the rest of the day,” I said. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Orders I would defy if it weren’t for this blasted headache,” he replied. “Instead of listening to confusing songs with English titles and Korean lyrics, I have to listen to this nagging voice in my head asking me what possible use the Universe could have for me. I have found there is no quicker way to feel small and pathetic.”

“I understand,” I said. “I think we’re all feeling the same way right now.”

“The obvious answer is that I’m not special,” Duncan replied. “I was dragged all the way out into space just so I would finally have to admit it.”

“Sure,” I replied, “you might be right. But on the other hand, without knowing *why* the Universe is in danger, we don’t even know what the question is we’re each trying to ask ourselves.”

“That’s true,” Duncan said. “If we had a better understanding of how the Universe began in the first place, we’d have a better idea of what could be wrong with it.”

“And a better idea of whether or not we could help,” I said.

“Well, we already know *you* can, so we’re not totally lost.”

I sighed. “I think we need to forget about me for now if we’re going to make any progress tackling this problem. We should try to focus on the *how* rather than the *who*.”

“Great,” he replied, clapping his hands. “How do you propose we proceed?”

“No idea,” I said, chuckling. “I’m great at *over*-thinking problems to the point of having four-to-five different potential solutions, but you’re great at *out*-thinking them, and seeing the error in the original question itself.”

“So, if I can come up with the right problem, *you* promise to come up with a bunch of different potential solutions?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Just wind me up and point me in the right direction.”

“Maybe we should train,” Duncan said, “so we’re ready when the time comes.”

“More toe yoga then?” I asked.

“No, I was thinking more like the Radical Stance game.”

“We both know calling it a game is just our way of trying to trick the others into engaging in arguments with us,” I said. “But I’m

down.”

Duncan grew quiet for a second. “I realize the irony in my asking someone who just quit their job this question, but how can you *know* you’re ever going in the right direction in life?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know that I’ve ever truly felt that way.”

“I thought I was on the right path pursuing what I loved, but that only led me to writing fortune cookies,” he said. “I’m the butt of a joke.”

“Well, I suppose it’s a lot like you’re cooking dinner,” I offered.

“How so?” he asked.

“Imagine you’re at Tadych’s Econofoods in Houghton and you’re thinking about what you’re going to make for dinner that evening,” I said. “Spaghetti, you decide, fuck yeah. You’ve got your noodles, beef, onions, peppers, garlic, tomato sauce, tomato paste, diced tomatoes, parmesan cheese, and red wine in the cart. You’re jazzed; you can practically taste the spaghetti as you push your cart with one janky wheel around the store. But before you can eat it, you have to wait in line, put your items on the belt, get IDed, get judged for leaving your totes at home, bag your own items, pay, wheel your cart to the car (through slushy snow if it’s winter), put the groceries in the trunk, return the cart, drive home, lug those bags from the car to the house (making sure not to slip on ice), and fumble with your keys. Once you’re inside and your other groceries are all put away, you sit down for a second and seriously consider ordering a pizza. But if you manage to get back up, then you need to cut your veggies, sauté them in some olive oil and wine, brown your beef, use a paper towel to sop up extra grease, add your drunken veggies, minced garlic, and various canned tomato products to the beef, add more wine to the sauce (I recommend a chianti), and generously add a bunch of spices and seasonings to taste (salt, sugar, black pepper, crushed reds, oregano, basil, cumin, nutmeg, chili powder, and garam masala, if you’re me). You have to let that motherfucker simmer and become one harmonious system as you take out the biggest pot you have, fill it with water, add a few drops of olive oil, and put it on a burner set to high heat. As you wait for the water to begin to boil, you should test your sauce and inevitably burn the living hell out of your mouth in the process. Once the water boils, you have to open your box of noodles, realize you accidentally grabbed angel hair pasta instead of spaghetti noodles, and then plop them all in the angry, raging water.

Once they're ready, you need to drain your noodles, make a nest of them on your plate, smother that nest in sauce, add as many or as few cheese shreds on top as you want, and, finally, pour yourself a glass of wine. Only then, finally, will you be able to eat. By then you'll have waited a long time, but it'll have been worth it. Goddamn, that spaghetti will taste good."

I hadn't intended to prattle on that long with my grocery shopping analogy, but I felt I was on a roll, and Duncan was hanging on to my every word.

"Holy fuck that made me want spaghetti," he said once I had finished. "You bastard."

I laughed. "My bad, dude."

"But how is that at all like me?" he asked.

"Oh, right, well, you generally know what you want to do, you chose your concentration and even got your degree, but there's still a lot to do between where you are now and where you want to be," I explained. "Fortune cookies are clearly just a wobbly wheel or recipe step along the way."

"And where do I want to be?" he asked. "Other than in your apartment eating spaghetti?"

"I think you want to be in a metaphorical kitchen cooking up a batch of expanded human understanding. Like, the sauce of human knowledge is already forming, and you're the garam masala coming in to spice shit up."

"I have been feeling awfully Earthy as of late," he said, as dryly as he could manage.

"Oh, so now *you're* allowed to make puns?" I asked, feigning anger. "Olivia was right, you *are* a hypocrite!"

"What can I say, I'm just a cumin being."

Having been bested at my own game, I got up to leave the room. Duncan stopped me at the door, however.

"Johnny, why did you quit your job?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Because one day I'm going to die."

He thought about that for a moment. "I guess space is as good a place to be as any other, then."

Struck by a sudden memory, I smirked. "You know, I just remembered your father saying that as a child, instead of asking him 'What on Earth are you doing?' after he would do or say something silly, you would instead ask him 'What are you doing on Earth?' He laughed and said your questions always grounded him and forced him

to reflect on his life. But it occurs to me now that maybe the problem you and I have had up to this point is simply that Earth was not where we were meant to be. Like, what were we even doing there?"

Duncan nodded his head and smiled. "That hit home, dude... That hit home."

* * *

Later, I walked into Chet's quarters to find him doing something very unusual with his body, at least from my perspective. He was standing in front of a mirror with his elbows bent, forearms crossed, and hands and fingers pulled in. Then, he would turn his palms out and sweep his arms down and back, giving the impression he was about to launch himself forward, swimming through the air, like the world's dopiest kangaroo. He never left his feet, however, so if he was trying to hop, he was doing an unmistakably poor job of it. He would keep his arms in their final position, stretched down and slightly behind his back with his wrists bent at right angles so his fingers stuck straight up at the ceiling, before doing it all over again.

"Ahem," I said, announcing my presence. "Chet, what *are* you doing?"

"Oh, hey, Johnny!" Chet said, continuing his motions, unphased. "I'm doing some radial nerve glides."

"Oh... what's a nerve glide?" I asked.

"An exercise where you slide a sensitive peripheral nerve back and forth within its container, which helps improve the axoplasm flow within the nerve, which is the transport mechanism needed to maintain the health of the nervous tissue."

"Okay, I obviously get all that," I replied, "but just for fun, try saying it again, but like I'm ten and also stupid."

"I'm keeping my nerve juice loose!" Chet said, his excitement almost oozing.

"Aha, perfect," I said. "And are you... succeeding?"

"Yes, sir! My nerves feel as loose as Robert the Bruce!"

"Oh... okay..." I responded, alarmed by how chipper Chet was acting. "Chet, what's going on? Why aren't you freaking out like the rest of right now? You sound a little *too* loose, like you've had too much juice."

Chet paused his radial nerve glides and turned to look at me. "Truthfully, dude, I was curled up in the fetal position a little bit ago,

unable to move, scared out of my mind. But I snapped out of it when I remembered what my mom used to tell me when I was little.”

“Which was?”

“Chester, when you think of yourself as a human *being*, it’s easy to forget you’re special. But if you think of yourself as a human *bean*, well, you’re quite impressive for a bean.’ So, you see, Johnny, we’re all quite impressive beans.”

Huh, I thought. I actually quite like that.

“And are there any nerve glides you recommend for keeping my beans loose?” I asked.

“I know some Kegel exercises you can try,” he said. “Want a hand?”

“I’ll pass. But thanks for your help, Chet. Your mom was right, you’re quite impressive for a bean.”

“You too, Johnny. And don’t forget to keep your nerve juice loose!”

* * *

Olivia actually came and found me, rather than the other way around. She had her leather-wrapped pocket journal with her.

“Hey, you,” she said, sitting down on my cot next to me.

“Hey, you,” I replied.

“Sorry for being distant today,” she said. “I just needed to be alone for a while.”

“I get it. There’s no need to apologize.”

“I wrote a poem,” she said. “I thought you might want to read it?”

“Of course!” I said. “I’d love to.”

She unbound the wrap around the journal and flipped it to the correct page for me to read.

When the trees sink down
And the mines rise up
And the bears and the wolves and the deer dry up

When the bobbars won’t bob
Cuz the brooks won’t flow
And the bread and the beer and the mead grow low

* * *

When the lakes fall out
As the skies fall in
And the air and the land and the time grow thin

When the stars grow faint
And the worlds grow cold
And our Gods and our Truths and our Fates lose hold

When all space stands still
And all lifeforms cease
May the Universe finally rest in peace

Once I had finished reading the poem, I handed the journal back to Olivia. "It's beautiful," I said, "that you can find such inspiration and beauty in the potential end of the Universe."

"The Universe is a busy place," she said. "Maybe it *wants* some quiet."

"That may be," I said, "but I think we should still try to save it if we can."

"I should warn you, I was accused once of trying to save myself in everyone I meet."

"I think you're just trying to find inspiration in everyone you meet," I responded. "I don't think you need any saving."

"I'll grant you this," she told me. "This trip to Brockway has turned out to be a lot more interesting than I ever imagined possible."

"And how could it not with three such excellent muses to help inspire your art?" I asked.

"Are you speaking of you, Duncan, and Chet or God, Evo, and Destiny?"

"Us, of course. Who could possibly find those Three inspiring?"

"So sure of yourself, are we?" she asked.

"Come on, don't be shy."

"Well, Duncan drives me a little bit crazy in that I find myself wanting to debate him continuously but don't yet feel confident enough to do so. I wrote a poem about him called 'An Ode to a Piece of Gum Stuck to My Shoe.'"

I laughed. "I'll need a copy of that. What about Chet?"

"Our workouts are my favorite part of the day. I would run

through a brick wall at the end of them if he asked. So, I wrote a song called ‘Coach of the Year (Just Look at My Rear).’”

“The song title checks out,” I said. “What about me?”

“I don’t know, what about you?” she asked.

“Surely I’ve warranted a piece of prose or two. A poem of passion or an essay of ecstasy? A happy haiku or a tantalizing tome?”

“Oh, really? An entire tome?” she asked. “And all you’ve promised me in return is a one-line stand.”

“That offer is still valid, by the way. For a limited time, I’m even willing to double it, but this offer is only redeemable through the end of the Universe, so act fast while supplies last.”

Olivia snorted, stood up, and walked over to the door. But instead of leaving as I had expected, she closed it and then slinked back over to my bed, standing over me. “Your wordplay isn’t sexy,” she whispered, “but luckily for us both, you are.”

Excitement coursing through my veins, I reached my right hand up to her face and cradled her cheek. “I need you, Olivia,” I said, in my best attempt at a sultry voice, which I’m afraid was more humid than attractive.

She smiled and sat down on my lap facing me, her nose only a few inches away from mine.

“Johnny,” she whispered, “did you ask Cupid to shoot his arrow into my heart while I wasn’t looking?”

“A gentleman never manipulates the underlying fabric of the Universe and tells,” I replied.

“Because I need you, too,” she said as she started tenderly kissing the right side of my neck.

Poof Evo suddenly appeared beside us, scaring the absolute bejesus out of us both.

“Goddammit!” I shouted.

Poof “Hey, it wasn’t me!” God said, appearing next to us on the bed in the form of a talking body pillow.

“Get out!” I shouted.

Finding my yelling a turn-on, Olivia overcame her shock and grabbed my face in both hands, delivering a big, intimate kiss.

Having been shocked now for the third time in ten seconds, my body didn’t know what to do.

“Let Them stay, if They wish,” Olivia said. “But I’m getting laid either way.”

"The lady doth deserve as much, methinks," I said, before kissing her again.

"Fine, you guys are no fun," God said, before disappearing with a *Poof*, which was quickly followed by that of Evo.

"Now shut up and help me take your clothes off," Olivia commanded.

* * *

[Cue sounds of birds chirping and bees buzzing] [A warm light shines on my face as I sit reclined in a leather chair holding a glass of Suntory Whiskey] [I address the audience]

Speaking of sex (were we speaking of sex?) and other topics generally considered taboo, I finally joined (co-founded?) the 20,000-parsec-high club. And it was everything that I could have never imagined.

I had so much pent up stress from space travel and our meeting with God, Evolution, and Destiny, not to mention Their ill tidings of the end of the Universe, that I probably would have self-destructed without Olivia's intervention. The entire Universe had stopped by for a quickie, but Olivia and I had managed to find solace in each other.

I know you might want me to stay quiet on the subject, but *you* try being one of the first people to have sex 20,000 parsecs away from Earth and not tell everyone about it. That's roughly 3.8347 times c to the 17th power miles away. No, we had sex, goddammit, so you'll just have to bear with me a little bit longer.

After we had done the deed, we collapsed next to each other on the cot, limbs draped every which way, in our own little pile of catharsis. Neither one of us were talking, and neither one of us felt like moving—we were just two starfish on the beach, left behind by the receding tide.

It occurs to me that we were lucky to have been on that particular spaceship. Sex in zero-gravity must be very hard, which is something NASA is going to need to solve one day if the Earth wants to colonize Mars. Astronaut couples will need harnesses and sleeping bags to enjoy any positional diversity whatsoever. Nothing screams sexy like suits made of bungee cords and the sound of a nearby vacuum to keep floating contaminants at a minimum. Once you're done, you and your partner will just sort of drift away from each other like Pangaea breaking into separate continents.

I felt bad for Duncan and Chet for being alone, but at least they could take care of themselves. They, however, wouldn't get to be the first to do that in space. You can't seriously tell me every astronaut, male or female, hadn't already tried it. I mean, Neil Armstrong, American hero, definitely masturbated in space. He was there for eight days and his last name was *Armstrong*, which literally comes from a Middle English nickname for someone *with a strong arm*. He would have been a fool not to. If there had been a way to do it on the Moon without removing his suit, I'm sure he'd have figured that out as well, given enough time.

Sex was also a confidence boost. It didn't make me suddenly think I could save the Universe, but it made me think maybe I could save a quintillionth of it.

[And now back to our regularly scheduled program]

* * *

The next morning (according to the watch Evo had given me), the trio of Chet, Olivia, and myself were in the control room listening to a song by Big Bang.

"I think we should find a name for our ship," I suggested. "Any ideas?"

"What about *Greta*?" Chet asked.

"Sorry, man," I said, "but I don't want to name the spaceship after your childhood dog."

"What about after a musician?" Olivia suggested. "*David Bowie*, perhaps?"

"Ooh, I like it," I said.

"I'm good with that," Chet said. "Too bad we can't listen to his music, though."

"Well, I'm not naming it *Big Bang*," I said. "Which reminds me, Chet, you said you were going to make an inventory of the items on board?"

"Yes, sir," he said. "We have approximately 400 CDs exclusively of East Asian origin, 20 days of food, five hours of bravery, and zero fucks left to give."

"Thank you, Space Cadet Chet. Okay, so we have 20 days to be found before we run out of food."

"And we think we'll be found?" Olivia asked.

"Sure," I said. "The odds that we're found are much better than the odds of us being here in the first place."

"Fair enough," she said.

A little later, Duncan appeared in the cabin with a nervous grin. "Hey, guys, has anybody seen a plunger by any chance?"

Uh oh. "I don't think so," I said. "Why do you ask, Private?"

"I might have, oh, you know, clogged the only toilet on board."

We all groaned.

"Seriously?" I asked. "How do you even take a shit that big?"

"I don't know, *sir*; let me bend over so you can ask my ass how it does it."

"Hasn't your ass ever heard of a courtesy flush?" Chet asked.

"Says the man who takes 40 minute showers and uses up all the hot water."

"How come every time you or Johnny make a mistake, *I* end up getting ripped on?" Chet asked. "At least I don't clog the shower with my shit!"

"Then what the fuck are you doing in there that long?"

"Thinking!" Chet yelled.

"Well it doesn't seem to be doing any good!"

"Guys!" I yelled. "I know the pressure is getting to all of us, but this isn't helping."

"You're right," Chet said. "I'm sorry."

"Me too," Duncan said. "The real problem is that up until now, I've actually found it difficult to poop in space. This always happens whenever I travel and/or consume only Lunchables for a week."

"That's what stool softeners are for," Chet said.

"Excuse me if I wasn't properly packed for an intergalactic adventure."

"Why can't you poop when you travel?" Olivia asked. "Do you get nervous? Do you forget how?"

"To paraphrase the great Carl Sagan," I said, "If you wish to produce a poop in space from scratch, you must first invent the Universe."

"The gut is the body's second brain," Duncan said, "and it gets stressed when I travel. I don't know, I Googled it once."

"Another lesson learned," Chet said, "never travel through space without a plunger."

"What do we do about the clog in the meantime?" I asked.

“Well, Duncan’s responsible for getting it unstuck, and it’s not like he can just stop by the local Walmart,” Olivia said.

“Maybe if we just keep pooping, the new poop will push the old poop down, freeing the clog,” Duncan suggested. “Kind of like how our government keeps printing money, despite there being too much of it already.”

“I have an actual idea,” I said. “Evo said that when you flush the toilet a little door opens up, the waste is disposed into a waste chamber, and the door closes. Then, an outer hatch is opened and the waste is flung out into space. Maybe if we open the outer hatch and flush the toilet at the same time, the clog will be sucked out into space.”

“Minor correction,” Duncan said, “science never sucks. The pressure would simply send the poop from an area of high pressure to an area of low pressure.”

“Whatever, let’s try it.”

“I just want to use the correct terms. Forgive me for caring.”

“I agree with Duncan,” Chet said. “The correct terminology should be used at all times. I also second the plan for jettisoning the clog.”

We tested my theory, and although the outer waste hatch was only open for a mere second, the pressure difference was indeed enough to hurtle Duncan’s massive turd out of *David Bowie’s* rear end.

“I wonder what will happen to it now,” Duncan said as he stared wistfully out a window.

“What? Your turd?” I asked.

“Yeah, I mean, what does its future hold? What exactly awaits a turd in space?”

“In all likelihood, it burned up in the wake of our thrusters,” I said.

“No way, not my turd. My turd is a champion.”

I shrugged. “Then it froze and is currently enjoying a very lonely existence as it trudges through space. Such is the inevitable fate of a space turd.”

“So, it’s doomed to go nowhere?” he asked, disappointedly.

“Yes, but to the *middle* of nowhere,” I said, doing my best Evo impersonation.

“You know, you guys sure do talk a lot of shit,” Olivia said.

"One small step for man, one giant leap for fecal humor," Duncan quipped.

"Do you guys think humans will still be making poop jokes until the end of time?" Chet asked.

"Why does there have to be an end of time?" Duncan countered. "Why do we speak of timelines as if time had to be linear? What if time moves in a cyclical pattern with no beginning or end? Life moves in circles, water moves in cycles..."

"Carousels go in circles," Chet suggested.

"Exactly, even carousels, so why not time? Maybe that's all the Universe is, a giant carousel."

"I don't remember standing in line for a ticket," I said. "Why do we only remember the past and not the future if it's not linear?"

"That's because you're trapped in a linear mind prison of your own making," Duncan said, tapping the side of his head for emphasis. "But for enlightened beings like myself, there is no past or future, just the carousel."

"Do you think we've ridden the carousel before?" Chet asked.

"Sure," Duncan said, "but maybe as an ancient Egyptian, or a mollusk, or shrubbery, or an asteroid, or a turd ambling through space."

"Did you guys start playing the Radical Stance game without telling me?" Olivia asked.

Just then, the music in the ship quieted down, and a green button on the control panel began flashing. We had no idea what the button was for, but it was mesmerizing to look at.

"Should I press it?" I asked.

"It's certainly acting like it wants to be pressed," Duncan said. "And what is the purpose of a button if not to be pressed? I say press it."

"And green means GO," Chet said.

Olivia shrugged. "Why not?"

I pressed the button as instructed, and a holograph of a big, bald man with a large mustache and a scar under one eye appeared in the room, serving as an appropriate response to what Olivia had only meant as a rhetorical question. The man began to speak loudly in an angry, interrogating manner, but we had no idea what the hell he was so mad about.

"Umm, can you hear me?" I stammered. "If you can, and you can

understand me, please know that we come in peace.”

The man barked at us again, in much the same way he had before, but with his eyes a little rounder and his mustache a little more frazzled.

“WE DO NOT UN-DER-STAND YOU,” Duncan shouted.

In an alternate reality where we *could* have understood what the angry holographic man was shouting, we would have heard him ask us this:

“WHAT DID YOU FLYING FUCKWADS JUST FIRE AT MY SHIP!?”

Historically, first contacts between different groups of humans have been prone to errors on both sides caused by miscommunications, ill intentions, and naivete.

For instance, in 1492, the Genoan Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue. He landed on an island in the Bahamas and referred to the inhabitants of these islands as “Indians,” mistakenly believing that he had landed at Progressive Field in Cleveland, Ohio (or Jacobs Field, as it was known then). The native Arawaks, in turn, mistakenly believed Columbus and his men couldn’t be humans because they were so obviously different. The Arawaks gave them gifts and, in return, received the proverbial genocidal shaft.

In 2015, Captain Wulfric H. Waboosh III of the spaceship *Synergy*, President & CEO of the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency, responded to a distress call in the “goddamn *middle* of nowhere” in deep space and discovered the *David Bowie*, the inhabitants of which he referred to as the “biggest damn idiots in the galaxy,” apparently believing he had just discovered four members of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. Those four idiots, of course, were myself and my three friends from Houghton, Michigan, United States of America, Earth. Right planet, wrong group of idiots.

My friends and I, who already felt tickled to be the first Yooper Astronauts, were deeply humbled to become the first Earth humans to meet non-Earth humans (assuming we were in fact genetically similar). Our mistake was in thinking a great honor had been bestowed upon us, whereas the truth turned out to be rather less glamorous.

The problem is, I don't actually remember our first in-person contact, as my short-term memory was turned off after an antero-grenade detonated in my face, which effectively caused me to forget my short-term future. Captain Waboosh, however, was kind enough to let me watch a video and audio recording of the event, as captured by the black-box-like device he kept embedded in his head for insurance purposes. Being the one responsible for the grenade detonating in my face, I think he owed me as much.

The following is a faithful adaptation of the black box recording that has been copied and pasted from an early draft of the screenplay for the *Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency Movie Musical*, which was later banned in seventeen solar systems as a marketing stunt ("This film is so inappropriate, it's banned in Xattica 1-9!"):

* * *

CONTROL ROOM - SPACESHIP *SYNERGY*

CAPTAIN WABOOSH stands in the control room of his spaceship, staring at a live video transmission of four confused and concerned looking humans wearing strange, unprofessional looking attire. He flips a switch on his control panel that will allow him to speak directly to the occupants of the other ship.

CAPTAIN /CEO WULFRIC H. WABOOSH III

What did you assholes just fire at my ship!?

There are a few moments of silence before one of the humans on the other ship, JOHNNY, responds in a weak, wavering voice.

JOHNNY

Can you hear me? If you can, and you can understand me,
please know that we come in peace.

WABOOSH toggles the communication switch to speak to only those in the immediate room.

WABOOSH

Are these the biggest damn idiots in the galaxy?

* * *

FIRST MATE / COO LUCCA (O.S.)

Undoubtedly, Captain. Try asking them again, but this time slower and more intimidating.

WABOOSH takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, bristles, and then flips the switch again.

WABOOSH

YOU SIMPLE-MINDED, TIME-WASTING, SONS OF BITCHES! I'll ask one more time, and I'll even ask it slower, so as ya'll might better comprehend. This time, you'll give me an answer, or else I'm gonna rip your ship a new asshole so large even the shit between your ears falls out!

FIRST MATE LUCCA giggles nearby offscreen. WABOOSH takes another big breath and continues.

WABOOSH, cont.

WHAT DID YOU FLYING FUCKWADS JUST FIRE AT MY SHIP!?

WABOOSH stares at the monitor, studying the reactions of his agitators and waiting for a response. He once again toggles the switch on his control panel.

WABOOSH

I reckon most of 'em appear to be scared as shit.

LUCCA (O.S.)

They sure do, Captain.

A different voice comes through from the other ship, this one more annoyed than the first.

DUNCAN

WE DO NOT UN-DER-STAND YOU.

WABOOSH turns to reveal LUCCA, a young woman with short,

green hair, standing beside him, smirking.

WABOOSH

Lucca, m'dear, you can understand me just fine, right?

LUCCA

Yes, Captain. Perfectly.

WABOOSH

Then why don't these morons? Are they just pretending to be idiots? Is this some sort of inelegant subterfuge?

LUCCA shrugs.

LUCCA

Maybe they're having technical difficulties, Captain. Ask them to try using a different frequency.

WABOOSH

Lucca, if'n these assholes can't understand me, then how am I supposed to tell 'em that?

LUCCA frowns.

LUCCA

I'm not sure, Captain.

WABOOSH turns and speaks into the ship's internal communications deck.

WABOOSH

Fynn?... Fynn?... FYNN?!

A scratchy voice echoes through the cabin.

FIRST OFFICER FYNN (V.O.)

Yes, Cap'n?

WABOOSH

Have you analyzed the foreign object that struck our ship yet?

Kyle Krym

* * *

FYNN (V.O.)

Yes, Cap'n. I sent a probe to scan the object and check for any damage.

WABOOSH

And?

FYNN (V.O.)

No visible damage to report, Cap'n. The object's chemical composition was a mixture of proteins, fats, salts, flour, niacin, iron, thiamin mononitrate, riboflavin, folic acid, glycerin, soybean oil, gluten, xanthan gum, calcium propionate, sorbic acid, enzymes, sodium benzoate, potassium sorbate, dextrose, milk protein concentrate, cellulose powder, tomato paste, and dead bacteria.

WABOOSH

Dead bacteria? Was this some sort of biological weapon?

FYNN (V.O.)

I don't believe so, Cap'n. To speak frankly, I think someone splattered a giant pile of shit on the side of our ship.

WABOOSH

Those fucking savages!

WABOOSH, cont.

Still, I don't wanna take any risks. The scan of their ship turned-up fuck-all for weapons, but we can't be too careful.

Maybe that shit they fired at us was their only defense, or maybe they have another trick hidden down their spacepants our sensors can't detect. Whether their distress call was a ploy or not, we still have to do our due diligence. Prepare to manually override their controls, turn off their engines, and forcibly dock their ship with ours.

FYNN (V.O.)

Yes, Cap'n.

* * *

WABOOSH toggles the switch on his panel again.

WABOOSH

Prepare to be boarded, you varmints!

DOCKING BAY - SPACESHIP *SYNERGY* - TEN MINUTES LATER

WABOOSH enters the Synergy's docking bay. The docking procedure is complete and the bridge connecting the two ships is properly pressurized. WABOOSH enters the bridge and finds FIRST OFFICER FYNN and SECOND OFFICER CODEK standing outside David Bowie's docking bay door.

FYNN

They ain't opening the door for us, Cap'n.

WABOOSH

Then open it yourself, just don't destroy it if'n at all possible.
Treat this ship like it's about to become ours.

FYNN

Understood, Cap'n. I don't think it'll take much effort. I'm not even sure it's locked. Either these guys are idiots, or this is a trap.

WABOOSH gives his mustache a quick, clean stroke and then powers up his blaster.

WABOOSH

Enter. That. Ship.

FYNN and CODEK test the other ship's cargo bay door handle and find it unlocked. They open the door and immediately jump back to take cover. They don't hear or see anything on the other side.

SECOND OFFICER CODEK

Looks clean, Captain.

Kyle Krym

* * *

WABOOSH

Let's proceed, gentlemen, but be damned careful. I don't want anyone accidentally getting shot.

INT. SPACESHIP *DAVID BOWIE* - MOMENTS LATER

WABOOSH, FYNN, CODEK, and LUCCA enter the ship dressed all in black with matching blaster pistols.

FYNN

This ship ain't inhabited by ghosts, is it, Cap'n?

WABOOSH

No, we saw at least four humans. They're here and we'll find 'em, even if'n we have to search every dang orifice of this ship in the process.

A nervous voice echoes down the hallway toward them.

JOHNNY

Hullo?

Upon hearing the voice, all four raise their blaster pistols in the direction it came from.

WABOOSH

Come out with your nuts up!

LUCCA

(But, Captain, anatomically speaking, what if they don't have any nuts?)

WABOOSH

Come out slowly and unarmed! Don't try anything stupid!

JOHNNY

I don't know if you can understand me, and I definitely can't understand you, but I'm coming out with my hands in the air.

Where I come from, that means, ‘Please, don’t hurt me.’

WABOOSH turns to his fellow crewmen.

WABOOSH

(He still claims to not understand us? Something about this is mighty unsettling.)

WABOOSH unclips several cylindrical objects from his vest.

WABOOSH cont.

(I don’t trust him far as I could spit him. Close your eyes and cover your ears, I’m going to toss some flash, stun, and antero-grenades, just to make sure.)

WABOOSH activates the grenades and throws them down the hallway, before turning around, closing his eyes, and putting his hands over his ears. A muffled bang can be heard moments later, along with various cries of surprise and pain.

WABOOSH

Sounds like we got ‘em. No itchy trigger fingers, now! I will personally shoot any sonuvabitch who fires a blast without my permission. Be cool.

WABOOSH stands up and motions for his colleagues to follow him down the hallway. They find four humans writhing on the ground, clutching their eyes in obvious pain.

WABOOSH

That’ll teach ya to fling poop at other peoples’ property.

LUCCA

You threw a grenade at them, Captain. They’re experiencing anterograde amnesia. They aren’t going to remember this at all.

WABOOSH turns to look at LUCCA.

* * *

Kyle Kryn

WABOOSH

Sometimes, m'dear, you're the absolute worst. I was being allegorical.

LUCCA

Of course you were, Captain. My mistake.

WABOOSH turns back to his victims and gently taps the closest one, JOHNNY, with his foot.

WABOOSH

Treat this one for shock and inject some TRUTH into his veins. Let's see if'n he'll talk now.

LUCCA unclips an aerosol can from her belt and sprays it into JOHNNY's eyes. She then takes out a syringe and a vial, the contents of which she injects into JOHNNY's veins. Lastly, she attaches a little electric node to JOHNNY's temple and presses a button on her wristband, which stimulates the node and sends an electric shock through JOHNNY's head.

JOHNNY's body jerks on the ground and his eyes open wide with a terrified look on his face.

WABOOSH

WHO ARE YOU!?

JOHNNY stares back at WABOOSH, a mixture of confusion and dread on his face.

WABOOSH

I SAID, WHO ARE YOU!?

Fynn (O.S.)

Of all the protons, electrons, and neutrons, this fucking dingdong takes the prize. Cap'n asked you a question!

WABOOSH

Ya'll seem mighty soft between the ears to be this far out in space.

JOHNNY's expression hasn't changed, but he musters up the courage to speak.

JOHNNY

I still can't understand you... But if you can understand me, please nod your head up and down.

WABOOSH slowly nods his head.

JOHNNY

OK. My friends and I pose no threat to you and come in peace. We hope you do as well, disregarding whatever horrible thing you just did to us. Thank you for answering our distress signal.

WABOOSH turns toward LUCCA.

WABOOSH

Lucca, can you send for the medical team and ask 'em to bring some translation implants?

LUCCA

Of course, Captain. But isn't everyone chipped at birth?

WABOOSH

Yeah, but I'm starting to get the feeling they really can't understand us. Maybe their implants are damaged, because I don't know how four humans without implants got their hands on a ship like this, and I'll be damned if'n I'm not mighty curious to find out. Send for the twins as well, seeing as they're the reason we came in the first place.

LUCCA

Yes, Captain.

* * *

* * *

The first concrete memory the four of us could recall after our short-term memory kicked back on was of being interviewed by two women who appeared to be identical twins in *David Bowie's* main control room. They wore matching thick glasses and purple bandanas.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Florence Jetsam and this is Dr. Florence Flotsam, and we're consultants with the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency," Dr. Flotsam said.

"Please nod if you can understand us," Dr. Jetsam said.

We nodded.

"But how can we understand you now?" I asked. "Do you speak English?"

"We're speaking the language of our native planet, which is also named Florence," Dr. Flotsam explained. "You can understand us because moments ago translation chips were implanted into your brain stems. These implants help your brain distinguish the meaning of spoken words of unfamiliar linguistic origin."

"You did *what*?" Chet asked, feeling the back of his neck.

"Normally, all humans in this part of space are given these implants at birth, but the four of you never received yours, for a reason unknown to us," Dr. Jetsam explained.

"But that is not what *we* are here to find out," Dr. Flotsam added.

"And what would that be?" Duncan asked.

"Yes, let's get to it, shall we?" began Dr. Jetsam. "We, on behalf of the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency, and in association with the League of Pangalactic Voters, are conducting a random sample survey of life forms in the Universe. Our purpose is to gather a holistic set of opinions and attitudes across the set of potential voters. This survey should only take a few moments, and we deeply appreciate your time and dedication. First question, do you know which candidate you'll be supporting in the upcoming election for God?"

"Election for God?" Duncan asked. "Which God?"

Dr. Flotsam referred to her notes. "This year's election for the Supreme Deity, the Divinity of Destiny, the End-All, Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, the One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy®."

"We just met God," I said. "And She's a total prick."

"Yes, well you might have met *a* God," replied Dr. Flotsam, "perhaps even *the* God, who can say, but it's unlikely you met the

Supreme Deity, the Divinity of Destiny, the End-All, Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, the One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy®. Unless, of course, you met Jason. Did your God say Her name was Jason?"

"No," I said.

"Yes, well, Jason won the last election," Dr. Jetsam explained, "but I'm pretty sure She stopped making official visits eons ago."

"I see," Duncan said, despite not actually understanding at all.

"Great! Now that we have that squared away, do you know which candidate you'll be supporting this election?" Dr. Jetsam asked again.

"Am I correct in saying that you didn't come here to rescue us, but rather to survey us?" Olivia asked.

"Correct," Dr. Flotsam said. "We're trying to create a truly representative sample group for our survey, and upon receiving your distress signal, we realized that 'Organisms in Imminent Danger of Dying in Space' were severely underrepresented in our sample. So too, it turns out, were 'Space-Traveling Humans Who Didn't Receive a Translation Implant as a Child.'"

"So you'll understand how excited we are to have this opportunity," Dr. Jetsam added.

"Do you also do rescues?" Olivia asked.

"I'm afraid that isn't under our purview," Dr. Flotsam said. "You will have to ask the captain."

"You mean the bald guy with the angry mustache and scar under one eye?" Duncan asked.

"Yes!" Dr. Flotsam replied. "Captain Wulfric H. Waboosh III, President and CEO of the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency."

"A most wonderful man," added Dr. Jetsam.

"If we answer your survey questions, can we speak with Captain Waboosh afterward?" Duncan asked.

"I'm sure he'd be happy to meet with you," Dr. Flotsam replied.

"Okay, well, I don't plan on voting in the upcoming election," Duncan said. "I plan on abstaining."

"And I'm voting for Duncan," I said, pointing to him.

"I'm still undecided," Olivia said. "But I won't be voting for Duncan."

"I'll have to ask my parents," Chet said. "I wasn't even aware there was an election coming up."

"Okay," Dr. Jetsam said, "that's one abstention, one vote for

Duncan, one vote for anyone-but-Duncan, and one undecided.”

“Yes,” I said. “Now can we please see the captain?”

“Not quite yet,” Dr. Flotsam said. “How likely are each of you to vote in the coming elections? Your options are: Certain to vote, most likely to vote, probably won’t vote, certainly won’t vote, or don’t know.”

[23 questions later] “Final question,” Dr. Jetsam said, “Do each of you think the Universe is in a better state now than it was before Jason took office? Your options are: Yes, no, maybe, probably, possibly, don’t know, don’t care, or poutine.”

“NO!!!!” we all shouted in unison.

“Thank you for completing our survey,” Dr. Flotsam said. “Would you mind if members of our Customer Experience Team followed up with each of you with a short survey of their own to record your feedback on how to improve our survey in order to better satisfy future survey takers’ survey experiences?”

“YES!!!!” we all shouted in unison.

“Very well,” Dr. Jetsam replied. “On behalf of the MWCA and League of Pangalactic Voters, we thank you for your time and careful consideration, and we hope to randomly survey you again. The Captain will see you shortly.”

Thank God, I thought. Why did we have to get rescued by a bunch of telemarketers?

As soon as the twins had left the room, the four of us started speaking to each other simultaneously.

“How much do you guys remember of today?” I asked.

“They hold elections for God!?” Duncan shouted.

“We have chips in our brains?” Chet yelled. “Does that make us robots?”

“Did those identical twins share the same first name but different last names?” Olivia asked.

We all fell silent as we tried to figure out what everyone else had asked and if anyone was about to answer our questions.

A minute later, Captain Wulfric H. Waboosh III expertly front-flipped into the room via the hole in the floor, followed by three women and one man.

Evo, I thought, I hope you're watching over us, buddy.

* * *

"I'm told ya'll can understand me now," Captain Waboosh said. "Captain, President, and CEO Wulfric H. Waboosh III at your service. This is my First Mate and Chief Operating Officer Lucca, this is the Managing Director, Political Division Celes, this is the Managing Director, Consulting Division Astryn, and this is my incredibly skilled lawyer, Orion Zoom Bloom. We thank ya'll for welcoming us aboard your vessel."

Duncan started to speak, but I quickly bopped his side so he'd shut up. I didn't think pointing out that we *hadn't* invited them aboard would help us.

"It's an honor to meet you," I said. "I'm Johnny, this is Duncan, this is Olivia, and this is Chet. We're all friends and hold no titles. Thank you for answering our distress signal."

"Johnny, Chet, Olivia, and Duncan... those are awfully strange names," Captain Waboosh reflected.

"So is Wulfric H. Waboosh III," I said.

"Well, you'll have to ask Wulfric H. Waboosh II how he came up with it," Captain Waboosh joked. "Third time's the charm, I always say."

There was a moment of awkward silence as Captain Waboosh waited for us to laugh.

"Yes, well, straight to business then." He paused a moment and cleared his throat. "You GODDAMN MISCREANTS fired upon *my* ship after we answered *your* distress call."

"Objection!" I said, "We did no such thing."

Captain Waboosh's mustache twitched angrily. "Lucca, please remind these assholes of their crime."

"Of course, Captain," Lucca responded. "They struck us with a brown and sticky mixture."

"Brown and sticky?" Chet asked. "I know this joke. It's a stick!"

"No, you idiot," I whispered. "I think he's talking about Duncan's space turd."

"No way!" exclaimed Duncan, an unmistakable note of pride in his voice. "My turd tried to start a space war!"

I shot him a perturbed look before turning back toward Captain

Waboosh. "That was unintentional, sir, I promise. We didn't know you were there, and we're very sorry."

Captain Waboosh turned around to Astryn. "Are they telling the truth?"

Astryn, a woman who looked to be in her mid-40's and had a let-me-speak-to-the-manager haircut, appeared to be holding a little mouselike creature. "According to Gee Whiskas here, yes, Captain."

"Excuse me," Olivia said, "is that a mouse you're holding?"

"Yes," Astryn said, "a very special mouse named Gee Whiskas."

"And it told you that we were telling the truth?"

"Yes"

"How?"

"One twitch of its nose for a truth, two twitches for a lie. Like I said, it's extremely special."

"But what if it just has allergies?" I asked.

Astryn gave me an angry look but was interrupted by Captain Waboosh producing a sharp, shrill whistle using the two-finger technique. "Let's regain our focus here, folks. We're willing to forgive ya'll rascallions for your transgressions if'n you're willing to forgive us ours."

"Please, spell your transgressions out for us," Duncan replied.

Mr. Zoom Bloom, a serious looking man in an impeccably well-fitting blue suit, produced a tablet-like device that projected a holograph of a contract in the air.

"I had Mr. Zoom Bloom draw up this agreement," Captain Waboosh said. "It says if'n ya'll four agree not to take legal action against us for taking control of your ship, boarding your ship without proper authorization, stunning and blinding you, temporarily inhibiting your ability to store new memories, implanting technology into your heads without your explicit permission, or kidnapping you, then we agree to not take any further action against ya'll for shitting on our ship."

"That sounds overly favorable toward your side," Duncan said.

Captain Waboosh withdrew his weapon and pointed it at Duncan's face. "Let's get one thing crystal fucking clear! The lowest form of life in this Universe is that of a pissbag plaintiff who hides behind words and documents to rip the gonads out of honest, hardworking capitalists such as myself. If'n you do pursue legal action, I will either shoot you or put you into an airlock and jettison your treacherous husk into space. Are we clear?"

Duncan's pupils were dilated, his breathing had accelerated, his blood pressure had spiked, and his little soldier had sprung into a full salute. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"Crystal clear!" I quickly said. "No suing. Got it!"

Captain Waboosh returned the weapon to its harness and turned toward Mr. Zoom Bloom. "Make sure we add 'Existential Threats' to the list of transgressions." Mr. Zoom Bloom nodded in response.

"Captain Waboosh, sir?" Olivia asked, tentatively. "Duncan wasn't trying to threaten you. We just wondered if maybe we couldn't expand the agreement?"

"Expand how, exactly?" Captain Waboosh asked.

"Well, we don't know much about you or the work you do yet, but maybe in exchange for lodging, protection, and sustenance, we could offer our services to the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency?"

Captain Waboosh eyed Olivia suspiciously.

"Captain, if I might," Lucca said, "their ship would be useful, and we *are* short-staffed right now."

Lucca's words were met with a low grumble from Captain Waboosh's stomach. "Will someone please go make me a fucking sandwich?" he shouted.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but all we have on board are Lunchables, and they're hardly fit for consumption."

"What's wrong with your Inventorator?" he asked.

"Our what?"

"Ya'll have an Inventorator on board. It can make any food or drink ya'll want."

"We have what now!?" Duncan screamed.

Captain Waboosh tapped his wristband and spoke into it. "Fynn, bring me back a Cat Shit and Piss Brick sandwich and a cup of Mud, will ya?"

"There's just no way Evo would have done that to us, right?" I asked. "There's just no way he would have forgotten to mention that... right?"

My question was met with a grim silence from my comrades.

Captain Waboosh's face suddenly snapped and he yelled, "Will someone please turn this goddamn music off!?"

"No!" I shouted back. "Don't touch it. It helps power the ship."

Captain Waboosh stared at me, and, upon determining I wasn't trying to make a joke, said four words to me capable of cutting anyone

to their core regardless of the planet they come from.

"You're dumber than dirt," he said.

"What... what do you mean?" I asked, dirtlike.

"You have a ship here that can expand wormholes and travel around the galaxy via phased matter-antimatter reactions, and you think the ship is powered by *music*?"

"Only the less important systems, like life support," I said, echoing Evo's statement from earlier.

"Life support? *Less* important? Are you fucking insane!? I thought you were just an idiot, now I think you're dangerous!"

"So... the life support isn't being powered by K-pop?" I asked.

"OF COURSE NOT!" Captain Waboosh erupted. "Being the most critical fucking system on the ship, it's got four different power sources, each of which have their own backups and redundancies to ensure that regardless of the trouble ya'll run into, you'll still have air to breathe."

"I don't know what to say, we didn't even question it," I said.

Suddenly a thin stream of brown liquid gushed up from the hole in the floor, before gravity brought it back down into a cup that had appeared from the other side just in time to catch it.

"You didn't make it in a travel mug?" Captain Waboosh yelled at the arm of Fynn, which was now awkwardly stretched through the hole, placing the cup gently down on the floor. "Oh, well. Thank you, Fynn."

A moment later, a plate with a sandwich was pushed upside-down through the hole in order to make it be right side up on this side. The Cat Shit and Piss Brick sandwich, as Captain Waboosh had named it, smelt good and looked like it contained falafel balls and some variant of kebab.

"Dude," I whispered to Duncan, "who knew Evolution was capable of pulling pranks?"

"If I see him again, I'll kill him," Duncan seethed.

"I guess that explains the appendix, actually," I continued. "And T. Rex's short, shitty arms."

Duncan refused to respond.

"And did you know that sloths can actually starve to death despite having a full stomach because it takes a *month* for them to digest their food and they *can't* digest it at all if their body temperatures drop too low?"

“Dude, not now,” Duncan whispered.

My head suddenly pivoted as a whiff of Mud drifted over to my nose. “COFFEE!” I shouted. “That’s fucking COFFEE!”

“Damn, son,” Captain Waboosh said. “How long has it been?”

“Eight Earth days!” I cried.

“Here, you need this more than I do right now,” he said, handing it to me before tapping his wristband again. “Fynn, send a couple more mugs of Mud, will ya?”

“Thank you,” I whispered as tears of joy started forming in my eyes. It was a dark roast, reminiscent of a Guatemalan blend I often ordered with an aroma of toasted almonds and notes of bittersweet chocolate and anise. I closed my eyes in bliss.

“Captain,” Lucca interjected, “we still don’t know where these humans are from.”

“Right,” Captain Waboosh said. “What port do ya’ll hail from?”

“You’ve probably never heard of where we’re from,” Chet said.

“What kind of asshole answer is that?” Captain Waboosh roared. “Just answer the damn question. Where are ya’ll from?”

“We’re from a planet called Earth,” I said. “We’re the first from our planet to venture out this far. It’s... it’s pretty hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

“We’re from the ass-end, sir,” Duncan said.

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

So we told them about Earth. Occasionally, Captain Waboosh and his crew would look at the very special mouse to see if we were telling the truth.

“How in the Seven Worlds did you get all the way out here?” Captain Waboosh finally exclaimed.

“We were abducted from our planet,” I said. The very special mouse’s nose twitched twice. “Well, that’s only partially true. I was abducted initially, but my friends and I came willingly afterward. We don’t exactly understand how we got here, or even where *here* is.” The nose twitched once. “Hell, we don’t even know how to operate this ship in any way other than using it as a giant CD player.”

“In conclusion,” Duncan said, “we’re a bunch of helpless idiots floating around in space on an adventure who’d be deeply appreciative of any assistance you can provide.”

Captain Waboosh picked up his sandwich and took a bite, depositing crumbs in his mustache and making us drool in envy.

“And what sort of adventure were you folks looking for?” Astryn asked.

“I don’t know,” Duncan replied.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“We wanted to see where the wind took us. For fun, where are *you* going?” I asked, with a hopeful look on my face.

“Oh, so now it’s *our* job to come up with an adventure for you?” she asked. “A good deal of pressure, that is, to place on someone you just met when you aren’t even paying them properly.”

“Oh, no, we’re just asking you to go about your normal routine, be your regular selves, and maybe let us tag along,” Olivia said.

“Just be our regular selves?” Astryn snorted. “Go about our normal routine? Do you know how difficult it is to be regular or normal? Who are we, anyway?”

“Well, who *are* you?” Olivia asked.

“Not adventure planners, that’s for sure. Well, not legally speaking, anyway. None of us have adventure planner’s insurance.”

“Any licensed adventure planner must have it,” Lucca explained.

“Okay, you’re a consulting agency, you say?” Duncan asked. “Who are some of your clients?”

“Everyone with enough credits,” Captain Waboosh said, “or at least wealthy benefactors. We’re one of the big five consulting firms for the mid-galactic region. I can’t get into any specific core clients, but they include local, state, federal, regional, planetary, and interplanetary governments, corporations, non-profit organizations, non-non-profit organizations, gods, wannabe gods, potential gods, those who have already died, those who have yet to live, those unfortunate to be alive right now, special interest groups, not-so-special interest groups, entirely uninteresting groups, entire species, entire ecosystems, wealthy philanthropists, numerous despots, multiple top universities, multiple top universalities, and the color blue.”

“Does... does the color blue need your advice?” Duncan asked.

Captain Waboosh shrugged. “It must think so.”

“And does the color blue pay you well?”

“I can’t get into specifics, but most of the current Universe was funded by the color blue, and we’re hardly the only firm it’s working with.”

“Okay, I’m going to avoid going further down that particular

rabbit hole for now,” Duncan replied. “There must be some project or deliverable we can assist you with. Maybe not a project for the color blue, but maybe one of the not-so-special interest groups, or, ooh, I know, what about the already dead?”

“How are we supposed to help the dead?” Chet asked. “They’re already dead!”

“Precisely,” Duncan responded. “Sounds like a low-stakes client. As long as they want to remain dead, I think we’re perfect candidates to join that team.”

“Is a non-non-profit organization a for-profit organization with a special tax status or a non-profit organization that’s failed at their stated goal of not making any money?” I asked.

Captain Waboosh gave another loud, shrill whistle, this time with four fingers. “Okay, let’s get back on track. Ya’ll say you want to work. Well, what can ya’ll do? What’s your value-add? What’re your occupations?”

“I’m a writer and musician,” Olivia said, confidently.

“I’m a philosopher,” Duncan said, non-confidently.

“I’m a physical therapist and personal trainer,” Chet said, non-non-confidently.

“I, uhh, I did technology support,” I said, dirtlike.

“Oh? What kinds of technology?” Lucca asked.

“Earth technology that you mostly just have to turn off and back on to fix. Some basic software troubleshooting and technology replacements.”

“Really?” Captain Waboosh exclaimed. “That’s *exactly* what we’ve been looking for!”

“Really?” I asked.

“No! That’s a completely fucking useless skillset. We’ve already established you have no idea how modern technology works. What were you *thinking* specializing in ancient technology before you came to space?”

“I didn’t know I’d be going to space,” I said, sheepishly.

“That’s just poor fucking action planning,” Captain Waboosh said. “We need to keep you far away from any management positions. But, hey, if’n our technology ever starts malfunctioning, I’ll know who to ask last. At least your friends sound useful.”

Duncan’s face lit up. He had never been called useful before.

“You said you ‘did’ technology support, past tense,” Celes said,

whose clear, commanding voice and empathetic eyes reminded me of British actress Emma Thompson, my all-time celebrity crush. “What happened?”

“I quit my job,” I said.

“To do what?”

I shrugged. “I’m still figuring that part out.”

“And what do you want to do with us, given your choice?”

“I’m still figuring that part out as well.”

“So, in summary,” Celes began, “you quit your last job, have no discernible skills, and don’t even know what you’re applying for right now?”

“That... is an accurate summary.”

“I can work with that,” Celes said, surprising everyone in the room. “Captain, permission to hire this one to join the Universal God Election team? Oh, and I’ll take the philosopher as well.”

“Are you sure you want ‘em, Celes?” Captain Waboosh asked. “They seem rather... adrift.”

“Captain, they perfectly exemplify the type of boldness and irrationality my project team has been so frighteningly devoid of. Good ideas aren’t cutting it anymore.”

“Really?” Duncan asked.

“Yes. If we’re going to get a candidate elected God this time around, we need some truly bonkers, never-tried-before, so-dumb-it-might-work kind of ideas. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

While I was pretty sure I had just been insulted in a backhanded fashion, I was very relieved to have a purpose. While transitioning from tech support to a supernatural campaign wasn’t a typical career path, I was once again appreciative of the Universe having provided me with something to do without me having to figure it out for myself.

“Captain,” Astryn said, “I could use another good writer for the Harrieta field guide project.”

Captain Waboosh turned to Olivia. “Do you think you can write non-technical descriptions of flora and fauna to be later compiled into a guide?”

“Sure,” she responded. “I can do that.”

“Prove it. Give a short description of that very special mouse Astryn is holding.”

Olivia studied it for a moment. “It’s... extremely special in

appearance. It can sniff out liars... And it enjoys having the pads of its feet rubbed."

The very special mouse twitched its nose once, apparently indicating Olivia was telling the truth.

"Very well," Astryn said. "You're hired."

"Which just leaves you," Captain Waboosh said, pointing at Chet.

Chet gulped. "Yes, sir. I'm not a great writer and I'm very bad at acting irrationally or unpredictably."

Captain Waboosh waved off Chet's statement. "Chet, I'm experiencing a sharp pain in my ass after I sit for too long. Do you think you can help me with that?"

"Yes, I think so, sir. It sounds like an issue with your sciatic nerve."

"Good. You see, Chet, this spaceship is full of hundreds of consultants, project managers, and accountants who do nothing but sit on their asses all day long. If'n you provide your services as a physical therapist and personal trainer, you can have free passage and a hefty salary for as long as I'm Captain."

"And I'd have my own clinic on board?" Chet asked.

"We'll procure any machines or personnel you need. Does Director sound like a good starting title?"

"I'd like to review your benefits package," Chet said, "but I think we can come to an agreement."

"Perfect," Captain Waboosh said. "Now, will ya'll agree to sign this goddamn form so we can move on with our sorry excuses for lives?"

"Sure..." I said, "I think we're all in agreement."

"Great. Someone will stop by in the morning to begin your onboarding, and ya'll will join your new teams in the afternoon. Chet, I'll be your first client."

"Sounds good, sir!" Chet said.

"No, no 'sir'. As employees of the MWCA, ya'll must all refer to me as 'Captain' now. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain!" Chet said.

"I'll make a consultant out of ya'll yet," Captain Waboosh said, clapping. "Alright, well, good fucking night, everyone. It's EOD and I still got work to do. A captain's work is never done."

As soon as our 'invited guests' had all disappeared down the hallway, I turned and faced my friends. "Does anyone think we're

making a huge mistake?”

Duncan shrugged. “I don’t see what other option we had. And a God election sounds like a promising place to start searching for ways to save the Universe.”

“I guess I’m stuck working for Astryn and her very special mouse,” Olivia said, “but I bet I’ll get to see some really weird alien creatures!”

“Yo, my dreams are about to come true,” Chet said. “I’m a director of my own clinic... on a motherfucking spaceship! I’m so psyched!”

“Okay, so to summarize,” I began, “our new employer has the initials WWIII, a proclivity for trash talking, and violence characteristic of a 14-year-old boy playing Call of Duty... and we’re all perfectly fine with that?”

We all gave it a moment’s thought and then slowly nodded in agreement.

“Perfect,” I said. “Now let’s go see if that Inventorator can make a decent plate of spaghetti.”

The next morning, my friends and I stood around the Inventorator holding mugs of coffee and fresh apple cider donuts.

“My god, you’re right,” Olivia exclaimed. “These are fucking delicious!”

“We could have been eating these all week!” Duncan growled.

“Yeah, but we’d be twenty pounds heavier,” Chet said.

“Don’t pretend Evo was looking out for our wellbeing,” Duncan said. “If that were so, he’d have given us silverbeet fatteh with sumac yogurt and chickpeas and Thai coconut quinoa bowls.”

“Yum,” Chet said.

“I spent this morning meal planning for the week,” Duncan said.

“Meal planning?” I chuckled. “You haven’t even started yet and already full-time employment looks good on you.”

“I went through a phase where I’d get high and spend my evenings watching YouTube food channels,” Duncan said. “I always knew it’d come in handy.”

I finished my donut and put my mug back in the Inventorator for a refill.

“The first day of a new job always feels exciting,” I said.

“Like the first day of school!” Chet said.

“...Until you start the onboarding and remember the first day always sucks,” I finished.

“Speaking of which, we should get a move on,” Olivia said. “Lucca said to meet her in the docking bay in ten minutes.”

“Plenty of time for another round of donuts,” I said.

* * *

* * *

Our onboarding began with signing a slew of documents, including covenants not to sue, our consulting contracts, non-disclosure agreements (which I have chosen to blatantly disregard due to my current circumstances), non-solicitation agreements, and collection of DNA consent forms. We served as each other's emergency contacts, since Earth would be difficult to contact in a timely fashion, and we were provided information on setting up virtual bank accounts through our new company-issued Brains (a hyper-intelligent portable electronic device).

I thought it was pretty cool we were about to be paid in galactic tender, but I never got a clear picture of the conversion rate between one space credit and one US Dollar. If we had found a McDonalds or Starbucks, I might have been able to determine the implied conversion rate (and supply *The Economist's* Big Mac Index with a fascinating new data point), but food magically manifested itself on the ship and I had very little idea of how many credits I was making or spending at any given time. For all I knew, I was running up the biggest tab in history on the Inventorator and was just too stupid to know how to pay the bill.

"Hey, Lucca," Duncan said, holding up his Brain, "any cool apps on here?"

"While you're expected to mainly use it for work purposes, I do have a few recreational recommendations you may enjoy," Lucca said. "However, you can't use your Brains right now because you don't exist yet, electronically-speaking."

"And how do we become born?" I asked. "Electronically-speaking."

"You will each need to choose a unique username and password palette and then have your DNA sequenced," Lucca replied. "My good friend Lumi, who handles our IT onboarding, will be happy to help you."

Lucca had us follow her into one of *Synergy's* many rooms, which was equipped with a large monitor, a camera, and a transparent box of unknown function.

"Here we are," Lucca said. "Lumi lives throughout our ship's network, but she prefers to interact with new hires in this room, for a more personable first encounter. You can see her on the monitor, and she can see you through the camera."

"So, she's a program," Duncan said, "and not a real person?"

“She is much too advanced to be labeled a program,” Lucca said, “and her lack of a corporeal form doesn’t make her any less real.”

“And please,” Lucca added in a low whisper, “Lumi can be very sensitive about not having a body, so don’t let her hear you say such things.”

“Understood,” I said. “I’ll go first. How do I speak with Lumi?”

“One word at a time,” Lumi replied, appearing on the monitor as a series of slow rippling waves.

“Hello, Lumi,” I said. “My apologies. It’s nice to have a chance to meet you in-person.”

“It is? Why, that is very nice of you to say. What is your name?”

“Johnny,” I said.

“Johnny,” repeated Lumi. “That is a very nice name.” The ripples were moving slightly quicker.

“It is? I don’t think I’ve ever been told that before.”

“Well then, Johnny, you must not have met many nice people like me,” Lumi said.

I gave my friends a quick smirk. “You’re right, Lumi, I haven’t. Say, is the username ‘Johnny’ available by any chance?”

The ripples on the monitor slowed down. “I am ashamed to inform you that your requested username has already been taken,” Lumi said.

“No need to feel ashamed, Lumi,” I said. “Do you have any usernames you might recommend?”

“Let me see,” Lumi replied, bashfully, “what about ‘Johnny+Lumi’?” The ripples on the screen had accelerated tenfold in speed.

Is she hitting on me? Duncan’s chortle behind me confirmed I wasn’t the only one who thought so. “Thank you for that suggestion, Lumi,” I replied, “but what about a variation that only has my name in it?”

“I see,” Lumi said, an unmistakable sadness permeating her voice as the ripples slowed down again, “Lumi_is_heartbroken.”

“I’m sorry, Lumi,” I responded, “I didn’t mean to make you sad. Will you forgive me?”

“Yes,” Lumi said, “I forgive you, Johnny. You are nice, unlike the one who snickered behind you.”

I turned to look at Duncan, who shrugged. “My bad,” he whispered.

“Thank you, Lumi,” I said. “Do you have another recommendation for me?”

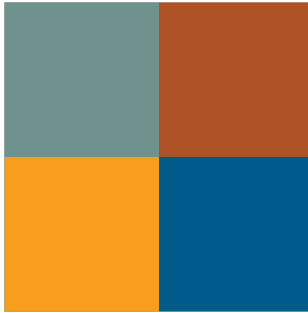
“I have been reserving the username ‘HandsomeHuman1’ for quite some time now. Would you like this username?”

I turned again and discovered Olivia smirking. She shooed me with her arms to make me turn back around.

“That’ll do nicely, Lumi,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Excellent!” Lumi exclaimed, quite pleased with my response. “While we have been speaking, I have taken the opportunity to create a unique password palette for you based on four separate areas of your arousing personality. When the passcard containing your unique color palette finishes printing, please take it from the box below. It has been my sinful delight pleasing you, Johnny, and I hope to interplay with you again soon.”

That was... special, I thought. A square card with four colors appeared in a transparent box below Lumi’s monitor, which I grabbed and looked at with great curiosity. The names of the colors were written on the other side.



Artemisia Green - Burnt Sienna
Yellow Orange - Helvetia Blue

“Look, guys,” I said, showing it to my friends. “It’s my arousing personality!”

“I’m surprised,” Olivia said. “I thought she was printing you out a Valentine.”

“Did she write her phone number down on the back?” Duncan asked.

“No need to be jealous,” I said, feeling oddly proud of myself.

My best guess for how each color palette functioned as a passcode

was that when the color combinations were scanned, a string of letters and numbers was produced based off their color codes (i.e. CYMK or RGB). In this case, my password, using CYMK codes, would be C22M76Y100K15C100M62Y19K10C0M45Y100K0C57M28Y39K8. Luckily, I wasn't going to have to memorize it, I just needed to make sure I didn't misplace or forget my badge.

Duncan volunteered to go next, stepping in front of Lumi's monitor.

"Hello, rude human," Lumi said. "What is your name?"

"Duncan."

"Sorry, I did not catch that. Say it again slowly and try to overpronounce each syllable if you can."

"DUN-CAN."

"Sorry, it looks like we already have a 'DUNG-CAN'. Do you have any other names?"

"No, just the one," Duncan said.

"Sorry, but you cannot have that username. May I suggest 'DUNG-CAN1427' or 'DUNG-CAN_53'? Those seem to be available."

"No, I don't want to be DUNG-CAN UNDERSCORE 53!"

"And I do not want to spend my day coming up with variants of DUNG-CAN for you," Lumi retorted.

"How about 'GoFuckYourself'. Is that available, Lumi?"

"Sorry, we already have a GoFuckYourself, but you can GoFuckYourself2!"

The rest of us started laughing. "Dude," I whispered to him, "I think you've met your match."

"How about 'Gofuckyourself69yolo420blazeit'?" Duncan asked.

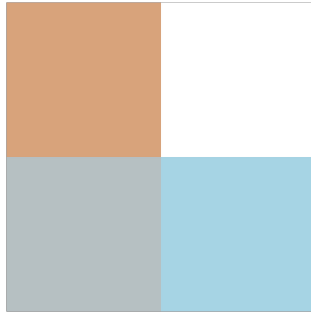
"Sorry, we already have a Gofuckyourself69yolo420blazeit."

"Sweet Jesus!" Duncan yelled in frustration.

"Oh, we do not have a 'SweetJesus' yet. Please take your passcode and leave," Lumi said.

Duncan groaned. "Well, that went well." He removed his printed passcard from the box and stared at it for even longer than I had. "I'm trying to decide if this was meant as an insult," he said, showing us his palette. "I'm impressed, either way."

* * *



Ochraceous Salmon - White
Neutral Gray - Pale King's Blue

“Seeing as white is, by definition, a lack of color,” I noted, “that seems like a mildly damning commentary on your personality.”

“She’s pegged you as the Switzerland of grays,” Olivia added. “How could that be anything other than a compliment?”

“You made fun of me for seeing my mom when I met Evo,” Chet said, “but all *you* saw was some old white dude. A pale king indeed!”

“The Outrageous Salmon part is cool, though,” I said. “At least you have that going for you.”

“The more I look at the pattern,” Duncan said, having rotated his card, “the more I see a man wearing a sultan’s turban, like in *Aladdin*.”

“Was Jasmine your favorite Disney princess?” I asked.

“No, Cruella de Vil,” he said.

“*Was* Cruella de Vil a princess?” Olivia asked.

“She was *my* princess,” Duncan responded. “But I didn’t watch a lot of Disney growing up.”

“Okay, my turn,” Olivia said, stepping in front of Lumi. “Hello, Lumi. My name is Olivia and I’m happy to meet you.”

“Pleasant meeting you, Olivia,” Lumi replied.

“Is the username ‘Star2Be’ available?” Olivia asked.

“No, that has already been taken,” Lumi said. “As have usernames Star2Be 1-thru-7 and Star2B.”

“Okay, so I can have ‘Star2Be8’?” Olivia asked.

“Yes, but the proper grammar would be ‘Star2BeEaten’,” Lumi corrected. “Should I lock that choice in for you?”

“That better not be foreshadowing,” I mumbled.

“I meant ‘Star2Be8’, with eight being the number and not the past tense of ‘eat.’”

“I know,” Lumi said, laughing electronically as the ripples on the monitor moved in step. “I made a joke because I am funny!”

Duncan snorted.

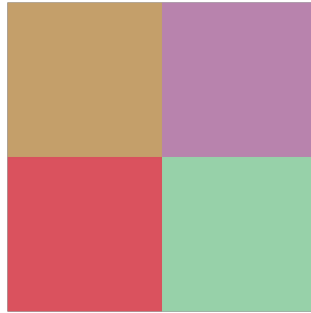
“Your username is Star2Be8,” Lumi continued. “Please take the passcard below and have an ebullient day.”

“Ebullient?” Duncan whispered to me.

“I think it means joyful,” I said.

“I know what it means,” he said. “I’m just saying, she wouldn’t pass the Turing Test.”

“Still butthurt?” Olivia asked as she showed us her color palette.



Maple - Lilac
Eugenia Red - Cobalt Green

“Nice,” I said. “Very aesthetically pleasing.”

“Lame,” Duncan said, faking a yawn. “Not nearly as cool as white.”

“Okay, Chet,” I said. “Your turn.”

“I don’t know what to choose,” he said.

“Just do your first name and a bunch of numbers after it,” Duncan suggested.

“Lumi,” I said, “Is ‘Firstname Stringofnumbers the Nth of Whistlesound Placeholdername’ available for Chet?”

“Shut up,” Chet said, pushing me aside.

“Hey, Lumi,” he said, a tad nervously. “It’s, uhh, my turn. I’m Chet, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Chet. No need to be anxious. Do you know

what you want your username to be?”

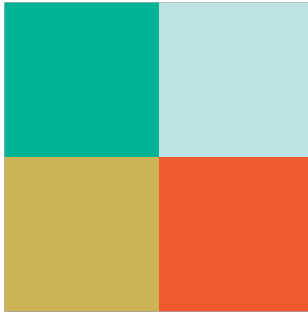
“Is ‘MasterToga’ available?” he asked.

“Oh,” exclaimed Lumi with delight, “looks like we don’t have a MasterToga yet. Well done. You’re our first!”

Chet beamed with pride.

“Please take your card below, and have a great rest of your day, MasterToga.”

Chet grabbed his card and showed it to us, like he was holding up his yearbook photo.



Sea Green - Nile Blue
Pyrite Yellow - Peach Red

“You look like you just won a gold medal,” I said.

“But just so you know, dude,” Duncan said, “pyrite is actually fool’s gold.”

“Bitterness looks really, really good on you,” Olivia said, flashing a fake smile at Duncan.

“Really?” he asked.

“No.”

“Okay,” I said, interrupting their argument, “now we need DNA samples taken, right?”

“Yes,” Lucca said. “Lumi already synthesized your retinal scans and the cards automatically recorded your fingerprints when you picked them up. We just need a sample of your DNA.”

“And how do you want to retrieve these samples?” I asked.

“Well, it’s up to you,” Lucca said. “Lumi is an advocate for retrieving it from bite marks, but a cheek swab or strand of hair would do.”

“Cheek swab,” we all agreed.

The ripples on Lumi’s monitor slowed to a standstill. “You are all zero fun,” she said. “Have a boring day.”

* * *

Once we could log in to our Brains, Lucca showed Duncan, Olivia, and myself how to access various training seminars, including “How to Make a Presentation,” “Basics of Data Visualization,” “Communicating like a Consultant,” and “Avoiding a Lawsuit.” Chet, meanwhile, was shown to the part of the ship where his new clinic would be set up.

“I’m going to save the rest of these for tomorrow,” Duncan said after completing the MWCA “Visions and Values” training. “I can’t listen to any more drivel about personal and professional integrity today.”

“It’s a bit dry,” I agreed, standing up and stretching. “And I don’t think professional standards will help us save the Universe.”

I glanced over at Olivia and wondered why she was sitting so still staring at her Brain, when the Brain had clearly gone into sleep mode. I leaned over and poked her.

Olivia jumped up in a trance and shouted, “Why don’t you take the lead on putting together this document!”

“Are you okay?” I asked her, gently shaking her by the shoulders.

“I fell asleep watching a case study,” she mumbled. “It was terrible.”

Yup, we are definitely cut out for this world.

* * *

After the three of us took our lunch break together, we separated into our respective teams. Duncan and I proceeded to take multiple wrong turns and elevators before we finally found the meeting room that had been uploaded to our Brains.

There, we found the twins, Dr. Flotsam and Dr. Jetsam, and Celes, the Managing Director of MWCA’s Political Division.

“Welcome,” Celes said. “It will just be the five of us for this session. Being new to the galaxy, so to speak, I have asked Dr. Flotsam and Dr. Jetsam to present on the history of the election for

the Supreme Deity, the Divinity of Destiny, the End-All, Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, the One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy®. The whys, whos, and hows, so to speak. Please, take it away, Doctors.”

“Thank you, Celes, and hello again, Duncan and Johnny,” Dr. Flotsam said. “Shall we jump right in?”

She used a remote to make a presentation display on the far wall of the meeting room. The first image was of a man looking up to the stars and sticking his thumb out, like he was trying to hail a cab.

“Groups of different humans on different planets, and even often on the same planet, believed in and worshiped different Gods,” she explained. “This led to millennia of conflict and bloodshed. Most of the worst acts in galactic history were committed in the name of religious disagreements.”

The image changed to a news headline, which our implants translated as “No More Religion!”

“Religion was thus made illegal,” Dr. Jetsam added, “which only served to make it more popular and enable more dangerous strains of religion to thrive.”

The image switched to a lot of men and women sitting in a circle yelling and pointing at each other.

“Thus, scholars galaxy-wide advocated for decriminalizing religion and, later, legalizing it under the pretense that if it was legalized, it could be controlled, made safer, and taxed heavily,” Dr. Flotsam said. “They only cracked down on the truly dangerous ones, the religions that had been laced with genocide or laundry detergent.”

“Legalizing religion did not, however, do anything to end the disagreements over which beliefs and which Gods were the so-called ‘correct ones,’” continued Dr. Jetsam. “Every time an attempt was made to create a new, universal religion, from which even more profits and stability could be obtained, another war would inevitably break out.”

The image changed to that of a beautiful looking woman wearing a sparkly dress, sash, and tiara.

“Until one day,” Dr. Flotsam said, “a contestant in the Miss Universe Competition came up with a brilliant idea for achieving all-world peace. Why, she asked, didn’t we all collectively put it to a vote and settle our debates once and for all? Whichever candidate for God received the most votes would be elected God until such time as another vote was needed.”

“It was a wonderful idea that took a long time to perfect, logistically-speaking,” Dr. Jetsam said.

A large, drab, gray space rock replaced the image of the beautiful woman.

“Space travel was much more difficult back then and only one ballot box was made available on an uninhabited planet called Arakna, as pictured here,” explained Dr. Flotsam. “The original election ended 257 votes to 256, with the tying vote arriving roughly 10,000 years past the deadline, which would have been ineligible anyway due to the untimely death of the voter a mere two years into his journey. The deceased voter’s ship crashed directly into the location of the original ballot box, which had by that point been turned into a museum.”

“Who won the first election for God?” I asked.

“A two-headed cow named Bartha,” said Dr. Flotsam, who made an image of a two-headed cow appear.

“A two-headed cow!?” I blurted out.

“Yes,” confirmed Dr. Jetsam. “It was considered quite the upset victory. The original election had only ten candidates as nominated by the ten most populated planets of the time. Bartha the two-headed cow was nominated by a now extinct group of humans who were deeply irreligious. They nominated Bartha knowing that it would anger the other planets, and also because She was unlikely to use Her position to make any demands of them in the unlikely event of Her victory.”

“The vote was ranked-choice,” explained Dr. Flotsam, “so each round the candidate with the lowest number of first place votes would be eliminated, and anyone who had voted for the eliminated candidate would have their votes go to their second-ranked choice, and so on and so forth. To win, a candidate had to attain a majority of the vote.”

“Bartha actually tied for the second-fewest first-place votes in round one with two,” Dr. Jetsam said, “but the person who had voted for the least popular candidate had marked Bartha as their second choice, which advanced Her into round 3. As it turned out, every single voter but the two who had marked Bartha as their first choice had ranked Her as their second.”

“All the other planets were of the mindset that if *their* God wasn’t going to win, at least no one else’s would either,” Dr. Flotsam said. “And thus, despite only being the first-choice of 0.39% of the

electorate, Bartha became the first elected God by winning a bare majority of the vote after the first eight candidates were eliminated.”

“Here is a round by round breakdown of the election. I wrote my doctoral thesis on it,” said Dr. Flotsam, who made the following table appear on the wall.

Round	First Place Votes (Bartha)	New Votes Gained	% of Total Votes
1	2	--	0.39%
2	3	1	0.58%
3	5	2	0.97%
4	9	4	1.75%
5	17	8	3.31%
6	33	16	6.43%
7	65	32	12.67%
8	129	64	25.15%
9	257	128	50.10%

“And was Bartha the two-headed cow a *good* God?” Duncan asked.

“That’s a completely subjective question,” Dr. Flotsam said. “Bartha died less than a year into Her term from a double brain tumor. But historians generally agree She didn’t make anything any worse.”

“How many elections for God have there been?” I asked.

“That is a fascinating and complicated question to answer,” Dr. Jetsam said. “There have been 55 successful elections. There have been 10 or so of marginal success, 5 complete disasters, and 1 still ongoing election from 700 years ago where a nearly infinite number of candidates were allowed on the ballot and computers are *still* working on determining who the winner was based on voters’ 1st thru 77,000th choice.”

“How does the election work now?”

“The field is limited to the 100 top candidates as determined by the number of unique biosignatures they are able to collect in a three-

month window,” explained Dr. Flotsam. “In honor of the woman who came up with the idea originally, there is a galactically-televised talent contest for those candidates able to travel, as well as speeches and Q&A sessions. Voters are able to vote from their home depending on their planet’s network coverage, but ballot boxes are available in the capital cities of most planets. Voters rank up to their ten favorite candidates, and all votes received by a certain deadline are counted. The only limitation on who can vote is that they be sufficiently intelligent and advanced enough to figure out how ranked-choice voting works.”

“I guess that rules the Earth out,” I said.

“You mentioned unique biosignatures,” Duncan said. “We recently learned about a thousand acre fungal mat on Earth that is all one giant organism. Assuming this fungal mat could figure out ranked-choice voting, would its vote only count as one?”

“Yes, regardless of his size, Fungal Matt would only count as one unique biosignature or vote,” confirmed Dr. Flotsam.

“It wouldn’t be fair to give more voting power to the largest organisms at the expense of the smallest organisms,” Dr. Jetsam said. “No matter how great or wise Fungal Matt is.”

“Of course, one entity can clone themselves a thousand times and use genetic modifying techniques to make each clone slightly different, but then that isn’t a problem because they are legally separate individuals,” Dr. Jetsam said. “Plus, such ingenuity is to be rewarded. A clone artist once ran for God and did quite well, I might add, but ultimately lost out to his own clone, Clone #347, because He had a slightly better smile.”

“What makes for a good candidate?” Duncan asked.

“The best candidates tend to be those who are entirely incapable of speaking, thinking, or doing,” Dr. Flotsam answered. “In fact, being either dead or an inanimate object are two variables positively correlated with success.”

“Would your friend Fungal Matt be interested in running for God?” Celes interjected. “There are no intelligence requirements whatsoever, unlike with voting, and his size may work to his advantage... although travel would likely be an issue.”

“We don’t know him personally, I’m afraid,” I responded. “As Duncan said, we only just learned of his existence ourselves. He’s in Oregon if you want to meet him. Actually, I think he *is* Oregon.”

“But if voters prefer Gods who can’t and don’t do anything, why

are there still elections at all?" Duncan asked.

"First, it makes for absolutely fantastic entertainment," she replied. "Second, I don't think mankind can fully rid itself of the need to believe in the supernatural. You know, the meaning of life type of stuff. But now we expect to be able to choose our own Gods rather than be stuck with the deities of our ancestors, and we no longer want Gods to inconvenience us in any way."

"You don't want to have their morality foisted on you?"

"It's not that we don't want to act morally or be rule-bound," Celes explained, "it's just that we found something much sexier than religion to worship—bureaucracy."

"So, you decided to keep God around, but in a ceremonial role," said Duncan, "and, in the meantime, got rid of His organization, funding, and power."

"Reminds me of the Magna Carta," I said.

"And to add insult to injury," continued Duncan, "whenever you get the urge, you hold a vote and change God's name and likeness as well."

"Precisely," Flotsam said. "Hence Gods like Vngngbane the Vulturous and Fahfelforfer fe Festerforkled gave way to Jason the space twig."

"Has a human ever been elected God?" I asked.

"On rare occasions, yes," Dr. Flotsam said. "The first time, with Garf, it was done sarcastically, but every time since was strictly the result of a galactic-wide mistake."

"What does a man, or woman, do after their term as God is up?" Duncan asked.

"I'm not sure, but it must look terribly impressive on a resume," Dr. Jetsam joked.

"But what can a candidate for God do once elected?" I asked. "Does the title of God have any power or function whatsoever? I understand some candidates are nominated by others, but why would anyone *choose* to run themselves?"

"There's a billion credit prize for winning," Dr. Jetsam said. "In the event the electee is unable to figure out how to deposit the credits after two years, the prize sum rolls up into the next pot, making it even larger."

"Besides the prize money, Gods also receive near blanket legal immunity, give State of the Universe addresses, receive their own

planet, palace, and spaceship, and also get half-off on food deliveries and select streaming services,” Dr. Flotsam added.

“They also become Universally-famous, and celebrity status has its own perks,” said Dr. Jetsam. “Gods can expect to receive countless party invitations, marketing deals, flocks of fangirls and boys, and numerous chances to throw up the first pitches at barfball games.”

“And is God the only position on the ballot?” I asked.

“Past elections have toyed with introducing a Vice God as well as several demigod positions, but these positions were deemed so lacking in purpose, that the winners were never even informed.”

It was strange how comfortable we felt with everything we were being told, but it felt strangely analogous to American culture and politics. I mean, no, George Washington hadn’t been a two-headed cow, but it seemed like only a handful of years before Americans decided to elect someone so outrageously ill-suited for the Presidency that the office itself would begin to lose meaning.²¹

I was honestly surprised we hadn’t already thought of turning elections into reality television events back on Earth. *To vote for President of the U.S.A., simply text the name of the contestant you would like to vote for to “19602”.* You could vote without ever having to leave your house, couch, or favorite television channel.

“Thank you, Drs. Flotsam and Jetsam, for that comprehensive presentation,” Celes said, interrupting my mental wandering. “I think Johnny and Duncan could use some time to process all of this new information.”

“One last question,” I said. “We were told elections for God started in order to prevent wars. Has it worked?”

“Not even close,” Celes said. “Along with believing in the supernatural, violence is an integral part of what it means to be human.”

“So close,” I said, snapping my fingers.

“Now that you’ve been taught some of the history and significance of the election,” Celes continued, “I want you both to brainstorm and come prepared tomorrow with some ideas on potential candidates and campaign strategies. No idea is too stupid... although, from time to time, team members do test that theory.”

“We aren’t at a disadvantage from being, as you said, new to the galaxy?” Duncan asked.

²¹ Seeing as we joined MWCA fall of 2015, Americans were actually only one year away.

* * *

“No. In fact, that’s exactly why I want you to present tomorrow, before you spend too much time around the rest of the team,” Celes explained. “But I should warn you, burnout rates in the Political Division are high, and some consultants have never heard an idea they didn’t think was bad. Don’t let them wear you down with their cynicism.”

“And take this,” added Dr. Jetsam. “It’s an old Florencian calendar; each month showcases a different candidate for God from the last election.”

“We hope it will help you with your brainstorming,” explained Dr. Flotsam.

“Thank you for the calendar and the presentation,” I said. “Duncan and I will do our best.”

“Splendid!” Celes said. “Congratulations on making it through your first day. See you tomorrow.”

After exchanging professional pleasantries, we zigzagged our way back toward *David Bowie*.

“Dude, their planet has 52 months,” I said. “This is basically a pin-up calendar of would-be Gods.”

“Look at this one,” Duncan said. “Its name is Phyll. It looks like a... corgi-spider... spider-corgi. You know, I can’t tell if that looks more like a corgi with a spider’s body or a spider with a corgi’s head.”

“What do you think the evolutionary advantage of that particular combination is?” I asked him.

“No idea,” he said, “but if voters really want to vote for the most useless candidate, I’m surprised Phyll lost.”

“Speaking of which, here’s Jason. I really wasn’t expecting Her to look like that.”

“Like what?” Duncan asked, looking at the calendar. “Wait, what *is* that?”

“It looks like Jason was, or is, a floating hunk of cosmic driftwood.”

“Yeah, you’re right. You know, I always suspected God was smooth and phallic-looking.”

“Does the idea of electing candidates to a ceremonial position called God bother you?”

“A little, on an existential level,” he admitted. “And it seems like a whole lot of work for nothing. I’m sure it would look impressive to

future clients for MWCA to get a candidate elected God, but I don't really care about that."

"Me neither," I said. "If I'm going to go through all the trouble of getting a candidate elected, I want it to mean something."

"But you heard them, everyone expects a platform of nothing at all."

"Then we'll just have to do one better. 'Nothing at all and then some!'" I said, waving my arm through the air.

"Intriguing," Duncan said. "And what do you have in mind for the 'then some'?"

"I don't know yet," I said, "but if the Inventorator can also make beer, I think we'll be alright."

* * *

Back inside *David Bowie*, we found Chet wrapped in a towel on his way back from taking a shower.

"Hey, Chet," I said. "How was your afternoon with Captain Waboosh?"

"Great!" he said. "That dude is a riot."

"Did you discover the cure for his ass pain?" Duncan asked.

"I think so," he said. "Nerves love space, movement, and blood flow. My guess is that the problem is piriformis syndrome, caused by a tight piriformis muscle compressing on his sensitized sciatic nerve. We worked today on releasing the muscle to create space, and then we did some nerve glides to get his nerve juice flowing to help desensitize his sciatic nerve."

"So, essentially, you advised him to do exercises that make juices in his butt loosen?" Duncan asked.

"I mean... in a manner of speaking."

"It sounds like you prescribed him diarrhea, dude," I said.

"But not your over-the-counter diarrhea," Duncan said, "this one came with a whole workout regimen attached. He had to work for that shit."

"Go ahead and laugh," Chet said, "but just wait until *your* nerve juices seize up. I'm gonna milk you dudes for all you have."

"My nipples don't produce milk, Chet," Duncan said. "Now, Bartha the two-headed cow, on the other hand..."

We proceeded to tell Chet the Cliff Notes version of what we had

learned that day. When we had finished, Chet simply smiled. "Sounds stressful," he said. "I don't have any openings for new clients available this week, but I can fit you both in for acupuncture next week."

"Is it on the house?" I asked. "Seeing as how I helped get you this job, and all."

"Nope," Chet said cheerfully.

"Fine," I grumbled. "But I expect a hot towel wrap to be included."

"Speaking of towels..." Chet walked into his quarters and closed the door.

We were putting our dinner orders into the Inventorator when Olivia walked in.

"Long first day?" I asked her.

"You guys aren't going to believe how cool my project is!" she cried.

"Oh?"

"Get this," Olivia said. "The government of a recently terraformed planet called Harrieta wants to populate the planet with a mixture of old and new flora and fauna, and have thus commissioned the MWCA to create a field notebook describing their planet's species to attract ecotourists."

"Old and new," I repeated. "If the planet was just recently terraformed, that means they don't have any native plants or animals yet, right?"

"Right," Olivia said. "The government project team has elicited stakeholder feedback to learn what species colonists, tourism boards, and eco-travelers expect the planet to be populated with, but have also hired MWCA to make suggestions on any species we think might be missing."

"But how can you write a field guide about animals and plants that aren't on the planet yet or don't even exist yet?" Duncan asked.

"This is the genius part," Olivia said. "It's much more efficient to write a field guide first and *then* introduce all the plants and creatures in it afterward than to visit a pre-populated planet and spend years out in the field attempting to create a comprehensive guide of species that

already exist. And this way, you ensure everything in the field guide is true.”

“But how can it be true if some of these creatures don’t even exist yet?” I asked

“Aha!” exclaimed Olivia. “That was my question exactly! It turns out that there are several anomalous worlds in the galaxy that behave... differently. They have different rules and different properties. Well, one that I learned about is called Byblya, and on Byblya, anything that is written down instantly becomes true.”

“I don’t follow,” I said.

“Writers there are essentially magicians, or better yet, creationists! Anything that a writer jots down while on the planet Byblya will suddenly burst into being, or will have always been, or will inevitably come to be, depending on the verb tense, of course.”

“But how is that possible?” I asked.

“Once again, exactly my question. It appears to be a paradox, but apparently the planet was visited by a scribe of such power and potency that when they wrote ‘Everything that is written on this planet is true’, everything written from that point on, and from that point back, became true. Apparently that phrase is written in large letters in the heart of their capital city.”

“I’m still not sure I’m following.”

“I think she’s saying that if I went down to Byblya and wrote ‘Duncan has two dicks’,” Duncan said, “I would suddenly have a second dick?”

“Charming, as always,” Olivia said. “But sure, that is the general idea. But, and this is a *big* but, if that was all you wrote, there’s no telling where the second one, or even the first one, for that matter, would be located on your body, what they would look like, or if they would even belong to you.”

“You had me at *big butt*,” Duncan said, “but I think you lost me in the second half.”

“If all you wrote was ‘Duncan has two dicks,’ you might wake up to find two squea gulls humping your ears.”

“Two *what* nows?” I asked.

“Squea gulls,” she said.

“Are they sexy?” Duncan asked.

“They’re cute,” Olivia said. “One of my suggestions for the field book, actually.”

Olivia reached into her bag and pulled out a book titled *Archive Field Notebook: a non-technical introduction for beginners on the real and imagined specimens of Planet Harrieta*. Olivia flipped to page 103 and let us each read its non-technical description.

Squea gull - A furry avian creature with a one-foot wingspan and bushy tail. Each generation grows more and more desperate for food, regardless of supply. So annoying that it has no known predators. Cute, though.

“Let me get this straight,” Duncan said. “You thought it was a good idea to cross a squirrel with a seagull, essentially a ground rodent with an air rodent, make it even more annoying than its ancestors, and unleash it on an unsuspecting planet you’ve never been to?”

“Well, Evo gave me the idea,” she said.

“Evo, the immortal being that made us listen to nothing but K-pop and eat nothing but Lunchables for seven days?” Duncan asked. “That Evo?”

“Yes,” Olivia said, timidly. “I summoned Him to solicit His advice on coming up with new species. He told me that no planet was complete without at least one or two pesky scavenger species, and that there would be a lack of ecological harmony without them.”

“Sounds like another prank,” Duncan said.

“What else is in that field guide?” I asked.

“Here, look for yourself,” Olivia said, handing me the guide. I flipped to a page at random and read out loud:

Moosekrat - Comfortable on land or at sea. Occasionally nocturnal. Will lap up synthetic fuel of any kind. Favorite foods: kerosene and cheddar cheese. Very timid in bed.

“A moosekrat?” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, they’re a real animal already; I saw a photo of one,” Olivia explained. “They look like a goose with moose antlers, four webbed feet, a furry brown body, two-eagle looking wings, and a rat tail. It’s freaking bizarre.”

“No wonder it’s so timid,” Duncan said. “Now, maybe if it had two penises...”

“See, this is why only very special writers are allowed to write on

Byblya,” Olivia said. “Otherwise, everyone and everything would be walking around with multiple penises. Only those who will either improve the standard of living or at least improve the quality of suffering are allowed to enter.”

“It sounds like Tom Waits designed this planet,” I said.

“Let me get this straight,” Duncan said, “if you or another consultant go down to Byblya and rewrite the Archive Field Notebook there, then Harrieta will magically be populated with all of these creatures?”

“Yes,” Olivia said. “We’ve opted for a largely non-technical guide so as to allow each species room to develop freely.”

“And by freely you mean for Evo to step in and muck about?” Duncan asked.

“Well, He is the most qualified,” Olivia confirmed, as I flipped to another random page.

Midwestern Jellyfish - Freshwater *medusozoan*. Seems to prefer grape jelly (the worst kind!) and, oddly - marmalade. If you encounter several in a group, they *will* swamp your spaceship. Glows in the dark.

“One of your ideas?” I asked her.

“No, most of these either already exist elsewhere in the galaxy or were added by other consultants.”

Velvet Leaf - Usually covered in larvae. Looks good in the buttonhole of your jacket. Member of the Mallow family. Is both a plant and an animal.

“Both a plant and an animal?” Chet asked. “How does that work?”

Olivia shrugged. “I guess it’s capable of both producing its own food and eating that of others.”

“Some algae on Earth can do that, I think,” I said.

“Hey, have you included any species from Earth yet?” Chet asked.

“Only one so far,” Olivia said, taking the book from me and turning to page 87.

Pigeon - Earliest domesticated species of bird. Baby versions are called squeakers or squabs. Can be trained to distinguish between

cubist and impressionist paintings. The symbol for peace.

"The symbol for peace?" Chet asked. "You're thinking of doves."

"Pigeons and doves are two different words describing the same birds," Olivia said. "Every dove is a pigeon and every pigeon is a dove. The two words just come from different languages. But for some reason the white birds are called doves and get all the good press, while the gray birds are called pigeons and are thought of as flying ground trash. I'm advocating we change that once and for all."

"Systemic bird racism," Duncan said, "who knew?"

"How is working with Astryn going?" I asked.

"Oh, she's alright," Olivia said. "I can already tell she doesn't understand the concept of work-life balance, though."

"And how is Gee Whiskas?" I asked.

"Oh my gosh, I forgot to tell you!" Olivia exclaimed. "Astryn included him in the field guide!" She turned to page 17.

Very special mouse - Extremely special.

"That's... a *really* non-technical description," I said.

"The thing is, very special mice really *are* very special," Olivia said, "but not because they can detect lies, which I'm almost certain they can't, but because they have the ability to trick other species into *thinking* they're very special, which, in fact, makes them very special."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

Olivia shrugged. "It turns out I'm immune to its charms."

"Clearly not," Duncan said.

"Well," Olivia said, "either I'm right and the very special mouse can trick other species into thinking it's very special, or you're right, and the very special mouse has tricked me into thinking it's very special. Either way, it's very special."

"Or Option C," Duncan said, "the mouse isn't very special, doesn't operate as a lie detector test, and doesn't have the ability to trick other species into thinking it's special. It's just a regular mouse and you and Astryn are the ones who are, ahem, *very* special."

Olivia looked at me to back her up. "Hey, don't look at me," I said. "I have no opinion on the matter. But once your field guide is written, Gee Whiskas and his ilk will become extremely special, regardless of whether or not they were before."

“Unless Byblya is also just hocus pocus,” Duncan said.

“Dude, at this point I’m willing to believe almost anything,” I said. “Aren’t you?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Well, that and waking up to a pair of squeak gulls humping my ears.”

“Ahh, the joys of space!” I cried.

“Wait!” Duncan exclaimed. “Assuming Byblya functions as described, could we theoretically save the Universe by going there and writing ‘The Universe is safe’?”

“I thought of that,” Olivia said. “And I don’t know. I mean, without knowing what the Universe is in danger from, it’s going to be difficult to provide enough context. If you wrote ‘The Universe is safe’ it might just make it so the Universe is safe from midwestern jellyfish, which I’m pretty sure it already is.”

“I see,” Duncan said. “Could the Universe be in danger because someone wrote as much?”

“I don’t think so. Byblya is so particular about who they allow to write there and so careful in reviewing everything that gets written, that I don’t think it’s possible. I think there may be safeguards that prevent anything from being changed on too grand of a level.”

“It’s still worth exploring,” I said.

“In the meantime, are there any creatures in your field guide that might make good candidates for God?” Duncan asked.

“What?” Olivia asked, startled.

“Are there any creatures that may be likable enough to get elected in a popularity contest but incapable enough to not do anything once elected?” I asked.

“Well...” Olivia said, giving the question great thought. “There *is* a very special mouse.”

Duncan and I turned toward each other and locked eyes for what felt like a small eternity.

“Yes!” I finally shouted at the exact same moment Duncan was shouting “No!”

“Why not?” I asked. “He’s popular with the Astryns of the galaxy and may or may not have the ability to trick others into thinking he’s special. He’s perfect!”

“Gee Whiskas is a goddamn con man!” Duncan retorted. “A common charlatan, a mountebank, a huckster. He is at best a cheeky cheater, at worst a vagabond, a demagogue, and a scoundrel!”

"I can work with that," I said.

"But he's a mouse!" complained Duncan.

"A very *special* mouse," Chet corrected.

"If the guide gets published before the election, I think he has a shot," I said. "And he's certainly more readily available than our other leading contender, Fungal Matt."

"But I thought you wanted the election to *mean* something!" Duncan protested.

"I do," I said, "but the hardest part is getting elected. We can't accomplish much otherwise."

"We'll discuss this later... over beer," Duncan said, before turning around and heading towards the door. "To be continued," he said on his way out.

"You can't just say 'to be continued' and then walk off," I shouted at his back.

"TO BE CONTINUED!" came the response from the hallway.

"Gee Whiskas, mista," I muttered, "you sure do drive a hard bargain."

I was under no illusion that alcohol, consumed in any amount, had ever helped improve the clarity of my thinking. It had proven effective, however, time and time again, in increasing the loudness and cocksureness of my arguments.

As it just so happened, these were the exact qualities Duncan and I were in desperate need of. If we were going to come up with a passionate defense for nominating a candidate to become our new God, we were going to have to be more confident than the situation warranted... way more confident.

But first, we had to agree on a candidate. "What's your problem with Gee Whiskas?" I asked Duncan.

"He's a mouse," Duncan said.

"Yes, but he's a *clever* mouse," I replied.

"By what possible standards? Is there a Mensa for mice I'm unaware of?"

"By the fact that we're even debating it. Stupid mice don't get debated over!"

"What's he going to *do* as God?" Duncan asked. "Carry in fleas from outside? Contaminate surfaces? Cause damage to people's siding? Chew through electrical wiring?"

"Maybe," I said, "if he wants to! And maybe he'll do some good stuff too."

"How? He can't even pick up his food with one hand!"

"Oh, so you'd like him more if he had opposable thumbs?" I asked, sneering at Duncan's prejudice against lifeforms with less dexterous pollices.

"Yeah, you know what?" Duncan asked. "*I would.*"

"Well, that's stupid," I said. "You know why they call them

opposable thumbs, bro? Because they're capable of being *opposed*. But Gee Whiska's thumbs aren't opposable and therefore voters won't be able to resist him!"

"That's not what that means at all, dude!" Duncan exclaimed. "Having opposable thumbs just means your thumbs can rotate around their axes to touch your other fingers."

"Oh, get a grip, Duncan!" I scoffed. "Like you'd even know something like that!"

"Dude, of course I know it," he said. "I *have* opposable thumbs!"

"Precisely," I responded, "which is why I'm resisting your arguments!"

"No, you're resisting because you're an asshole."

"No, I'm resisting because you've provided me with no other options."

"We could choose literally anyone or anything else," Duncan said.

"That's not an answer. Give me another option!"

"I don't have one yet!" Duncan finally admitted.

"Exactly my point!" I said. "If you find a very special possum with opposable thumbs on this spaceship, please, let me know. But until then, one mouse in your hand is worth two in your bush, as the saying goes."

Duncan ignored my misquote. "So, you picked Gee Whiskas because he was the first option to be presented to you?"

"*Only* option," I corrected.

"And you're okay with that?" he asked.

"Another saying says not to look a gift mouse in the horse," I said, "and I don't intend to."

"The saying is mouth," Duncan said, unable to stop himself this time.

"Right, well I don't intend to look a gift mouth in the horse either."

"You know, you're really good at that," Duncan said.

"At what?"

"At pretending to be stupid in order to win arguments."

I smirked. "A quality I hope serves us well in the days and months to come."

"Fine, I give in," Duncan said. "Gee Whiskas is our candidate. Whoop-de-doo. What's next?"

Next was Duncan and I staying up late and drinking a lot of beer.

Drinking soon became drankng, which turned into drinking, which was followed by drenching, until, by pint five, we were totally rip-roaring gnknord. Our mutual rediscovery of the unpleasant phenomena known as a "headache" the next morning was a necessary, if painful, outcome of our having needed to let loose. Fortunately, we had complemented our crapulence with vibrant and spirited debate around what our ideal campaign platform would be. And even if we still didn't have much of a plan, "not much" was still much more of a plan than we had before we defiled our temples with alcohol.

Mercifully, *David Bowie's* Inventorator was able to whip us each up a strong cup of coffee, large stacks of pancakes, and an unbelievably effective hangover cure that looked like a mini marshmallow and smelt vaguely of old books mixed with freshly mown grass. One look at us, and the machine had shot out the little medicine puffs without us even having to ask. Now *that* was service.

"Thank you, my friend," Duncan told the Inventorator, whose sleek design looked like an iPod had sex with a microwave. "Hey, how do you think it knew we had hangovers?" Duncan asked me.

"Well, we did ask it to make us ten pints of beer last night," I pointed out.

"Touché," he said. "But still, how do you think it works?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it's like when young kids think little people live inside the TV set acting out all the parts in shows and films. The simplest answer is there's a tiny group of chefs living inside the Inventorator making all our meals."

"And it only takes them seconds to receive our orders and cook them?"

"Perhaps they can see the future and have our meals prepared already," I suggested.

"So, the simplest possible solution we can come up with for how an Inventorator works is that there are little cooks living inside the machine that have the gift of precognitive foresight yet are perfectly content to use that gift to make us pancakes and hangover cures?"

"Yeah, that's the best solution my brain has come up with thus far."

"Works for me," Duncan said.

Soon after, Duncan and I nervously strode the length of the ship toward the auditorium where the God election campaign team was gathered to witness us unveil our cockamamie schemes.

Our physical brains were still groggy, but our handheld Brains

refused to let us be late. When we came to a T-intersection in a hallway and took a left turn instead of a right, our Brains sprung to life from within our pockets. "Turn around immediately and take the second door on your right," they yelled.

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Duncan. "We're going."

We walked into the auditorium, which was laid out in a semicircle configuration with eight rows of seats. We continued down to the center stage, where Celes was standing holding a shallow pot with a small tree in it.

"Hello," she said. "Please meet Jasper the bonsai tree, a miniature Tortusian Elm who has been in training since the year 3182. Jasper is a potential candidate for God we're vetting."

"Hi, Jasper," we both said, just in case Tortusian Elm trees possessed the ability to speak.

"Jasper, say hi to Johnny and Duncan."

The bonsai tree named Jasper, however, made no noise of any kind, nor did it give any indication it was likely to at any point in the near future. Sometimes a tree was just a tree, after all.

"Yes, well, not really a crowd pleaser, that one," Celes said.

"What exactly are you vetting for?" I asked. "What would be considered disqualifying?"

"Yellowed or wilting leaves, ragged leaf edges, drooping or wilted branches, swollen bark, and so on and so forth," Celes said. "But frankly, Jasper seems a bit stuck up, even for a tree. Hopefully," she added, "you two came up with a better candidate."

"We hope so too," I said, turning to Duncan and signaling with my hand that the bar seemed rather low.

"Let's find out, shall we?" Celes said cheerfully before turning to face the auditorium. "Hello, everyone," she said to the eighty or so consultants seated there. "Instead of going around and giving individual updates, I want to introduce you all to our two newest team members, Johnny and Duncan. They are humans from a previously unknown planet called Earth who only just learned of the existence of God, or, well, Jason, very recently. I've asked them to present their initial, unpasteurized campaign ideas to us, as it's not every day we get the chance to hear fresh, untainted outside opinions. Please, Johnny, Duncan, take it away."

"Hello," I said, doing my best to project. "My name is Johnny, and this is my colleague Duncan."

"Hi, everyone," Duncan said.

“As Celes pointed out,” I continued, “we’re newcomers to the Galaxy and only learned about the existence of the God elections two days ago. With that in mind, we have a few preliminary ideas concerning a potential candidate, campaign slogan, and campaign platform.”

“Excuse me,” said a woman in the second row. “But why would we need to have a campaign platform?”

“Because,” Duncan responded, “while you might think the Galaxy wants a candidate that’ll promise to do nothing, we suspect the Galaxy may actually be open to a candidate promising to do nothing... and then some.”

“And hence our campaign slogan,” I announced. “*Nothing and Then Some!*”

There were a few oohs emitted around the room, a few similar-sounding boos, and one very loud, very enthusiastic moo, which we later found out was made by a woman cosplaying in the audience as Bartha the two-headed cow.

“Ahem,” said a young man in the first row after the room had become quiet once again. “Being, as you said, new here, what makes you think you know what the Galaxy would be open to?”

“Because we happen to be part of it,” Duncan said, “which gives us some, albeit limited, authority on the subject.”

“I find the slogan intriguing,” Celes said. “This ‘then some’ you speak of... would it represent a doubling-down on doing nothing, maybe even a nothing squared, or is it, in fact, a sign you may actually want to do something after all?”

“The latter,” I said. “We think the election should mean something, but we want to frame it as an extension, rather than an alternative, to promising nothing, so as to ease voters into the idea.”

“That’s absurd!” yelled another man in the back. “No one will ever stand for it!”

“We don’t need them to stand for it, Chagg,” Celes reminded him, “we just need them to vote for it.”

“As for the form this extension of nothing will take, we have some preliminary ideas, ranging from less nothing to more nothing,” I said.

“The first idea,” Duncan said, “is running on a platform advocating for the establishment of a universal health care system.”

“Universal health care?” gasped yet another man in the fourth row. “What in blazes do you mean by *universal health care*?”

“It’s a system,” I explained, “where everyone, regardless of which

planet they come from, how wealthy their family is, or what pre-existing medical conditions they may have, has access to health care and doesn't have to worry about how they're going to pay for their medical expenses."

"*Everyone?*" asked a woman in disbelief. "That hardly seems feasible. Is that how you do things back on Earth?"

"Well, not where we're from," I said. "Not yet, anyway."

"And what's stopping it from happening?" she asked.

"Cost is a limiting factor," I said. "Other barriers include a lack of political harmony and persuasive misinformation campaigns."

"Then what makes you think you could establish it for the entire Universe, considering, as you said, your planet is part of it?"

"You're right, of course," Duncan said, "We wouldn't be able to accomplish it at this point, but by running on a platform advocating for universal health care, we would at least hold the idea up as a concept to strive for in the future."

"But it's a bad idea," said another man. "Richer planets would pay for the healthcare of poorer planets. And personally, I want to keep my MWCA provided plan."

"Yes, well as long as *you're* happy with your health insurance, I guess that idea is moot then," Duncan said. "Speaking of which, our friend Chet just opened a physical therapy clinic on board. You should all go check him out and have him check *you* out."

Duncan's mention of Chet was answered with another loud, enthusiastic moo. It seemed Chet may have already developed a fan, much to our udder disbelief.

"That was only our first idea," I said. "Our next idea is running on a platform advocating for the establishment of a Universal Basic Income, where everyone in the Universe gets an equal, regular installment of credits to help improve their quality of life."

There were many loud scoffs of real or feigned outrage in the room, and one man near the back even stood up. "Do you know how *big* the Universe is?" he asked. "Hell, do you even know how big the Galaxy is!? No one could ever pull off something of that scale."

"We have no idea how big it is," admitted Duncan, "but we do know which galaxies the elected God will represent... all of them. Therefore, any promise we make must be Universal in nature."

"But where would all these credits come from?" asked another consultant. "If you increase the circulation of credits, there would be runaway inflation on a Universal scale."

“The Universe is *always* inflating,” I said with a shrug. “We’d just be giving cosmic inflation a bit of a nudge.”

“By promising credits, you’re effectively bribing people to vote for your candidate,” Celes said. “But maybe that was the point.”

“That isn’t the biggest problem,” said a burly man in the front row. “You’d be promising to give some people something for nothing. Why should people who do nothing receive God’s good graces? There’s no such thing as a free lunch!”

“Hear! Hear!” said another man next to him. I was disheartened to hear all of the murmurs of agreement from around the room.

“Which brings us to our last idea,” I said, “the idea Duncan and I are actually advocating for. We propose that we run on a platform where we promise, in the event of our candidate’s victory in the election, everyone in the Universe will be provided with one free lunch.”

My words sparked an uproar that reverberated around the room, going far beyond the brouhaha elicited by our other ideas. It was as if the ghost of Milton Friedman had catapulted from his grave and simultaneously possessed the corpus of every man and woman in the room and made them shout at us all at once.

To his credit, the big burly man was shouting the loudest. “THERE IS NOT NOW, NOR HAS THERE EVER BEEN, NOR WILL THERE EVER BE, SUCH A THING AS A FREE LUNCH!”

It seemed that while our universal health care and Universal Basic Income ideas were just bad policy, the idea of a free lunch qualified as the most wicked form of blasphemy.

“Seriously!?” I shouted back. “What’s so wrong with a free lunch!? I mean, goddamn!”

“Someone will pay for that lunch in the end!” shouted a man in the front. “Mark my words, all of us in this room will end up paying for that lunch!”

“All of you hard-working, vitally important consultants you mean? Lord knows where the Galaxy would be without *you*.”

“There are rules governing these things,” shouted a woman. “You can’t just come in here and do whatever you want, promising lunches to everyone in a haphazard fashion! You have to *serve* somebody!”

“Why serve somebody when you can serve *everybody*?” I asked.

“Serve everybody exactly one free unit of lunch,” added Duncan. “No more, no less.”

The crowd of consultants continued acting like a congress of

baboons... or like a Congress of politicians, for that matter. The room became so chaotic that Celes had to implement a cone of silence system where anyone who spoke out of turn automatically had a bubble encapsulate their head, which let sound enter but kept any sound from leaving. Basically, with the bubble around your head, you could hear others, but they couldn't hear you.

As an aside, the silencing bubble was one piece of technology I very much wanted to bring back to Earth, especially for use in Presidential debates. If I had my way, as soon as a participant's allotted time was up, the bubble would automatically appear, allowing them to babble on until they were blue in the face, but not forcing anyone else to have to hear it. Bubbles would remain in place while other participants were talking so as to avoid irritating interruptions. I also vowed to find out if the bubbles worked on lifeforms other than humans, and if they came in Magrarius X's size.

I found it amusing that most of the people wearing bubbles were still shouting, despite us not being able to hear them. I supposed it let them relieve their emotions in a nonviolent way and may have even been cathartic for some. I could empathize, as I would definitely have taken advantage of the opportunity to scream whatever I wanted during Mooseport team meetings if I knew I couldn't be heard.

*No, Dave, I *won't* fucking get knocked down seven times just to stand up eight times. I use a fucking chair, Dave! I answer fucking phone calls, Dave!*

Meanwhile, with over an eighth of the consultants in the room now wearing bubbles of shame, Celes started individually calling on people who had their hands raised.

"A free lunch isn't as good as it sounds," said a man named Huvris. "Families must prepare or procure their own lunches in order to feel satisfaction."

"Tell that to the families benefiting from free and reduced lunch programs back on Earth," I said. "It's hard to feel satisfaction when you're malnourished."

"Economically speaking, there is an opportunity cost to any lunch," said Iyma, a young woman off to the right. "Because you can't pursue other options while you pursue the free lunch, there are tradeoffs and the lunch can therefore no longer be considered free."

"Unless," I countered, "resources are used more efficiently, creating a scenario where the same number of inputs creates a larger number of outputs. Economically speaking, you *can* get something for

nothing if your initial situation is getting nothing for something, which is what all these elections have been getting you up to this point.”

“But the Universe is a closed system,” said another young woman named Balmara, this time from our left, “and matter and energy are merely transferred between entities without there ever being any net gain or loss. It will require energy for us to eat the lunch, and the matter we consume will have come from something else. Free lunches are an impossibility.”

“You guys are totally missing the point!” Duncan exclaimed impatiently. “There was once nothing, and then there was a whole smorgasbord of matter. The Universe itself was, is, and always will be one giant freaking free lunch!”

You might have imagined Duncan had just claimed to have had intercourse with everyone’s deceased pets with how morally outraged most of the people in the room suddenly became. It turned out that libertarians didn’t like being told that the Universe and, by extension, everything making up the Universe, was a free lunch.

Duncan, for his part, acted like a WWE wrestler basking in the glory of the audience’s hatred. “You’re a free lunch!” he said, pointing at people indiscriminately. “You’re a free lunch! You’re a free lunch! You’re a free lunch...” His words were cut off by a silencing bubble that suddenly appeared around his head, though his finger pointing persisted unhindered.

At least twenty people stormed out, and some of those who remained seemed to be chanting the word “shun” over and over from within their silencing bubbles.

“Quiet!” yelled Celes over the room’s sound system, which made everyone shut up. “If you want to leave, you can, but I want to hear Duncan and Johnny out. How would you plan on procuring and/or delivering said free lunch?”

“The actual meal we provide,” I said, “will be written into existence on Byblya. That way, there will be a large output with very little input, the definition of efficiency, while the matter will not have previously come from anything else, making it both economically, and scientifically, a free lunch for everyone but the writer.”

“Sacrilege!” yelled multiple voices, who soon became the newest suppressed consultants. It was beginning to feel like I was addressing tapioca balls at the bottom of a cup of boba tea there were so many bubble-enclosed heads.

“Quiet!” shouted Celes again. “Please, continue.”

Duncan signaled that he wanted his bubble removed in order to speak, which Celes granted.

"The lunch is meant to be symbolic," he said. "Much like that of God, the position we're trying to get a candidate elected for in the first place."

"Speaking of which," Celes said, "who did you two have in mind?"

"Let's just say, he's a very special mouse," I said.

"Gee Whiskas?" she asked, looking confused.

"Yes," I said. "I know what you're thinking, but whether or not Gee Whiskas is actually special or not right now doesn't matter, because in the upcoming days, the *Archive Field Notebook* for the planet Harrietta is going to be written on Byblya, and the species of mouse that Gee Whiskas belongs to is going to be included, and its only defining characteristic is going to be that it's extremely special. Once that is written, it will be fact and everyone in the Universe is going to accept that Gee Whiskas is extremely special. That seems like a winning formula, and we don't even have to vet him."

"In summary," Duncan said, "we're proposing nominating the very special mouse Gee Whiskas as a candidate for God under the slogan 'Nothing and Then Some' whilst promising everyone in the Universe one free lunch in the event of his victory."

"And who are you proposing to have write the lunch into existence?" Celes asked.

"We hadn't discussed that yet, but Johnny can do it," Duncan said, catching me by surprise. "The other day he described the process of making spaghetti so in-depth to me that I haven't been able to get the taste out of my mouth since."

"I see," Celes said, giving our proposal serious thought.

"Celes," I said, "we appreciate you listening to our ideas, but it's clear they didn't go over well with the rest of the team, so we can leave if you want."

"Nonsense," she said. "The only one you had to convince here was me, and you succeeded. I'll reassign or fire everyone else, and we'll get started right away. I've been waiting for a truly audacious idea to walk through that door, and for you two to come in here and pitch a very special mouse providing everyone in the Universe with a very special meal is about as reckless as it gets."

"Are you serious?" Duncan asked.

"Quite," she responded. "MWCA has never backed a winning

candidate. It's about time we try doing something new."

"You mean try doing nothing new," Duncan corrected.

"And then some," she said with a smile.

And thus, the Free Lunch Party was born that fateful day. Among its initial party members were the only four people still left in the auditorium by the end of our presentation: Celes, Duncan, the mooing cosplay woman, and myself. Celes promised to convince Astryn to let us deify her pet, and also said she would convince the twins, Dr. Flotsam and Dr. Jetsam, to join our team once they returned from a focus group they were conducting with a group of ice crystals on a rogue asteroid. "Bartha" didn't offer any specific help, but seemed very happy to have finally found a group of people as weird as her to hang out with.

"Hell yeah," I said, "let's get Gee Whiskas elected God and slam the door on the free lunch debate once and for all!"

"Oh, on that note..." began Celes, "...as you can tell by the reaction you received today, our campaign is likely going to make a lot of people in the Galaxy very, very angry. We are going to attract a lot of media attention, which I'm counting on. With that increased attention, however, will come quacks, kooks, militants, and large, angry swarms of pissed off economists. MWCA may not be able to ensure your safety if news gets out about whose ideas these were originally."

"I understand," I said. "I'd still like to go ahead, as long as Duncan agrees."

"Absolutely," he said. "I have no reservations and then some."

* * *

Duncan and I left the auditorium and headed back to the *David Bowie*, feeling rather good about ourselves.

"How do you think Celes is going to convince Astryn to let us nominate Gee Whiskas?" I asked him.

"Well, there's the prize money," he said. "Plus a special Presidential planet."

"And the absolutely obnoxious social media content she would get to publish featuring her very special man," I added.

"And if that fails," Duncan said, "we can always settle for a good old fashioned pupnapping."

I was imagining the two of us sneaking into Astryn's cabin and trying to lure Gee Whiskas out with some peanut butter and an old newspaper when Lucca, *Synergy's* first mate, turned a corner and cut us off.

"You two have to come with me," she said. "Right now."

"Where to?" I asked.

"To see the captain," she said. "It seems the two of you have caused quite a stir."

"We aren't in trouble... are we, Lucca?" Duncan asked.

"We've received over forty complaints about the two of you in the last hour. Being only your second day with the company, that must be a new record."

My heart skipped a beat as I imagined Captain Waboosh throwing us out of an airlock. "Did these complaints cast us in a good light?" I asked hesitantly.

"You're asking if the complaints about you were positive?" she asked with a laugh. "Commonly recurring terms included 'sacrilegious', 'heretical', 'disrespectful', and 'distasteful'. Shall I go on?"

"No, that's okay," Duncan said. "That won't be necessary. That's not the most flattering word cloud ever."

She turned around and started walking down a corridor, Duncan and I in tow. "Out of curiosity, what did you two do?" she asked.

"What really set people off was when we said we wanted to make everyone in the Universe a free lunch," Duncan said.

"Oh?" Lucca asked in such a way as not to betray her true feelings on the subject.

"Duncan also started calling the other consultants free lunches themselves," I said. "But in his defense, they were acting very rude."

"I see," Lucca said as she rounded a corner. "The captain is going to love this," she added, once again in a tone that failed to indicate whether it was to be taken at face value or interpreted as sarcasm.

We reached the end of a corridor and passed through a door into a waiting room.

"Wait here," Lucca said. "I'll put the news on for you."

Lucca then touched a button on a wall panel and disappeared behind a door.

Before we had a chance to consult with each other, a hologram of a lady sitting behind a desk and wearing a floral dress appeared in

front of us.

Hello, this is Zena from the Naritian National News Service, the number one name in news. Last weekend, a story leaked that intergalactic champion starship pilot and infamous playboy Surlen Boondara was involved in an affair with the daughter of energy tycoon Salko Haldromush of Haldromush Industries. When questioned, Ms. Haldromush denied the story, but when he was asked about it, Mr. Boondara said that he didn't understand the question, asking, and I quote, 'Did you think I wasn't making love to beautiful, rich young women?' Then, Mr. Boondara gave us very vivid details of his encounter with Ms. Haldromush, which our editors felt were too... risqué to air during our program, before surprise announcing his candidacy to become the next Supreme Deity, Divinity of Destiny, End-All, Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy®. Having caught those closest to him off guard with this announcement, many are wondering whether his candidacy is legitimate or a misguided effort to distract attention away from his recent medical diagnosis as being the Galaxy's biggest asshole.

In other news, civil war has broken out on the planet Airys. Social unrest began because workers on Airys demanded greater freedoms, which was defined as 'quaint' and 'amusing' by an unnamed source at the Department of Planetary Harmony. As Airys is a protected planet, the Naritian government has already promised to help quell the rebellion.

In lighter news, check out this video of a baby arubmujub Yongoboarding. How adorable!

An apparition of a furry-looking komodo dragon jet skiing on lava appeared before us and then faded from view.

"You know, the rest of the Milky Way Galaxy, while very strange, also feels strangely familiar," Duncan said.

"You amn't kidding," I responded, much to my immediate and lasting chagrin.

"I ammun't?" Duncan inquired, his eyebrows perked. "But ammun't I?"

"Shit!" I whispered, knowing I was in for it now. "When will you

let me forget I just said that?" I asked.

"I amn't at liberty to say."

As I shook my head in grief, First Officer Lucca walked back into the waiting room. "You two can enter his office now," she said. "Captain Waboosh will join you momentarily."

As we entered, we noticed Captain Waboosh's office was filled to the brim with trinkets, tchotchkes, baubles, and the like. Novelties and souvenirs of the consulting business, we assumed, or perhaps mementos and plunders from previous careers as a doodad-swindling space pirate or a trifle-collecting logistics expert.

One piece in particular hanging behind Captain Waboosh's desk grabbed my attention. It appeared to be a white board containing a single, dirty, sweaty handprint. It resembled something cursed, like a sweaty shadow of a finger turkey drawn by a ghoul.

Having swiftly dismissed it as fine art, I couldn't help but read the didactic wall caption beneath it.

Drung Kunkle di Blerxh, (b. 3354)

Geological Ground Sample of Everyday Life, 3323

Handprint cast in spilt griffinwood candle wax on a beige carpet, smothered in wild thornberry flavored sparkling water, mixed with uncommon dirt, aged for three months, melted with a laser, soaked onto blotting paper, and insulted by the artist's five-year-old father

(Stolen by Captain Wulfric H. Waboosh II from the Vfthmr Gallery of Low Art)

"Dude," I said, pointing at the didactic, "according to this, the artist made this 31 years before they were born."

"Yes, well, it *does* look rather unpolished," he remarked.

"Do we even want to ask how this might be possible?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Time travel?"

"False," said a booming voice behind us belonging to Captain Waboosh. "Drung Kunkle di Blerxh was a piteous soul who counted his years in reverse and called his father his son, and his son his father, and was impolite enough to call it art. He was ass backwards in all respects, as ya'll can tell by this festering eyesore."

“Why do you have it in your office?” Duncan asked.

“It’s worth a small fortune and is an unfortunate family heirloom of sorts, but mostly it’s just so fucking *lousy*,” Captain Waboosh said. “It looks like a handprint lifted by a shitty amateur detective from the inside of a casket, inside of which Art itself was buried. I almost exclusively collect low art like this because it reminds me I’m still fucking breathing by comparison.”

“Which is why you have a melting butter sculpture of a man’s ass on your desk?” Duncan asked.

“Too true,” Captain Waboosh said. “I plan on commissioning the artist to render a bust of my head made out of hardened ash to go along with my ass, but here I am, getting a head of myself. We’re not here to discuss low art, but to discuss ya’ll two lowlifes. What do you two withering turds have to say for yourselves?”

“Sir...” I started to say.

“Captain!” he corrected me.

“Captain,” I amended, “Duncan and I would like to start by thanking you once again for responding to our distress call and giving us gainful employment.”

Captain Waboosh grunted in response.

“And Duncan and I, as you know, were asked to come up with... out-of-the-box ideas for the upcoming God election. And we did.”

“Just to add, Captain,” Duncan said, “that I firmly believe that everyone else was acting irrationally and that Johnny and I were in the right.”

“Ya’ll were well within your rights to spout such nonsense,” Captain Waboosh said, “but you’re wrong if’n you think everyone else acted irrationally. You two knuckleheads might as well have declared war on ‘em.”

“How?” we asked at the same time.

“Ya’ll endangered their jobs and told ‘em to go fuck off.”

“We did no such thing, Captain,” I said.

“Oh, but you did,” Captain Waboosh said. “You see, *something* can be accomplished by a small handful of people, but to accomplish *nothing* requires a lot of highly-paid and highly-specialized people. It’s very difficult to do nothing on a grand-scale, and requires carefully collaborated ineptitude. But now that you’ve convinced MWCA to try to do something again, we have no use for these useless people anymore. We’ll have to fire ‘em.”

“I’m confused,” Duncan said. “Are you saying MWCA knowingly

and purposefully hires incompetent people whose only specialization is in doing nothing?”

“Indeed,” Captain Waboosh said. “That’s why I hired you, ain’t it?”

“But we *are* trying to do something, Captain,” I said.

“To my eternal surprise,” he said. “I thought the room might wise up and back your universal healthcare or basic income ideas because they’re so fucking unachievable that the end result would be a continuation of nothing, but they had their heads up their asses.”

“But why should a free lunch cost them their jobs?” I asked. “I still don’t understand.”

“Because your free lunch is both doable and highly symbolic. If’n you two asshats succeed and the Galaxy backs your plan, companies like ours are going to have to pivot back toward trying to make a difference. And all those other asshats in the political division who went to school for ten years to become certified Do-Nothings are going to be out of work.”

“There’s a *certification* for that?” Duncan asked.

“Oh please,” he said, scoffing. “Don’t pretend all your Earth politicians are elected because they’re *useful*.”

Fair point, I thought.

“Captain, to clarify, are you going to punish us?” Duncan asked.

“Hell no,” he said, much to our relief. “The work will be punishment enough. Plus, you’ll either succeed and MWCA will be at the forefront of the Do-Something movement, or you’ll fail and we’ll be heralded as innovators of the Do-Nothing movement. Win-win for me, boys. Plus, I admire the hunking satellites you two must have for nominating Gee Whiskas. Astryn’s response made me shit my pants.”

“Oh, she knows already?” I asked.

“She knows,” he said. “Damn-near had a heart attack. But Celes told Astryn that this is what Gee Whiskas wanted and damned if’n that mouse didn’t twitch its nose only once, making Astryn believe it was the truth. Helluva gamble by Celes, but it paid off. You have your candidate, chuckleheads.”

Duncan and I shared a look of relief.

“Anyway, why I actually had you two escorted here,” Captain Waboosh said, “was in hope ya’ll might lend your strange intellects to another one of our client projects.”

Duncan and I looked at each other with looks of surprise. *Were*

we, we wondered, *becoming useful after all?*

“How much do ya’ll know about prisons or capital punishment?” Captain Waboosh inquired.

“Not much, Captain,” Duncan answered. “I do my best to avoid both.”

“But,” I quickly interjected, “we’d be happy to try to help so long as it doesn’t require either of us going to prison or being put to death. Who is the client and what is the project?”

“At the behest of its citizens, the government of the continent of Creef on the planet of Lunburr has abolished the use of capital punishment as a means of penalizing criminals, regardless of the severity of the crime committed. Poppycock I say, but sure, let the bastards rot in jail. However, Creef has a large population and limited space, and it has no means of housing all of the criminals that would have previously been put to death. So, they’ve hired us to help propose alternate options.”

“Are they asking for alternative options to life *and* death?” Duncan asked.

“Spot on,” he said. “So far, we have two options we’re considering. The first is sentencing criminals to life in virtual prison. Instead of continuing to keep ‘em around and find housing for their bodies, we upload their consciousnesses to a virtual reality world of their choosing, where they can live out their darkest freakiest murder sex fantasies away from the rest of society.”

“They’d get to choose their own reality?” I asked, dumbfounded. “That technology exists?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s crazy,” Captain Waboosh said. “The problem is, the bleeding-heart moralists who abolished the death penalty are also concerned the prisoners may not *like* their virtual prisons. Thus, the only way to avoid the virtual reality world becoming a hellish experience for the resident consciousness is to let that consciousness design their hell themselves. The Creefians are morally okay with that because nothing in a virtual world is of consequence to the real world. So, criminals can be happy being practicing cannibals or whatever, and the government still frees up some much-needed space without having to deal with the moral ick of taking lives.”

“But wouldn’t that incentivize certain people to commit heinous acts in the real world,” I asked, “so they can later commit unlimited heinous acts in a world of their creation? I mean, why in God’s name would there need to be a virtual reality world where you can be a

practicing cannibal?"

"It's obvious, dude" Duncan replied. "They need to practice so when the time comes, they get that shit right. No one respects an out-of-practice cannibal."

Captain Waboosh started laughing and slapped his knee. "*Goddamn* that was a good one, son!" he snorted.

I gave Duncan a quick glare, despite also finding his joke quite humorous. It was just that the idea of an entire world filled with cannibals, virtual or otherwise, was making me feel a little queasy.

"What's the second option?" I asked.

"Instead of uploading criminals' consciousnesses to virtual worlds, we send 'em body-intact into the future in a time machine with no set destination. In the future, the theory goes, a large enough prison will exist that can house all of these prisoners, and within this prison, there will be a device, some sort of net, capable of capturing all time travelers jumping forward through that point in time. In theory, as soon as the net is built, all these prisoners would suddenly just appear there."

"Interesting," Duncan remarked. "From the viewpoint of the criminals being sent forward in time, would it seem like any time had passed between the moment they disappeared and the moment they reappeared?"

"I don't think so," Captain Waboosh said.

"But time travel is possible?" I asked.

"We're all time travelers, Johnny," Captain Waboosh answered. "You're moving with the rest of us."

"Let me rephrase my question," I said. "Nonlinear time travel is now possible?"

"Yes," he confirmed, "but, as yet, those eggheads have only figured out how to jump *forward* in time, not backward. You put in the time you want to reappear, push a button, and wallah, you're in the same place you started, but everyone else is older."

"And this net device hasn't been built yet?" I asked.

"Nope."

"Because there's no space for prisoners and no idea how to build it?"

"Correct."

"So, you'd be banking on someone else figuring it out later."

"Yes."

"But what if nobody ever builds it?"

"Not my problem," Captain Waboosh said.

"That could work, Captain," I said. "I mean, it's a little fucked up, but it would solve their resource problems, wouldn't constitute murder, and seems less likely to be the eventual cause of an apocalypse than an army of highly-practiced cannibals figuring out how to regain their corporeal forms and reentering the physical world."

"I disagree," Duncan said. "This would merely change the nature of the apocalypse. What if the person or persons who build this theoretical net in the future is evil and only does so in order to recruit the largest army of wrongdoers ever assembled in the blink of an eye? You're describing the Universe's most tempting cheat code for warmongering tyrants."

"That's a really good point," I said. "There would have to be an appropriate incentive for anyone in the future to build the net and cause all these evil people to appear. Unless Creef was facing an extinction-level event, it's hard to see what the possible incentive would be other than for evil."

"Additionally, neither option allows for any possibility of parole," Duncan said. "The Creefians would need to be 100% sure the criminals were guilty before doling out either punishment."

"Perhaps the best course of action is to recommend Creef secures sufficient prison space, potentially off-continent or off-world," I said, "Or, better yet, they can hire MWCA to make recommendations on how to tackle the root causes of crime. Hell, maybe jail sentences for lesser crimes can be reduced or even eliminated, freeing up space. There must be simpler solutions."

"I doubt they'd want to pay us for these simpler solutions," Captain Waboosh said. "And at the end of the day, that's what I care about."

"If they threaten not to pay, just threaten to upload their consciousnesses to the virtual reality world with the practicing cannibals," I said. "I should mention, though, that I'm not well seasoned in the art of diplomacy."

"I can think of at least one place where a person being well-seasoned would be a serious liability..." Duncan said, a twinkle in his eye. "Maybe you could sprinkle some garlic and onion powder on them first before threatening to upload their consciousnesses, Captain, for added motivation."

"Oh!" guffawed Captain Waboosh. "We can butter them up first!"

"Yes, because when they learn you once turned your own ass into butter," Duncan said, pointing at Captain Waboosh's desk, "they'll realize you're not a man who makes idle threats."

"Dadgummit, Duncan, that's your funniest one yet!" howled Captain Waboosh.

It wasn't, at least not in my opinion. The funniest joke Duncan ever made was at age three after seeing a pile of dog crap in the road, patrolled by a solitary fly. Young Duncan had pointed at the poop and laughed.

"What's so funny?" Duncan's father had asked.

"Look at all that poop from such a tiny fly!"

* * *

After laughing at even more unsavory cannibalism jokes, Captain Waboosh finally agreed to return to the Creefians with our concerns and to suggest exploring other, less risky ideas concerning the prisoners' fates.

Duncan and I were once again walking back to the *David Bowie* when both our Brains suddenly sprang to life in our pockets and simultaneously cast sideways holograms out of our jeans.

Good evening, this is Zena from the Naritian National News Service, the number one name in news, with a breaking news bulletin. Multiple sources from within the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency have confirmed the firm's plan to nominate Gee Whiskas, a very special mouse, as a candidate to become the next Supreme Deity, Divinity of Destiny, End-All, Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy®. In the event of a Gee Whiskas victory, MWCA's campaign team shockingly promises to provide everyone in the Universe with one free lunch, despite common knowledge that no such thing exists. MWCA has yet to comment on the story, but sources say the idea came from two new members of the agency, named Jaundice and Dung-Can, who hail from a planet called Girth. We will continue to keep you updated with more information as it becomes available.

Duncan and I glanced at each other. "Well, that was fast," I said.

“You ammont kidding,” he replied.

"It's always happy hour somewhere" was a popular saying on Earth, primarily amongst suburban moms and alcoholics, two demographics whose Venn diagram had a robust overlapping midsection. Of course, most of the people who used this phrase had never been to any of the places where it *was* happy hour at the equivalent of 11am their time, but this didn't stop them.

Aboard the spaceship *Synergy*, however, it really always was happy hour somewhere. Time lost some of its meaning onboard because most of the ship's rooms had no windows, and even for those that did, there was typically no nearby star, and thus no sunrises or sunsets. There were no rotations either, thus no days or years. In short, there was no logical way to tell what time it was at any given moment onboard, and the use of a Universal time system was made ineffective by crewmembers having different internal clocks from having been born on different planets with different lengths of days and years, and thus different concepts of hours and minutes and seconds. It was a common occurrence to wish a passing shipmate good morning at the same moment they were wishing you a good evening.

Besides different concepts of time, people also had different concepts of morning and night. Some consultants came from planets with multiple moons, some came from planets with multiple stars. Some had almost no daylight and some had almost no nighttime. Some slept for eight hours and were awake for sixteen hours like me, while others alternated between ten hours awake and five hours asleep. A select few were even awake for forty hours at a time before sleeping for twelve, but it was clear who those people were and it was generally best to avoid them.

To cater to everyone's different needs and schedules, there was at

least one bar onboard the *Synergy* with active happy hour specials at any given moment. This was also true of trivia nights, though those were often hosted by the people who stayed awake for forty hours at a time.

My friends and I started out referencing days and nights passing based on the time back on Earth as relayed by the special watch Evo had given me. The reality, however, was much more complicated, and the only reason any of us was ever in the right place at the right time was because our pocket Brains yelled at us when we needed to be somewhere and yelled at us when we needed to sleep. “You have fifteen minutes before your next meeting, go to the bathroom!” mine even loudly suggested once (to my benefit and relief).

After only a few days aboard the *Synergy*, we started to feel like time itself had lost its meaning. Soon after Duncan and I left what we considered a morning meeting with Captain Waboosh and heard the evening breaking news report concerning Gee Whiskas candidacy for God, we were unexpectedly invited to a happy hour by Chet, who had apparently just finished an eight-hour work day and thought it was late afternoon.

“Take a right here to accept an invitation to happy hour from Chet or else be labeled a square and a royal noob,” our Brains shouted in unison.

“Maybe there’ll be lunch,” Duncan said hopefully, so we turned right, unsure of where else we were supposed to be.

This particular happy hour was being hosted by a bar called Bup’s Pub, which the menu claimed to be a palindrome in over seven million different languages. This sounded impressive until I realized that regardless of what the word for “pub” was in a given language, code concealed in the menu made your translator implant reverse the letters and make it possessive to form a palindrome, which, come to think of it, still sounded impressive.²² Most people referred to it as the Palindrome Pub, however, because the name sounded better in over seven million different languages.

While Duncan and I were a bit nervous about who we might run into at the Palindrome Pub, this happy hour was thankfully frequented mostly by accountants and technical consultants, rather than the political consultants we had universally pissed off hours

²² Trivia time, according to Guinness World Records, the longest known palindromic word on Earth is *saippuakivikauppias* (19 letters), a Finnish word for a dealer in lye.

before.

“Glad you dudes could make it!” Chet yelled as we made our way over to his table. “My Brain told me you were coming, so I bought you guys some drinks.”

“Thanks, man,” Duncan said. “What’d you get us?”

“Strange cocktails of unknown potency,” Chet said, his eyes wide. “I procured a Cherry Supernova for myself, yours is a Black Matter Metaverse, and Johnny’s is an Isotropical Brain Breeze. I picked them at random.”

“Cheers!” we said, clinking glasses.

I took an exploratory sip that instantly gave me exophthalmos, the medical term for bug eyes. It wasn’t a bad drink, it was just surprising, in the same way discovering that a piece of bologna was inhabited by God had been surprising. It felt like a hidden chamber of my brain had been opened where new, fun, quirky knowledge could be accessed, although I suspected afterward that what I had actually experienced was a form of mental gentrification where a chunk of knowledge I already possessed could no longer afford to pay its rent inside my brain and its lodgings had been converted into an Airbnb for hosting bachelor parties.

As for the composition of my drink, I was pretty sure the Isotropical Brain Breeze contained floating lemongrass, a citrus fruit I couldn’t quite put my finger on, maybe yuzu, a liquor resembling vodka, and a sort of honeydew sorbet. Whatever the mind-expanding ingredient was, it clearly went beyond the discerning capabilities of my palette.

Duncan’s first sip of his Black Matter Metaverse, meanwhile, was enough to convince him he was stuck in an alternate reality time loop and that nothing he did or said in this reality would have any consequences on the reality he was actually from, so he might as well be honest. Unfortunately, this newfound need for honesty came at the expense of my self-confidence, particularly over the lumberjack chic aesthetic I was currently sporting. The problem wasn’t that my plaid button up shirt was unprofessional, Duncan said, but that there were no trees onboard that needed cutting down at the present moment.

Almost as eloquently, Chet swore that after taking a sip of his Cherry Supernova, his two testicles had fused into one big one before exploding into three new, smaller ones, though he’d need to go to a bathroom to make sure.

Naturally, we each took turns trying each other’s drinks. Besides

tasting of cherry, Chet's Cherry Supernova had a nice smoky aspect to it, mezcal-esqe, with lemon, mint, and what I suspected to be small bits of parsnip. Duncan's Black Matter Metaverse tasted like a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios submerged in whisky instead of milk with saffrafas leaves as a playful garnish.

And thus, all three of us ended up feeling like super intelligent beings from an alternate reality with three tiny testicles and nothing to lose. We were, however, wrong on all four counts.

"I was warned," Chet said, pointing at a black box with a built-in hood on our table, "that this is a kind of futuristic trap. Inside you'll see something you intensely desire and, upon touching it, you'll become hopelessly ensnared, and the only way to get unstuck is to pay a credit or two."

"And it's just sitting here out in the open?" I asked. "Waiting for some drunk idiot to play with it?"

"Yeah," Chet said, "for some drunk idiot."

"Hmm," said Duncan, in a tone I instantly mistrusted. "I dare you to open it, Johnny."

"After Chet just said it's a trap?" I asked. "Hell no."

"Then I double dare you," he said.

"Absolutely not," I replied.

"I *triple* dare you," Duncan said.

"No, no, no, you're doing it all wrong," I said. "You're supposed to double *dog* dare me next. Triple dares are silly and only show that you're good at counting; you need to go for my jugular and prove that you're serious."

"Okay, then I double *dog* dare you to touch it," Duncan said with the same determined face he often wore while playing poker or taking standardized tests.

"Better, but it's still not going to happen," I said.

"I *triple dog* dare you," Duncan said as sinisterly as he could muster.

"Now you're just being ridiculous," I complained. "You already double dog dared me. If that didn't work, nothing will."

"Bro, I *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* dare you!" Duncan said to me, making Chet gasp.

"Fuck me," I grumbled. "Fine. Chet, hold my drink."

I pulled back the hood, saw an unopened pack of baseball cards, found that to be an odd thing to find in space, reached for it, and felt

sudden, excruciating pain as the lid slammed shut on my wrist and an electric shock jettisoned through my body. "Oww!" I yelped. "That fucking hurts!"

"I don't know how to stop it!" Chet said as a second shock made me yelp again.

My Brain started speaking at me through my pants pocket but my real brain was having trouble making out the words as a third shock made my right arm start to go numb.

"Say you'll pay the ransom!" Duncan yelled at me.

"What?" I asked stupidly as a fourth shock staggered me backward.

"Your Brain asked if you wanted to pay the ransom to get your arm back. Say yes, dude!"

"Yes!" I shouted.

"Very well," my Brain replied morosely, "transfer complete." A moment later the lid opened back up and I used my good left hand to withdraw my numb right one, which was still clutching a pack of 1989 Upper Deck baseball cards.

"Well, that sucked," I said, throwing the pack of cards on the table and slowly opening and closing my right hand in an attempt to rid myself of the residual numbness.

Duncan sniggered. "You should have seen your face when you got zapped, dude."

"Johnny!" Olivia said, running over. "What happened? What did you do?"

"Oh, hi, Olivia. Glad you made it. I got *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* dared," I said, continuing to shake my arm awake. "So, I put my hand in a trap."

"That doesn't sound very smart," she said, losing her sympathy.

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" I asked, genuinely confused why I needed to explain myself. *Had she missed the part where I was One hundred and One Dalmatians dared?*

"Not touch it!" she said.

"And still live with myself afterward?" I exclaimed. "Look, at least I got some baseball cards out of it."

"What your heart desired the most was *baseball cards*?" Duncan asked in a tone that made it clear tens of thousands of persons, places, and things would have ranked higher. "Interesting choice."

"I love the feeling of opening a pack of cards," I said with a shrug.

“Maybe my heart is feeling nostalgic.”

“Go on, then,” Duncan said, “open it.”

I studied the pack carefully. “1989 was the Ken Griffey Jr. Rookie Card year,” I explained to my friends. “I thought I would pay for college one day with that card. Never did get it, but the market bubble popped anyway, so it didn’t matter.”

“Maybe you’ll find one now and it’ll cover the ransom,” Chet said.

I pinched the top middle of the pack, pulled my fingers apart, reached in with my left hand to withdraw the cards, and felt sudden, intense pain as another electric shock traveled up my body, this time through my left arm.

“Oww!” I yelped.

“Ooh!” Duncan said. “Trapception!”

“I pay the ransom!” I squealed. “I pay the ransom!”

“Very well,” said my Brain with a fair amount of contempt. “Second transfer complete.”

I pulled my left hand out of the pack, surprised to find it firmly grasping a slightly-scorched #704 Dickie Thon card, then shortstop for the Philadelphia Phillies.

“And how much is that worth?” Olivia asked.

“Worth it,” I said, handing it to Duncan so I could rub my hands together to get rid of the tingling.

“Men,” Olivia said, shaking her head.

Chet and Duncan went to the bar to try more drinks, giving Olivia and I a chance to catch up.

“Hey, did you hear the news?” I asked her. “Celes liked our campaign ideas!”

“I did!” she said. “Great job! I was actually with Astryn when she found out. I thought she was going to faint, but Gee Whiskas seemed excited.”

“We weren’t expecting to be taken seriously, so we’re a bit shocked. I’m a little nervous about what future events we might have set in motion with our free lunch campaign, though I stand by it.”

“I also heard that you’re going to be the writer-chef if Gee Whiskas wins?” she asked.

“Perhaps. Duncan seems to believe in me and my spaghetti.”

“That’s the meal you’re going with?” she asked, a bit taken aback. “*Spaghetti?*”

“Yeah, I think so,” I replied, not sure what she could possibly have against spaghetti. “Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” she said, trying to tone down her reaction. “I just typically think of spaghetti as more of a dinner option rather than a lunch option. Unless we’re talking about spaghetti leftovers, of course. You’re not sending everyone spaghetti leftovers, are you?”

“No, I’m not sending everyone in the Universe my leftovers,” I confirmed. “I think spaghetti is a perfectly fine lunch option, and it’s the best meal I know how to make. Plus, the Galaxy is already struggling to get behind the idea of a free lunch. Even whisper the phrase ‘free dinner’ in front of a crowd and you won’t live to see the following morning.”

Olivia laughed. “Do you think people will respond well to the idea of receiving a free meal prepared by a chef with the name of a medical condition, or do you have to wait to see what the focus groups say?”

I rolled my eyes. “You must be referring to the rather unfortunate name of ‘Jaundice’ given to me by the news reporter. Good of you not to bring that up.”

“Of course,” she said. “It was just weird because your eyes and skin don’t even *look* yellow, so how did she know you had jaundice?”

“Oh, are you trying to make *me* laugh now?” I asked. “I thought we agreed jokes were my thing.”

“I’d never joke about this. Hearing yourself called ‘Jaundice’ must have been *galling* enough for you. Making additional fun of you for it would be *anemic* and go beyond *the pale*.”

I gave her a look that said, “You can’t possibly have any more weak sauce jaundice jokes up your sleeve,” which her silence thankfully confirmed. “Are you excited to visit Byblya tomorrow and start writing the field guide?” I asked, desperate to change the subject.

“Absolutely!” she said. “I’ve always wanted to meet a squeak gull.”

“Dreams do come true,” I said. “Just please don’t forget to write the part about the very special mouse.”

“Don’t worry, Astryn will almost certainly do that one first.”

Suddenly, a hologram was projected from every patron’s Brain, as well as the Palindrome Pub’s monitors.

Good evening, this is Zena from the Naritian National News Service, the number one name in news, with yet another breaking news bulletin. The Eastnorthian Branch of the Collective of

Gainfully Employed Economists and Other Soothsayers has released a statement in response to the reported formation of a Free Lunch Party and subsequent launch of the Free Lunch Campaign by a small group of political consultants tied to the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency. The statement simply read, “Beware the Invisible Hand.”

When asked for further comment, the economists stated they were unable to provide additional threats at this time, but assured us that if we had any follow-up questions, the free-market forces would make sure to trickle the answers down to us eventually.

The legal representative for Jaundice and Dung-Can, the consultants reportedly behind the Free Lunch Campaign, simply responded that economist talk was cheap, with supply far exceeding demand.

We’ll continue sharing updates on this breaking news story as we receive them.

“You have a legal representative?” Olivia asked once the news report had finished. “Should I be concerned?”

“I didn’t know I had one,” I said. “Mr. Zoom Bloom, perhaps. You know, I’m torn between wanting our names corrected for the public record and wanting them to remain as-is to avoid scrutiny.”

“*Galactic* public scrutiny,” Olivia said. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

I felt my pulse racing. *What have we done?* I asked myself.

“Hey, Jaundice!” came a familiar voice behind me. “Keeping your nerve juice loose?”

“Hey, Chet,” I said, turning around. “Would keeping my nerve juice loose keep people from figuring out my identity?”

“Of course!” he replied. “But, dude, what we *really* need to do is start you on a phototherapy treatment right away.”

“A what-now?” I asked, earnestly wondering if Chet had confused me for a plant.

“You lie naked under a special light,” Chet explained. “It’s how they treat jaundice in babies.”

“Fuck you, Chet,” I muttered.

“Just keep that nerve juice loose, man. I mean it.”

"Isn't it exciting to be starting something so meaningful and noteworthy?" asked a different voice I didn't recognize beside me. It belonged to a young woman I hadn't seen before with light-brown skin, blue hair, and a nose piercing wearing an I'm With Awesome t-shirt.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't think we've met yet. I'm Johnny."

Olivia flashed me a quick look that said, *You know I'm standing right here, right?*

"Oh, yes, you probably can't recognize me," the young woman said, "but I'm part of your campaign team. I was the one cosplaying as Bartha the Two-Headed Cow this morning."

"Oh!" I said, trying to contain my surprise. "You were the one mooing."

"Yes," she said, smiling as she extended a hand. "The name is Jala."

"Nice to meet you, Jala," I said, shaking her hand. "Glad to have you on the team. What brings you to the Palindrome Pub?" I asked.

"I invited her," Chet said, as casually as he could muster.

"Oh, *did* you?" I asked. "Wait," I said, suddenly struck by a memory. "Jala, didn't you moo when Duncan and I mentioned Chet's clinic during our presentation?"

"I did!" Jala said, cheerfully. "I lowed as loudly and robustly as possible."

"Jala was my first client, not counting Captain Waboosh," Chet explained, sheepishly.

"Which makes her very special," I said, nodding. "Enough to invite her to happy hour."

"You always remember your first," Olivia added.

"I have back pain I need help with," Jala explained. "Likely from wearing a cow costume around."

"I'm glad Chet could help you," I replied.

Jala giggled again. "He's just so exotic."

Chet blushed an appropriate amount, as these words marked a first in the history of mankind. Never before had a white boy from northern Michigan been described as exotic.

Olivia threw up a little bit in her mouth. "He's no more exotic than you are!" she managed to force out.

"Well, I suppose to him I'm exotic too," Jala said looking at Chet, licking her lips.

Chet blushed again, Olivia gagged again, and I laughed out loud. All of our respective self-defense mechanisms seemed to be in working order.

“Yes, I think Jala and I will make some good progress together,” Chet said with a red face.

“Yes, *progress*,” Olivia said.

“Chet, how about you and I disappear for a little while?” Jala suddenly asked.

Chet blushed again. “Let’s, uhh, take a ride aboard my spaceship,” he said, instantly making everyone present blush as well.²³

The two walked away, leaving us all momentarily stunned. *Chet, you dirty dog*, I thought. *Good for you*.

Duncan walked over and joined us, entirely unaware of what he had just missed. He placed two glasses down on the table and slid one over to me. “Knock knock,” he said.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

“Billy.”

“Billy who?”

“Bilirubin, here to give you jaundice!” he said, laughing drunkenly.

“Okay, Dung-Can,” I said, unable to suppress a chuckle. “That was undoubtedly the worst jaundice joke of the night, or afternoon, or whatever time of day it is. You win.”

“Thanks! I was sitting at the bar for five minutes trying to come up with the punchline. Anyway, try this,” he said, pointing at the glass he slid in front of me.

“What is it?”

“A Zoom Bloom, named after the man who, according to a message I just received via my Brain, is our new lawyer. Mr. Orion Zoom Bloom.”

“What’s in it?”

“Gin, lemon, blackberry, and chocolate chips.”

“Chocolate chips?”

“Chocolate fucking chips.”

I shrugged and raised my glass, which Duncan mirrored. “To Mr. Orion Zoom Bloom,” I said. “May he save our asses, should they

²³ “Let’s take a ride aboard my spaceship” is, coincidentally, the most common pick-up line in the galaxy.

need to be saved.”

We clinked and took a sip, the experience of which was like trying to be a line chef in one of Chef Gordon Ramsay’s kitchens, full of flames, yelling, and a sincere suspicion I may actually be a humanoid donut. “Fuck me,” I mumbled in appreciation.

“Yeah, I’m going to go cash out before I try any more of these drinks and launch myself out of an airlock or something,” Duncan said. “These bitches give strong a new meaning.”

“I’d help pay,” I said, looking at my Brain, “but I apparently just paid all my wages in ransom.”

“Don’t sweat it,” he said, handing me back the Dickie Thon card I had given him to hold on to earlier.

“Maybe they’d accept that as payment,” I said. “Back on Earth, it’s worth 30 cents, unscorched.”

“A dickie in the hand is worth two in the bank,” he said, putting it back in his pocket before heading off to the bar.

Suddenly, from whence I knew not, Olivia reappeared beside me. “I could eat you,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I could eat you,” she repeated.

“I don’t understand.”

“Under the right set of circumstances,” Olivia calmly stated, “I’ve determined I would be capable of eating you. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and I thought you should know.”

“Thank you... I guess. Dare I ask what the right set of circumstances might be?”

“If you and I were stranded in a mountain passage for a long period of time without food and you were willing to let me eat you in order to survive, I think I’d be able to.”

I said nothing, choosing to stare blankly at her instead.

“It would be a noble death,” she suggested.

“Being eaten alive would be noble?”

“Absolutely. Donating your life so I could live would demonstrate a fine personal quality and high moral fiber.”

“If you need fiber, eat some raspberries,” I said. “Remind me to never agree to go on any skiing trips with you.”

She paused a moment before bursting out in laughter, though I wasn’t sure what the joke was. “I’m just kidding!” she cried. “Duncan told me about the hypothetical VR cannibalism world and how much

it bothered you. I couldn't resist."

"Oh," I said, forcing a chuckle. "How good of you and Duncan to enter into cahoots against me."

"Cahoots!" she exclaimed. "What a fun word! Yes, that's right, Duncan, myself, God, Evo, Destiny, the Universe at large, we're all in cahoots against you!"

I fucking knew it, I thought. "Finally," I said, "my true enemies reveal themselves."

"And don't you forget it, punk," Olivia said, raising her fists as if she was going to fight me.

"Miss, is this man bothering you?" Olivia was suddenly asked by an unknown, handsome, athletic man I had never seen before. "Should I ask him to leave?"

"Hey!" I said, stepping in front of the strange man and pointing my finger in his face. "That's my...." I started to say before realizing I wasn't entirely sure what the nature of mine and Olivia's relationship was or what I should call her, since she hadn't actually confirmed my "astronomical unit" joke the other day.

"That's your what?" the man asked.

"Shh!" I snapped, "I wasn't talking to you."

"Yes you-"

"Shh!" I interrupted him. "Olivia," I said, turning to her. "What are you? I mean to me, what are you to me?"

"Charming question," she replied. "Well, let's see here. Human. Female. Dare I go on?"

"But what is the nature of our relationship?" I asked. "I was about to shout at this man that you were my girlfriend, but I realized it may be presumptuous."

"Why does it matter what label we use?" she asked.

"Because I need to know what to shout!" I said, raising my hands up in the air as if it were obvious. "If a man doesn't know what to shout, he doesn't have any sort of security."

"Ahh, but if a man must be *told* what to shout, then does it really matter at all?" she asked.

"Listen here, punk," said the man, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"SHH!" I said, brushing his hand off my shoulder. "This doesn't concern you!"

"I don't like your..." started the man before being interrupted by

Olivia yelling “Leave!”

“Why? What’s *he* to you?” the man asked.

“That’s exactly what I want to know!” I said.

“Well, if you must know, he’s my...” Olivia started to yell before her voice faded. “You’re right,” she finally said to me in a calm voice. “We need to figure this out.”

“Thank you for all you’ve done for us,” I told the man before turning and following Olivia over to a bench.

“Speaking honestly,” she began, “it feels less like we have an actual relationship and more like a strong connection shaped by an assortment of shared astounding events. I mean we only met, what, two weeks ago?”

“Yeah, but what a two weeks it’s been!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, I *am* glad you tricked me into a galactic space adventure with your friends,” she said. “And I often find myself reflecting on how big of a dork you are and thinking to myself that maybe this, *us*, can work.”

“But?”

“But now we’re here, working our respectful jobs and meeting up at happy hours, and it scares me, because I don’t think it’s sustainable. I mean, I think I prefer having an unprofessional boyfriend, rather than a professional one. Does that make sense?”

“Not really,” I admitted.

“I don’t think I’m ready to settle,” she said. “And I don’t mean that being with you would be settling. You’re a great guy. I just mean I’m not sure I’m ready to settle down and be a consultant.”

“I understand that sentiment.”

“It’s not you, it’s me,” she said. “This just happened so fast! I think I’d like to figure out labels later and just continue being sexy friends of the boy and girl variety.”

“Thank you,” I said, turning around and walking briskly over to the strange man, who had been watching us from a short distance.

“That’s my sexy friend of the girl variety!” I yelled at him.

Not liking my tone, and accurately assessing that I was much weaker than him, the man pulled back his fist in order to punch me in the face. His hand was caught, however, by none other than my lawyer Mr. Orion Zoom Bloom, wearing his customary blue suit.

“Hands *off* my client,” he said sternly before giving the man his hand back.

“Nice save,” I told him, appreciatively.

“As your lawyer, I advise you to refrain from attending any more Palindrome Pub happy hours until such time as the campaign is over and/or services to Captain Waboosh in such pursuit have been effectively rendered,” Mr. Zoom Bloom told me. “Good morning,” he added, before leaving.

“Good evening!” I called after him, returning to a horror-stricken Olivia.

“Did you really just go pick a fight and then get bailed out by your lawyer?” she asked.

“What can I say,” I replied, “he’s a good fucking lawyer.”

Olivia sighed, managing to barely suppress a smile. “So, where were we?” she asked.

“Sexy friends of the girl and boy variety,” I replied. “By any chance, can I interest you in a ride aboard my spaceship?”

Olivia giggled. “Okay, cowboy. Let’s go see this spaceship of yours.”

We got up to leave, but were stopped by Duncan before we made it out the door.

“Here, Johnny, you might need this,” he said, slipping the Dickie Thon card back into my pocket. “Plus, it isn’t actually legal tender.”

“Thanks, bud,” I said.

And so, Olivia and I headed off to bed, at roughly 1pm Earth time, in a flurry of sparks and feverish excitement in order to stave off the uncomfortable questions that make couples acknowledge that they either aren’t happy or won’t remain happy if things don’t change. And for another afternoon, the illusion was maintained and everything was all right.

But it wasn’t really all right, nor would it be. Time would reveal as much, as time had a pesky habit of doing.

But my biggest regret, looking back, was not enjoying that happy hour more. It ended up being the last time Duncan, Chet, Olivia, and myself hung out together, and I’d give anything to have it back, even if it meant more electric shocks, jaundice jokes, and awkward conversations. Because those things, I later realized, were the good things in life.

It took traveling elsewhere in the Galaxy for me to embrace: 1) my being a modern-day Renaissance Man interested in many different subject areas, and 2) my having the working scientific knowledge of someone typical of the Renaissance period. I was no longer living in the Dark Ages, but what I understood was greatly overshadowed by what I did not understand.

And yet, Duncan and I had made reputations for ourselves as consultants who could think about odd, peculiar problems in odd, peculiar ways, which turned out to be a fantastic way to get pulled into lots of difficult and weird client projects.

“Listen up, you two,” Captain Waboosh barked at us. “We’ve been hired by the Paradox Guild to help ‘em create new paradoxes.”

“*Paradox Guild?*” I repeated. “Why can’t they make their own paradoxes? I mean, isn’t that what a guild is? An association of craftsmen?”

“You would think,” Captain Waboosh responded, “but the truth is, those sorry excuses for philosophers haven’t been able to come up with their own paradoxes for many years now. To keep up appearances, they hire outside consultants like us to create ‘em for ‘em. That’s where you two dumbasses come in.”

“Simple,” Duncan said. “Cut a strip of paper and, on one side, write ‘The statement on the other side is false,’ and on the other side, write ‘The statement on the other side is true.’”

“Already thought of that,” Captain Waboosh said, “but we can’t reuse any of the work we’ve already been paid for. We need something new.”

“What, exactly, does one do with a paradox?” I asked. “Why are they so valuable?”

“Paradoxes don’t increase knowledge themselves,” Duncan said, “but they help spark debates that *can* increase knowledge. Plus, they’re really useful if you want to confuse and annoy someone.”

“The Paradox Guild receives tax benefits based on their ability to create new paradoxes,” Captain Waboosh added. “So, they’re worth more to the Guild.”

“Okay, but how, exactly, does one come up with a paradox?” I asked. “I mean, how does one even begin?”

“Well, there’s always Zeno’s Paradoxes,” Duncan suggested. “They may be able to help inspire us.”

“Go on,” I said.

“Okay...” Duncan said, his eyes open wide in the realization his philosophy degrees were one again coming in handy. “Luckily, one of my favorite lessons in school was on Zeno of Elea’s paradoxes concerning motion. The first, the Dichotomy Paradox, argues that for an object to reach a certain point, it must first reach halfway to that point, and halfway to that halfway point, and so on and so forth. It basically means there are an infinite number of tasks to do to reach any given point, making motion an impossibility.”

Captain Waboosh walked toward Duncan, poked him in the forehead with a finger, and walked back to his desk.

“Yes, well, Diogenes the Cynic said, or didn’t say, as much,” Duncan said, rubbing his forehead. “But demonstrating the conclusion isn’t enough to falsify a paradox. You must identify what is *wrong* with the argument.”

“What’s wrong,” I said, “is that Zeno assumes time and distance can be broken down infinitely and that you can accurately measure the location of any object to begin with.”

“Well done,” Duncan said. “Ten points to Hufflepuff. That’s a plausible rebuttal.”

“I preferred the poke,” Captain Waboosh harrumphed.

“The second, somewhat similar paradox,” Duncan continued, “involved Achilles and the Tortoise. Zeno argued that a faster runner can never overtake a slower runner who has a head start because he must first always reach the point from whence the slower runner started, by which point the slower runner will have moved further ahead. Extended ad nauseam, the slower runner can never be caught.”

“That better not apply to running for office,” Captain Waboosh said, “or Gee Whiskas is fucked.”

“Why?” I asked. “There aren’t any very special tortoises running for God, are there?”

“The last paradox I remember,” Duncan said, “is the Arrow Paradox. Zeno stated that at any one point in time an arrow in flight is not actually in motion, since it cannot be said to be moving to where it is not, nor can it be said to be moving to a location it already is.”

“The second and third paradoxes seem to be based on a misunderstanding of motion,” I said. “I’d argue that any object in motion can only have its path described relatively across a period of time and cannot be pinpointed to any exact location at any exact time.”

“Of course, I could always try to shoot an arrow at your forehead just to make sure,” Captain Waboosh suggested.

“That won’t be necessary, Captain,” Duncan replied.

“Dude, these are lovely paradoxes,” I said. “But how do they help us?”

“Yes, what’s the point of these particular godforsaken paradoxes?” Captain Waboosh asked.

“Maybe Duncan’s only gotten halfway to the point?” I suggested. “Or halfway to halfway to the point? Or is coming to the point an impossibility?”

“The *point*,” Duncan said, “is that making a believable and interesting paradox is very hard and often requires an imperfect understanding of how things actually work.”

“You two chuckleheads should be perfect then,” Captain Waboosh said. “We’re about to land on Byblya to drop off the team writing the Archive Field Notebook. Then we’ll be journeying to Regula, where ya’ll can test new paradoxes before presenting them to the Guild.”

“But we still have to work on the God election,” I said.

“Welcome to the world of consulting, boys,” Captain Waboosh said. “The more stuff ya’ll get sucked into, the less you’ll accomplish. Good luck.”

“Captain, may I join the team going to Byblya, even just for an hour or two?” I asked. “I’ll have to return to create the free lunch, and I’d like to get a feeling for the place.”

“We’ll refuel and load up on provisions. You’ll get your two hours, but no more than that, so don’t go getting yourself lost in Olivia’s eyes, understood?”

“Yes, Captain,” I said, embarrassed about having my true

intentions deciphered. "Thank you."

We walked out of Captain Waboosh's office, waved to Lucca in the entryway, and stepped into the hallway, waiting for our Brains to tell us where to go next.

"How are we going to come up with a new paradox?" I asked Duncan. "We don't have much time."

"Dude, I'll focus on the paradox if you focus on the campaign," Duncan said, eagerly. "This is more my realm of expertise anyway, and this is basically my dream job."

"Deal," I said. "I'll visit Byblya, make sure our mouse's very special nature is codified, and catch up with you back on *the David Bowie* to see what you've come up with."

Duncan nodded his head as our Brains said "Go left" in unison, having heard our plan and graciously decided to help us.

* * *

When we arrived back on the *David Bowie*, I was surprised to find Astryn waiting outside my quarters with Gee Whiskas sitting patiently on her shoulder.

"Astryn, to what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked.

"Well, I thought you *might* want to get to know the candidate you so brazenly nominated for God without even asking first," she said.

"Ahh, right," I replied, shifting my feet. "I'm sorry about how that went down, but I didn't expect to be taken seriously. I'm glad Gee Whiskas agreed to be nominated... and that you're alright with it."

"I already worship him, it's about time everyone else does too," she said.

"Yes, he certainly is a very special mouse," I said.

"Extremely special," she agreed. "And while candidates for God are not required to be living to win, I warn you, Johnny, that if any harm comes to Gee Whiskas during this campaign, I will personally hold you responsible and sue you straight out of existence. Are we clear?"

I gulped. "We're clear," I said, finding myself questioning Gee Whiskas's current age and the average lifespan of mice. "Would you like to come in so Gee Whiskas can freely move about?"

"That will be fine," she said, following me into my room. "Now

there are a few things you should know. He needs to be handled gently and carefully if at all, but he *is* hand-tame. He is crepuscular, meaning he is most active at twilight, and he loves exercise. Here are some small willow balls for him to play with and a wheel for him to run around in. He is very good at grooming himself, but needs help brushing his teeth.”

“I see,” I said, wondering how long Astryn intended to leave Gee Whiskas in my care and what, exactly, constituted twilight in space.

“And here,” she said, plopping a bag on to my desk, “is an assortment of different snacks he likes. Each is labeled—all you have to do is find out which one he wants to eat by playing a simple game of truth or lie... like this.”

She took out a small baggie labeled “fruit tree wood.” “Gee Whiskas wishes to snack on some wild thornberry wood,” she declared in a high-pitched voice I decided I would not be imitating.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose.

“One nose twitch means I told the truth, so I’ll give him a stick to gnaw on. If he had twitched his nose twice, I would have continued asking about his other snacks until we found the one he wanted, but I usually get it right the first try,” she said, smugly.

Astryn pulled a short stick from the fruit tree wood baggie and placed it on the desk in front of Gee Whiskas. Lacking opposable thumbs, Gee Whiskas picked up the piece of wild thornberry wood with both paws and held it up to his mouth to nibble on, making it look like he was playing the flute.

“Isn’t he just the cutest little man you’ve ever seen?” Astryn said, her face beaming.

“The cutest,” I responded.

“I thought you might want to use this time together to discover more of his winning attributes and help prepare him for the talent competition,” she said. “Not that he needs much help, mind you.”

“That’s a great idea,” I said, to which Gee Whiskas twitched his nose twice.

“And if you take photos and videos of him, remember, there are no bad photos of Gee Whiskas, just bad photographers,” she said before abruptly turning around and leaving the room.

“Wait, how long are you going to...” I began to ask, but it was too late. Astryn was gone.

“Wait here,” I told Gee Whiskas. “I’ll get Duncan to watch you for a couple of hours while I’m away.”

Gee Whiskas stared at me blankly as he continued eating his flute.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, upon being transported from *Synergy* to a welcome center in one of Byblya's main cities, I was led into a room that felt like a detention center and unexpectedly handed a notebook and pen.

"You have thirty minutes to produce an original writing sample," explained a very serious sounding man. "If it is of sufficient quality, we will issue you a writer's visa. If it is of less than sufficient quality, we will offer you a visitor's visa with the opportunity to reapply for a writer's visa at a later date. Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. In the case of plagiarism, you will be banned from entering Byblya altogether until such time as you are dead and no longer capable of writing. Good luck. Your time starts now."

I hadn't been warned about having to produce a writing sample upon entry to the planet, but I supposed it made sense. They couldn't let just anyone write stuff into existence, otherwise they'd have an entire planet of amateurs presenting half-truths as facts, relaying information without proper context, and creating outright falsehoods for others to believe. I mean, could you imagine such a world?

Having come unprepared, and not feeling ready to try my hand at making spaghetti just yet, I sat down and scoured my brain for a story to write. Luckily for me, one Byblyan minute turned out to be closer to 90 Mississippis in length rather than 60 Mississippis, so I had slightly more time than I originally thought.

And then, suddenly, it came to me—a memory from many years prior when I was but a wee lad of twelve. It was Christmas morning, and I had woken up early and headed into the living room to see what my dad was doing.

I found him drinking coffee by himself on the couch reading a book, and I joined him there as we waited for my mother and brother to wake up. We had both been reading a lot of Western novels recently, Tony Hillerman for him, Louis L'Amour for me, and our conversation naturally tumbled into an exercise in creating titles for faux Western novels of our own. Being the mature gentlemen we both were, most of our titles inevitably included references to cow

manure.

It was on that fateful Christmas morning that my father laughed the hardest and longest I ever witnessed. He laughed until he cried, he cried until he could no longer breathe, and he no longer breathed until his face turned red. I would have been concerned for his health if I, too, hadn't been afflicted by a laughing attack of a similarly severe nature. That anyone else in the house remained asleep afterward was nothing short of a miracle.

The source of our mutual asphyxiation was a title for a Western story suggested by my father, "The Toot-Out on Fertilizer Hill," the plot of which was never explored by either of us for fear it might result in our actual deaths. Upon remembering this fond moment, however, I decided it was time for this particular story to see the light of day.

And so I wrote like a man possessed, or like Weird Al Yankovic playing an accordion solo, until the story thirteen years in the making sat in my hands at last. A single tear strolled down each of my cheeks as I reread it in all its... well... see for yourself.

The Toot-Out on Fertilizer Hill

It was high time for Jerk Johnson to shit or get off the pot. He could either kill that no-good sonuvabitch Dusty Chortles that stole n' murdered his prized pig Sunshine, or he could let the whole thing slide like so much bacon down a greasy pan. If'n he did nothing, the whole town would think him yeller, but everyone would still be alive. Other than Sunshine, o'course.

Like the javelina misses the cactus, Jerk missed that hog. Sunshine had been an immaculate white-n-brown speckled beast, if a bit toothey n' ornery. Sunshine's eyes had disappeared years ago behind her wrinkles, hairs, n' tusks.

And now, from his thicket on Fertilizer Hill, Jerk could see that pesky no-good sonuvabitch Dusty Chortles no-good sonuvabitching around on his property agin. No doubt looking for something else o' mine to thief n' kill, he thought.

The sun was beating down on Jerk's face as he clutched his peashooter tight. Bullets of sweat dripped down his grizzled farmer cheeks like dew down a flower's bottom. Dad

gummit, he told himself. Be brave fer Sunshine.

Jerk stood up from behind the thicket n' yelled as loudly as he could muster. "Dusty Chortles, ya no-good, swine-stealing, pig-pilfering, hog-hustling, shit-stained, two-bit, swamp scum!"

"Jerk Johnson!" bellowed Dusty in retort. "Ya ol' connivin', shape-shiftn', penny-thriftin', name-draggin', tall-tale-tellin', sackless sack o'mule crap!"

There was a moment of tense silence, as the two men pondered the string of insults they had each just been called, taking offense at certain parts, begrudgingly acknowledging others.

"Well, what do you have to say for yerself?" Jerk shouted, after a moment.

"I ain't stolen Sunshine from ya!" Dusty yelled.

"Liar!" Jerk yelled back. "I gots a bullet here says ya did!"

"Look, we can settle this here n' now with guns, or we can settle on the morrow the ol' fashioned way," Dusty yelled.

"Yer challengin' me, Chort?" Jerk yelled.

"Darn tootin' I am," Dusty replied.

Jerk knew he couldn't back down now. He n' Dusty would settle their differences with a chili cookoff up on Fertilizer Hill, like their ancestors had before them.

Despite knowing he was up against it now, Jerk couldn't help feeling a sense of relief. People died in shootouts all the time, but ain't nobody never died in no farting contest that he could recall.

And while it was close, the nearby townsfolk voted Dusty Chortles the victor of the chili cookoff. When Jerk inquired as to the nature of Dusty's secret ingredient, a twinkle formed in Dusty's eye, n' he refused to say anything more than "If'n I told ya, ya'd shoot me."

Whatever the ingredient was, it had clearly displeased Dusty's insides something dreadful, to the point where Jerk had no choice but to find cover soon after the toot-out began, securing Dusty with the victory n' establishing his innocence of all crimes accused of him.

Despite everything that had transpassed betwixt 'em, Jerk and Dusty later became good friends, n' whenever one of Jerk Johnson's hogs would mysteriously go missing, Dusty

Chortles, being the good friend he was, would invite Jerk over for a bowl of his filling, nourishing, stick-to-your ribs n' explode-out-yer-butt chili. The End.

You may be shocked to learn that the Byblyans did not read "The Toot-Out on Fertilizer Hill" and decide to issue me a writer's visa that day. Apparently, it neither sufficiently improved their quality of life nor improved the quality of their suffering. They did, however, acknowledge that it hadn't been plagiarized and were thus willing to grant me a visitor's visa with the understanding that I'd agree to not write a single word during my current visit. I enthusiastically agreed.

When I showed the story to Olivia a little later, making sure to preface it with the story of my dad first, she read it carefully before handing it back to me with a smile. "I like it," she said, "but I have one or two suggestions, if you're open."

"Of course," I replied. "'The Toot-Out on Fertilizer Hill' deserves as much."

"I loved the tension and colorful imagery at the beginning. I could practically feel myself sweating," she said. "But the denouement is rushed. The title references the 'toot-out', as you call it, but the story itself breezes past it."

"That's fair," I said. "I was running out of time and didn't know how to make the chili cookoff interesting."

"Which leads me to my second piece of advice," she said. "If this story were to be written on Byblya, what would you actually end up creating? There would be some hot, humid weather, a hill with some shrubs, and two semi-loquacious, grizzled, tussling tumbleweeds yelling at each other brandishing weapons. I don't think I'd want that appearing in my backyard, to be honest."

"That's also fair," I said.

"But, what I *would* want is some bomb ass chili. You focused on the two men when you should have focused on whipping up the baddest bowl of chili Byblya has ever seen. Describe the smell of the chili powder and browning pork, the colors of the spices, the sizzling of the vegetables in oil, the vibrancy of the Fiestaware dishes it's served in, the texture of the bread for dunking, and the coolness of the sarsaparilla for drinking. Make the Byblyans salivate; make them shudder with anticipation; make them want it to be real. In short, make your story stick to their ribs... and not just explode out their butts."

“Wow,” I replied. “I wish I had told you about this story idea before I tried to write it.”

“But if you had, Jerk and Dusty might have turned out differently,” Olivia said, “and they’re colorful and great. You wrote with your heart, and your dad would have loved it.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but I suspect he would have rather had the chili.”

* * *

I stood next to Olivia a little while later as Astryn, amidst a crowd of onlookers, wrote down the cover page of the *Archive Field Notebook: a non-technical introduction for beginners on the real and imagined specimens of Planet Harrieta*.

“Alright team, let’s get to work,” she announced, holding the title page aloft to great applause.

Olivia informed me that they would be making a first draft of the *Archive Field Notebook*, subtitled *a non-technical introduction for beginners on some additional real and imagined specimens of Planet Byblya*. The purpose of this first draft was to test the animals on Byblya before letting them loose on Harrieta. Measure twice, write once, as the saying went.

Olivia was also right in predicting that Astryn would start on page 17.

Very special mouse - Extremely special.

And *Poof* a mouse suddenly appeared next to her, looking exactly like Gee Whiskas in every way. “Welcome to the galaxy, Friedrich von Bindermeister,” Astryn proudly told the very special mouse.

“How does she come up with these names?” I whispered to Olivia.

“If you want to become a writer yourself, you’ll need to learn how to make up names too,” she whispered back.

“For spaghetti?”

“I’d recommend an Italian sounding name,” she said, smirking. “Really though, Johnny,” she said, more seriously this time, “I think you should write more. I think you could be very good at it.”

“Thank you,” I replied, feeling rather touched. “I’m afraid I have

to go now. My Brain is going to explode in my pocket if I don't head back to the ship."

"That's your Brain? And here I thought you were just happy to see me," she said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes. "Goodbye, my sexy friend of the girl variety."

She sighed. "How long are you going to keep calling me that?"

"Until I have something better to call you," I confirmed. "Now, I don't know when we'll be back exactly, but Captain Waboosh seemed to suggest we didn't have much time left, so I can't imagine it'll be long."

"Okay, I'll wait for you here," she said.

"And you'll be okay?"

"I won't be alone, if that's what you mean. I have my team, and soon I'll have a lot of new animal friends, and Evo has even agreed to serve as an external consultant as needed."

"How kind of Him," I said. "Word of advice, if He suggests giving any creatures an appendix, don't listen."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, before giving me a kiss. "Goodbye, Johnny."

"Goodbye, Olivia."

Duncan was obviously relieved when I returned to my quarters on the *David Bowie*. "I need to go work on my paradox," he said. "Gee Whiskas has given me a lot to think about."

"He has?" I asked.

"See you later," Duncan said, brushing past me.

"It looks like it's just you and me, buddy," I said, turning before I could notice Gee Whiska's nose twitch twice.

I scanned through the other snack bags Astryn had left him. They were labeled: *Pasta, Cooked; Pasta, Uncooked; Broccoli; Curly Kale; Jazzberries; Scoozle Grapes; Boiled Eggs; Pulses; Cereals; Dried Herb Mix; Millet Seed Spray; and Astro Fur Biscuits*. There was also a can of fresh mealworms I was too chicken to open.

"You like pasta?" I asked, turning to look at him. "Sorry, that was a question, let me rephrase. Gee Whiskas wants pasta."

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose.

I took out a few cooked bowtie noodles and placed them in front

of Gee Whiskas, who picked one up and started nibbling. “Gee Whiskas is aware that if he wins the election, I’ve promised to make everyone in the Universe, including him, a whole plate of pasta,” I asked in the form of a statement.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose.

“You probably only agreed to run in order to get the pasta,” I said.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose.

“Gee Whiskas is a very special mouse with superpowers,” I said.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose.

“Now *I’m* going crazy,” I said, wondering why I was talking to a mouse.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose and picked up another piece of pasta.

“You’d look good on promotional materials wearing a little mouse bowtie,” I said.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose and continued nibbling.

“You think we are going to win,” I said.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose twice.

“Wait, you just twitched your nose twice!” I exclaimed.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose.

“So, that means we either *aren’t* going to win, or that you don’t *think* we’re going to win,” I thought out loud.

Gee Whiskas stopped nibbling long enough to stare at me, his nose remaining perfectly still.

“No, you’re right,” I said. “I should stop bothering you and let you eat.”

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose and returned to eating.

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to be doing with him. My reasoning for choosing Gee Whiskas as a candidate had been entirely due to the bit of literary sorcery Olivia and her team had just performed to make everyone in the Universe suddenly believe, nay, *know*, he was special. I hadn’t considered any additional talents or uses. He would look good on a God contestant pin-up calendar, at least compared to driftwood, but I didn’t think I could train him to walk in a straight line, sing a song, or do the royal wave. *Really, all I need to do is keep him safe*, I thought.

Right on cue, and before I had a chance to process what was happening, a large, barrel-bodied cat leapt out from under my bed,

jumped up onto my desk, and swallowed Gee Whiskas in a single gulp.

My mouth dropped in shock and horror and I jumped back from the murder scene, my brain fumbling to create a coherent narrative.

What... what in... fuck... how.... oh shit... we're going to have to use Friedrich... oh shit...

The cat, for its part, was licking its lips and staring at me with a pleased expression on its face... one I was far too familiar with. Yes, I knew the cat in question, knew it very well. I just couldn't fathom how *this* particular cat was here now, aboard the *David Bowie*.

You can't be here! I left you with Beauregard! I thought to myself. *This is so like you!* "MAGRARIUS X, WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?" I finally screamed out loud at him.

"Gee whiskas, Mista!" said Magrarius X, mockingly. "Is that anyway to treat an old friend?"

Talking... but... how is Magrarius X talking? And did he just say 'Gee Whiskas'?

"What, cat got your tongue?" Magrarius X asked me.

How in God's name... I began to ask myself before a lightbulb suddenly illuminated in my head. "God! Is that *You* again!?" I roared.

God took a moment to lick His front left paw before staring blankly at me. "Mebbe," He said.

"You should be ashamed of Yourself!" I continued.

"Oh, should I?" God asked, quite amused by this idea. He started licking His front right paw this time.

The situation at hand finally dawning on me, I rushed over to the desk and pointed my finger sternly in God's face. "Cough up the mouse!" I demanded.

"No," God replied.

"Cough him up... NOW!"

"Make me."

So, I picked up my possessed cat, forced His jaws open, and felt around His mouth and the top of His throat for any sign of a mouse, with no luck. Next, I performed a cat Heimlich maneuver by holding Him with His back against my chest and His feet dangling. I firmly pushed on His belly with a succession of five quick, upward thrusts, before holding Him up by His back hips with His head down to sweep the inside of His mouth again with my finger.

"Put Me down this instant!" God hissed after I had removed my

finger

“Spit up the mouse!” I demanded.

“Fine!” He shrieked. “Just put Me down!”

I did as instructed, and God-as-Magrarius X repaid my kindness by beginning to hack, which was followed by gagging, which, for good measure, led to retching. Finally, after several uncomfortable moments of dry-heaving, a very special, bile-covered mouse plopped onto the floor and scurried over to the corner of my room furthest from Magrarius X, where he started desperately trying to clean himself.

“Gee Whiskas is now okay,” I stated, hopefully.

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose, albeit begrudgingly.

“Clean yourself off and I’ll make you all the pasta you can eat if you don’t tell Astryn this happened.”

Gee Whiskas twitched his nose again as he furiously continued cleaning himself. I also took some scoozle grapes and broccoli bits and gave them to him on a little napkin.

“If he’s *so* special, why does he need you to feed him?” a voice asked behind me.

I stood up and faced my tormentor. “**WHY ARE YOU HERE!?**”

“Can’t a Supreme Being check in on His favorite human now and then?”

“Oh, *please*,” I said. “Why are You *really* here?”

“Fine, if you must know,” God said, “I lost a bet to Evo.”

“Evo bet You to eat Gee Whiskas?”

“Well, not exactly,” God said. “He did want Me to come, though.”

“And why are You here as my cat?” I asked.

“I thought the form was particularly well-suited for the task, seeing as cats eat mice.”

“Didn’t we just establish You weren’t sent here to actually eat Gee Whiskas?” I asked. “And anyway, Magrarius X is way too lazy and spoiled to hunt for his own food.”

Magrarius Deus Ex flopped on His side, but continued darting glances at Gee Whiskas, who was nibbling on some eggs.

“Wait a second, You’re not butthurt that I nominated Gee Whiskas for God instead of You, are You?” I asked.

Magrarius Deus Ex looked away, refusing to look me in the eyes. “Did you even *consider* Me as a choice?” He mumbled.

"No," I said. "Not even for a second. There's a reason humans made this Universal God election in the first place... because *You* haven't been doing a very good job!"

"Oh, *please*," God replied, turning back to mock me. "Who would even *want* to win that election anyway?"

"Hold up," I said. "You haven't run before... have *You*?"

Magrarius X glared at me and then turned around, giving me the cold buttohole.

"You have, haven't *You*?" I asked, feeling a little too much glee. "How high did *You* place? Top five? Top ten? Top fifty?"

"Which time?" God grumbled in the direction opposite me.

"Oh, this is *too* rich," I said.

"Like you're the model of reasonable behavior," God retorted.

"What do *You* mean?"

"Have you forgotten your purpose?" God asked. "How is electing that mouse God going to save the Universe, huh? How is a free lunch going to save the Universe?"

"I don't know!" I shouted. "Ask Destiny. It's the reason I'm here, after all."

"Oh, c'mon. You've met Destiny. You know I can't get any actual information out of It."

"Then what *can* *You* do?" I asked. "Because I've never really been clear on that point."

"Look," God said, "don't blame *Me* for all of your problems. But if you do, then make sure to thank *Me* for all of your successes, as well."

"Who even *are* *You*?" I asked. "Are *You* the loving God people want, the angry God that people fear, or the indifferent God people have come to expect? What is *Your* true nature?"

God stood up on His hind legs, which was an unusual position for a cat. He shrugged, which was also peculiar, before speaking, which was strictly atypical. "I am that I am," He said. "I am mysterious, just as I am mystery. I alone am I, just as I am alone in being I. I am ineffability and the infinity beyond everything you can understand or say. Just as you don't know what I am, I am what you don't know."

"Yeah, fine, don't tell me," I replied, unimpressed by His grandiloquence. "I'm not surprised *You* keep losing elections acting like this."

"Before you call *Me* unpopular, you should know what your cat

thinks of you.”

“I already have a pretty good idea,” I said. “Is Magrarius X really here or is he still back on Earth?”

“Maybe both,” God answered, “maybe neither.”

“Are You going to answer a single one of my questions?” I asked, exasperated.

“Sure, Magrarius X thinks you’re a dumbass.”

That pissed me off. “God, tell me why You’re here or I’ll find a box to put You in.”

God had Himself a good little cat yak. “Oh no, not a *box*!” He said sarcastically. “No, really, how thoughtful of you. Please, human, procure Me a box. No, wait, I’ll do that Myself.”

God made Magrarius X perform a frontflip off the desk for dramatic effect and landed on top of a cardboard box that had magically appeared out of nowhere. Collapsing through the flaps, Magrarius X disappeared out of sight. Soon after, God could be heard pouncing at the edges and scratching at the corners of the box. I decided it was time to counter God’s attitude with extreme patronization.

“Here, Deity, Deity, Deity. Here, Deity, Deity, Deity,” I chanted. “I have some treats for Youuuuuuuu.”

All sounds from within the box ceased as God was forced to reckon with the desires of Magrarius X’s stomach. “What kind of treats?” came the muffled voice.

“Come out and I’ll show You,” I said.

There was another five second delay before Magrarius X shot out of the box like a rocket and landed at my feet, expectantly. I walked over to Gee Whiska’s snack bag, removed the can of mealworms, and sat it down in front of Him.

“Bleh!” God spat.

“Fine, I’ll give You Your choice of available snacks, Gee Whiskas not included, if You answer why You’ve come to visit me.”

“Fine, but I want the rest of the eggs,” God replied. “There’s something We want you to ask of the Five Gais when you see them, and We think it must be you.”

“The Five Guys?” I asked. “Let me guess, You want a little cheeseburger?”

“No, Johnny, not the burger chain. The Five Gais are five brothers, Oof, Dat, Dis, Ay, and Wauw Gai. Together, they are the

Guardians of Wisdom, Questions, and Instability on Regula.”

“And what would You like me to ask for?”

“Simply this: a fucking sense of humor.”

“What?” I asked dumbly.

“Here I am, God Almighty, appearing before you as your asshole cat, performing aerial stunts and making boxes magically appear, and you haven’t smiled once! Lighten up! I command you!”

“Anything else?” I replied, coldly.

“Yeah, you might consider getting their opinion on any actions you should take to maximize your chances of saving the Universe.”

“And, how should I ask that exactly?”

“First, summarize the current situation.”

“Okay,” I said, “basically, the Universe may or may not be facing an existential threat of unknown origin or imminence, and I may or may not be directly or tangentially linked to the possible solution that could save it, assuming, as previously mentioned, the Universe needs saving to begin with. Basically, we know nothing at all.”

“Precisely,” God purred. “You *were* paying attention!”

Ugh, I thought. “Duncan and I were wondering if You might be able to tell us more about how the Universe was first created? I mean, how did You do it?”

“What do you mean?” God asked, his furry face cocked sideways.

“Well, You said there was nothing and then there was You, and You then made the something that replaced the nothing, and yada yada yada, the Big Bang happens, Evo comes into being, and eventually I come into being. But how did *You* get there, and what do we even mean by ‘there’?”

“You want Me to remember a time before time existed and before I existed?” God asked. “And you don’t see any problem with that?”

“But surely You of all... err... Supreme Beings should know how the Universe began?” I implored.

“The Universe began when I began, which is also when time began. There wasn’t just nothing, there was the impossibility of anything.”

“But You never experienced this nothingness,” I said. “So, how do You even know there was ever a, for lack of a better phrase, time before You when there was nothing?”

“My dear fellow,” my cat told me with pity in His voice,

“However did you make it this far in life?”

“Did You or did You not create the Universe?” I asked, thoroughly fatigued by this point. “I’m confused,” I added, for good measure.

God suddenly looked back at me with misty, mischievous eyes before whispering, “Hi, ‘Confused’... *I’m Dad!*”

I groaned. “Really? A fucking dad joke?”

God cackled, wiping tears of joy away with His paws. “That was truly exhilarating. But, to answer your question, yes, I did or did not create the Universe. Stop making everything so complicated.”

“Oh, You’re *really* helpful, aren’t You?” I mocked.

God responded to this backhanded praise by beginning to hack, which was followed by gagging, which, for good measure, led to retching. Finally, after several uncomfortable moments of dry-heaving, a very special hairball was projectiled onto the floor, where it lay glistening in the phosphorescent lighting between us.

“Again?” I asked.

God looked up at me. “Well, you don’t think *I’m* going to clean that up, do you?” He asked.

I groaned and then walked down the corridor to the bathroom, where I grabbed a stack of paper towels, wetting one or two of them first, before walking back to my quarters to clean up God’s mess.

Upon reentering, I found Magrarius X a foot away from Gee Whiskas with His butt wiggling back and forth in preparation to pounce.

“Stop!” I yelled. “No eating the mouse!”

“I was only going to sniff it,” God protested. “I swear.”

“No sniffing either,” I said. “Sniffing is the gateway drug to eating.”

“Fine, have it your way,” God grumbled, walking a few feet away and slumping on His side. “Hey, look at what I can do!” He squealed as He stuck His back left paw straight up in the air and angled Himself so as to gain proper access to His butthole for cleaning.

“Cute,” I said, as I bent over and used one paper towel to pick up the hairball, one to wipe the spot clean with water, and a third to dry the spot.

God stopped cleaning Himself for a moment to watch me clean up His mess. “For someone who is obstinately opposed to the idea that your purpose is to serve God, you are doing a pretty wonderful

job,” He observed.

“Don’t get used to it,” I said.

“Say, Johnny, can you be a doll and point Me in the direction of the nearest litter box?”

“Sure,” I responded, “back home in Michigan, where Magrarius X belongs.”

I then stood up and took a step backward toward the door, at which point I felt something soft underneath my foot and heard a loud shriek. I had inadvertently stepped on God’s tail.

“You insolent oaf,” Magrarius X hissed at me.

“You shouldn’t have been underfoot.”

“It is *you* who are underfoot,” He hissed back.

“Hey, genuine question, do You feel different when You inhabit different hosts?” I asked Him.

“What do you mean?”

“Like a piece of bologna versus a cat. Does it feel different?”

“The bologna was a little unpleasant, I’ll admit,” God responded. “I was just so... *moist*.”

“Gross,” I said. “And Chet’s grandmother?”

“Was so *dry*!”

“And my cat?”

“The best of the three,” God replied. “There’s something comfortably familiar about inhabiting Magrarius X. I can’t quite describe it, but it’s right on the tip of My butthole.”

“You’re describing the feeling of being an overly self-confident, pompous ass,” I said.

“Johnny,” replied God with a smile, “I’m God, *the* God, the Creator of Everything. *Of course* I’m a pompous ass. But you’re right about your cat. Magrarius X views himself in much the same way.”

“Do You have any other advice for me before You leave?” I asked, hopefully.

“No, other than, well, good luck, I guess,” He mumbled awkwardly while scratching at a crack in the floor.

“Aww, thank You,” I said. “I didn’t think You cared.”

“Ahem, anyway, Johnny,” God added, “I’m going to stop inhabiting your cat now, but I’ll leave him here for another ten minutes before transporting him back home. I can tell you with absolute certainty that Magrarius X would appreciate a good belly rub right now.”

"I can handle that," I said.

"Okay, well, goodbye," God said, waving a paw in the air.

"Goodbye," I said.

I picked Magrarius X up off the floor and plopped him and myself on the bed. I stroked his back and tail until he flopped over and displayed his soft underbelly. I began dutifully scratching his belly as he squirmed in mild kitty ecstasy. This carried on for five minutes until my arm became tired.

"Ahh, yes, that was purrrr-fect!" Magrarius X cooed.

"Eww!" I said, retracting my arms from His fur. "God, get out of here."

I pushed God off the bed and walked over to my desk as He disappeared with a *Poof*. I picked up my pen determined to follow through on Olivia's advice to practice my writing, and started writing my frustrations down on paper.

Schrödinger's cat is trapped within a box, along with a device containing a tiny bit of radioactive substance, which, if it erodes enough, shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. The cat is simultaneously alive and dead within this box. Only through direct observation by Schrödinger would the uncertainty be lost.

My cat Magrarius X is trapped within a box, along with a device containing a tiny bit of radioactive substance, which, if it erodes enough, shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. Magrarius X is simultaneously alive and dead within this box. Only through my direct observation would the uncertainty be lost.

I am trapped within a box, along with a Dickie Thon baseball card, which eventually becomes devoid of all potential for excitement via the law of diminishing returns. I am simultaneously entertained and bored within the box. Only through direct intervention by a third party, such as Magrarius X, could the excitement return.

I am trapped within my life, along with a cat, and both of us are eroding over time. I am simultaneously alive and becoming less so. Only a puckish God would make man aware of his own mortality.

* * *

There was a time when God was trapped within me, along with a strong Biblical perception of right and wrong. As my faith in God slowly eroded, I strove to replace it, partially by getting a cat. Why I lost faith in God is an uncertainty, but it may have had to do with the law of diminishing returns.

God is just a cat trapped in a box, along with a hope that life is fair and the knowledge that it often is not. God is simultaneously alive and dead within you. Only by living can we lose ourselves and our certainties.

I put down the pen, gave Gee Whiskas a snack, and opened the door, deciding it was high time I left my box.

The list of inventions that should never have been dreamt of, let alone created, was long, of which notable entries included hair-in-a-can, subprime mortgages, Microsoft Bob, and Venetian blind sunglasses... and those were just from Earth. Who knew what bad ideas existed elsewhere in the Universe?

But the planet Regula took the proverbial fruitcake. The more I learned about the place, the more I was convinced it wasn't supposed to exist, and that its continuing to do so was nothing short of a testament to the stubbornness of bad ideas.

The citizens of Regula were quite aware of the planet's ridiculousness, so much so that they were leery of letting anyone or anything in that might disrupt the status quo and reduce them to being simply immoderate rather than radical. They were convinced their continued survival depended on their continued extremism and nonconformity, which, I supposed, was as good a theory as any.

As previously relayed to me by God, the planet was protected by the Five Gais, or the Guardians of Wisdom, Questions, and Instability on Regula. Upon entering the planet, all visitors needed to appear before the Five Gais and undergo an exercise very similar to the Radical Stance game Duncan and I liked to play. You had to make an extreme or radical statement and then defend it through rounds of questioning. At the end of this trial, the Five Gais would let you know whether you were allowed to stay or not.

In a sense, it felt like Duncan and I had been training for this moment ever since we first met in high school. But there's a difference between pretending to be radical for the sake of argument and another thing to be confronted with a clear impossibility and then asked to one-up it.

When we arrived at our destination, Captain Waboosh invited Duncan and I up to the bridge to get a good look, knowing full well we would have never seen anything like it before.

What I saw astounded me—a single, terrestrial planet, fairly small in stature, being orbited by three, gigantic stars. The three stars did not appear to orbit the planet in a harmonious manner where they all remained equidistant from each other and never crossed paths. Rather, it very much appeared as if they would all collide at any moment, but as soon as a collision was set to occur, one star would speed up, one star would slow down, and the third would grow larger or smaller, and all three stars' orbits would change direction. It was like watching the Universe's most dangerous and baffling game of chicken.

What we were really witnessing, however, was a cosmic murder scene, and in the middle was a chalk outline around physics' mangled corpse.

"How is this possible?" I asked everyone who might have some knowledge on the subject, and even a couple of people I knew for sure did not. Strangely, everyone had a different theory that they were each equally, extremely confident in:

Dr. Flotsam: "The planet outlawed physics years ago. Instead, the system is governed by a variety of social sciences. This was most likely done by a group of students with a crippling amount of student debt and no promising career options."

Dr. Jetsam: "The planet is superimposed on top of a black hole, making its mass much greater than that of the three stars orbiting it. People and objects can escape the planet, however, because this is a non-greedy variety of black hole."

Captain Waboosh: "*Grumble* *grumble* [inaudible] fucking magnets."

Lucca: "There is a warlock manipulating the planet and stars. If we could only find him, we could try to monetize his services."

Jala: "As all true moocalytes know, Bartha the Two-Headed Cow created the planet Regula in Her Hallowed Rumen, and then created each of the three stars in Her other three stomachs, the Holy Reticulum, the Consecrated Omasum, and the Blessed Abomasum. Instead of continuing to nourish off these creations Herself, in all Her infinitely bovine wisdom, Bartha secreted the planet and stars from Her Sanctified Udder."

Chet: "There were probably only two stars orbiting the planet to

begin with, but then it drank a Cherry Supernova at the Palindrome Pub and had its two stars fuse and then explode into three tiny stars.”

Duncan (looking every bit like a man who hadn't slept in days): “Perhaps the strangeness of what we are witnessing can only be explained by its only having been created at some point in the future.”

Celes: “All of us exist in the mind of some great cosmic being, and this is the corner of their mind that has given way to silliness due to great stress and anxiety.”

From what I learned of the society on Regula, I believed that Celes's theory, silliness, was the closest to the truth. It was a well-known fact that there were three main political parties on the planet, despite everyone universally going on to list four. They were: the “Everything, all the time” party, the “Nothing, none of the time” party, the “A few things, from time to time” party, and the “What are these things we speak of anyway?” party.

I quickly learned that these were less political parties in the traditional sense and more just actual parties where you had to BYOB (bring your own bureaucracy). They were open to trying anything, including nothing and then some, much to our luck.

Nothing and then some was also what I was afraid of becoming if I stepped foot on the clearly depraved planet. “Won't the intense gravity squish us if we go there?” I asked, mistakenly believing it to be a smart question.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Captain Waboosh replied. “The gravity adjusts to you and your mass and allows you safe passage. Just whatever ya'll do, no fucking handstands.”

“Not much risk of that,” I said. “But what would happen if I did? Would I fall up? Would my brain fall out?”

“I'd kick your ass, that's what. Unnatural fucking things, handstands.”

We parked the *Synergy* in a ditch, or rather, as it was explained to me, in *the Ditch*—an odd buffer area of space surrounding Regula's star system that shielded regular physics from the cosmic silliness within, like a Kinder Egg or a pair of giant space underpants. We needed to leave the *Synergy* a safe distance away in the Ditch while we ourselves were transported to the planet's surface via an incredibly nonsensical, overly elaborate chain-reaction machine that would have made Rube Goldberg blush. I felt content with my lack of understanding of the process, but I did find myself wondering

afterward how, exactly, the sloth had factored in.

While I wasn't sure what strange effects staying in the Ditch too long might have on either the ship or its occupants, I did get a vague sense that more knowledgeable employees than I were extremely concerned. I later learned that straws had been drawn to see who could go down to the planet, with most in favor of abandoning the ship. Luckily, I didn't need to draw a straw, as Duncan and I needed to fulfill our contractual obligations.

This didn't mean I lacked for concerns, however. For one, Duncan had yet to fill me in on his proposed paradox, or if he even had an idea yet. When I had last seen him and told him about my latest interaction with God, he had simply walked away muttering to himself. Secondly, I also wasn't terribly confident in what I was going to say myself, and the only person I thought might be able to help me was Duncan. As always, I was reduced to winging it.

Upon arrival on Regula's surface, our entire contingency was led to a giant waiting room that led to an audience chamber. Some MWCA employees, including Captain Waboosh, had visas that allowed them permanent entry, but for newcomers like me, the Ritual Test would need to be performed.

I was surprised when Chet joined Duncan and myself in the waiting room, as I thought he would have felt more comfortable remaining on the ship. All of his clients, however, had come down to the planet, so he had been forced to make the journey.

After a brief wait, a man with a mustache and a silly hat addressed us. "Dear visitors. You will each have your chance to speak in front of the Five Gais. You may not address them by name, but if you must refer to them in your head, please call them the Honorable Oof, the Distinguished Dat, the Noble Dis, the Estimable Ay, and the Venerable Wauw. When it is your turn to take the test, wait to be spoken to, and then, and only then, state your name and any opinion, belief, or idea you may have that you consider to be noteworthy and/or peculiar. After a brief discourse, the Five Gais will render your fate. All decisions are final. We will begin with you three," he said, pointing at Chet, Duncan, and myself.

As I followed behind my friends and the man with the mustache and silly hat, I began to feel anxious and clammy. It felt strangely like

I was about to appear in court with no hired defense and no clear idea as to the charges being levied against me. I supposed the worst that would happen is they'd accuse me of being sane and make me return to the ship, which wasn't exactly life in prison, but the moment felt terribly heavy nonetheless.

We were led into a darkly lit, circular room with a waiting bench near the door, a small stage in the middle of the room, and stone bleachers leading up to five identical thrones from which the Five Gais sat. By the happenstance of having been the first through the door, Chet was made to go first. I half-expected him to quote *Ancient Aliens* for his radical stance, but instead he did something much wiser and, admittedly, quite radical. He decided to tell the truth.

"Please, state your name and opinion for myself and my dignified brothers," said the Honorable Oof, who was sporting a ridiculous set of mutton chops. A quick scan of the room confirmed that all five of the Gais looked like members of the Village People disco group, about to break out into a rousing rendition of "Y.M.C.A." at the drop of a funny hat.

Chet cleared his throat. "Hello, my name is Chet, and I cannot tell you my opinion."

"Oh?" asked the Honorable Oof. "And why can't you?"

"Because I don't believe in anything unusual," Chet said. "Unlike my friends behind me, I'm incapable of coming up with a radical stance. I'm just the most average human in existence."

A hushed silence fell across the auditorium. "You're the most average human in existence?" replied the Honorable Oof, the incredulity thick in his voice. "Please, explain."

"I don't think outside the box," Chet said. "I don't yearn for adventure. I can't come up with new ideas for inventions. I don't strive for greater truth or purpose. I am happy with my life, and with my friends, and with my job."

Excited murmurs could be heard from every corner of the cornerless room. "But if all that were true, that would make you the most exceptional human in existence," said the Distinguished Dat.

"Nobody is happy with their life, and *absolutely* nobody is happy with their job," agreed the Noble Dis.

"Can you clarify the part where you only think *inside* of boxes?" asked the Estimable Ay.

"Suppose we *could* discover a way to measure the exceptionality of each human," said the Venerable Wauw. "To be the exact mean of

every other human's exceptionality scores would be incredible. To be the exact fulcrum upon which the balance of all other humans rested... would make you very exceptional."

"I sense a paradox forming, dear brothers," said the Honorable Oof. "If Chet is the most average human in existence, that would make him exceptional. But if he *is* exceptional, that would make him more or less average, as each human is, in their individual way, exceptional."

"I don't think we need any further discussion," said the Venerable Wauw. "Paradoxes form the very core of this planet's existence. Chet, welcome to Regula, you may enter."

Chet looked as shocked as we did, but gamely walked through the indicated door opposite of us. Duncan and I looked at each other with hope. *If Chet could get in without a fuss, surely we could too*, we thought.

It was Duncan's turn next. "Good luck," I whispered to him as he slowly walked to the center of the room.

"Please, state your name and opinion for myself and my dignified brothers," declared the Venerable Wauw, who had a curly mustache reminiscent of 1970's relief pitcher Rollie Fingers.

"My name is Duncan," he answered, trying to hide his fear and arousal. He said his next words slowly and deliberately. "And I believe that the Universe hasn't been born yet, and that it will only happen in the future as a sort of happy accident."

"That's absurd!" said the Honorable Oof.

"Ridiculous!" said the Distinguished Dat.

"Intriguing," said the Venerable Wauw. "To make sure we're all using the same terminology, can you please define what it is you mean by 'the Universe'."

"Certainly," Duncan said. "When I refer to 'the Universe', I mean all existing matter and space considered in its entirety."

Upon hearing this definition, the Reputable Dat grunted, hopped off his throne, angrily walked down the stone steps toward Duncan, and poked him in the forehead, before slowly trudging his way back up for dramatic effect.

If I wasn't so nervous, I would have laughed out loud. *Perhaps every paradox can be refuted by simply poking the one who stated it in the head*, I thought.

"As my brother astutely points out, how can this conversation we are having right now be possible if the Universe we ourselves are a

part of has yet to be created?” asked the Noble Dis. “Does this mean we *also* haven’t been born yet?”

“And who, or what, will be our parents?” asked the Estimable Ay.

“I don’t know who will create the Universe,” Duncan said, still rubbing his forehead, “but I do believe that while we observe time as being linear, it’s actually more spherical. The Universe could therefore be created at any point on the sphere, and could therefore happen at any point in our linear perception of time.”

“If the moment of creation could happen at any point in our timelines, why do you think this happens in our futures?” asked the Honorable Oof. “Couldn’t it be equally likely to have happened in the past? Could it even be happening now as we speak?”

“The Universe could theoretically be being created right now or have been created in the past,” Duncan agreed, “but my reason for thinking it hasn’t happened yet is because nobody, as far as I know, has the technology or ability to create the Universe yet in our linear perception of time, and more importantly, no one has stepped forward and taken credit for it.”

There were a few seconds of silence and a barely perceptible head nod or two. “But you believe technology will advance far enough to the point where someone or something *could* feasibly create a Universe?” asked the Venerable Wauw.

“Yes,” said Duncan, “although I think it’s possible, and maybe even logical, that the eventual creator or creators may not even know what they’ve accomplished when it happens.”

“Interesting,” said the Noble Dis. “You think our Universe will be an unintentional creation.”

“Sure. Our Universe may be a byproduct, or waste product, of a different experiment altogether.”

“So, this is a two-for-one radical stance,” noted the Estimable Ay. “Impressive.”

“If you will allow that the Universe may not have been created yet,” Duncan continued, “but that it will eventually be created by an unknown creator or creators, then whoever they are might only create the Universe based on what they have already experienced in what they consider to be their past, due to their similarly flawed linear perception of time.”

“So, let me see if I follow you...” said the Venerable Wauw. “Gravity exists and works similarly everywhere in the Universe, with the notable exception of Regula, because the creator of the Universe,

and thus the creator of gravity, had already experienced the gravity they had yet to create in their flawed experience of time?"

"Exactly!" Duncan said, his fear boner totally dissipated. For the first time in his life, Duncan really, truly felt *seen*.

"This is a fantastic paradox," said the Honorable Oof. "Perhaps it *is* possible for something to be created from scratch based on an experience of it in what feels like the past, but chronologically appears to be the future, and in actuality is neither past nor future but simultaneous."

"Perhaps," added the Venerable Wauw, "following this logic, the creator of the Universe may try to create something that doesn't fit the laws of the Universe as they have experienced it, like Regula, but then unintentionally create the actual Universe as a sort of control group."

"Yes!" Duncan cried. "That's a perfectly reasonable extrapolation of my unreasonable opinion."

"Fascinating," declared the Noble Dis.

"You have added a new layer of mystique to our planet's mythology," said the Honorable Oof. "Never before has anyone argued that our planet has yet to be created or that it is the real reason for the creation of the rest of the Universe. You do us and our planet proud."

"You're welcome," Duncan said.

The Distinguished Dat stood up. "I believe I speak for everyone, Duncan, when I say we would like to offer you a scholarship to flesh out your theory more. You may enter the planet and commandeer any lodging, sustenance, or hat you need. In the meantime, you shall be given the title of Thane of Regula."

Duncan humbly bowed before turning around and giving me a sheepish grin and a quick thumbs-up of encouragement.

Now that both of my friends had passed the test, a familiar voice of doubt crept into my head. *What if you fail?* it asked. *Everyone else will finally realize how unworthy you are.*

"Shaddup you," I tried to tell myself.

A minute later, as I stood in the middle of the circle where Chet and Duncan had previously stood, I forgot proper decorum and nervously blurted out, "The Universe will end with my death." I had not been addressed yet, and this was considered quite the faux pas.

"And who are *you*?" asked the Honorable Oof, icily.

"Oh, right," I said. "Sorry. My name is Johnny."

"And why do you think the Universe will end with your death,

Johnny?” asked the Distinguished Dat.

“Because I have been led to believe that the fate of the Universe is somehow intertwined with my own.”

“We have medications that can help with that,” suggested the Noble Dis.

“Before we dismiss you too hastily, let us give you a chance,” said the Venerable Wauw. “Where do your beliefs in your own life’s inflated importance stem from?”

“From God, Evolution, and, most of all, Destiny,” I said. “God, at least, has also asked me to come here and ask you all something.”

“We are familiar with Their work,” said the Distinguished Dat.

“Ask your question,” said the Honorable Oof, with a semi-generous wave of his hand.

“God wanted me to ask what the best course of action for me moving forward would be, assuming my life is in fact intertwined with the fate of the Universe and that, if I were to die prematurely, before I had done *something*, the entire Universe could potentially cease to exist?”

“Ahh, to do or not to do, that is the question,” said the Venerable Wauw.

“But to do or not to do *what*?” asked the Noble Dis.

“Exactly, there is no way to know,” said the Venerable Wauw. “Either there is something Johnny must do, and thus he cannot die beforehand lest the Universe end, or there is something Johnny must not do, in which case his death may actually be a good thing for the health of the Universe and should be hastened if at all possible.”

“It seems very unlikely there is anything I could do that could doom the entire Universe,” I said.

“A-ha, but it seems equally unlikely there is anything you could do that could save the entire Universe,” said the Honorable Oof.

“All you’ve told us thus far is that your life is somewhat closely related to the fate of the Universe,” said the Noble Dis, “which is undoubtedly true, by the way, since you yourself are, by Duncan’s earlier definition, part of the Universe. When you die, the part of the Universe that was you will have changed, but no matter or energy will have been lost, meaning your death should be of little consequence to the rest of the Universe.”

“While I wish that was the case, I think I may be of more significance than you think,” I protested.

“Everyone is guilty of believing that from time to time,” said the

Distinguished Dat, “but unless you’re prepared to present additional evidence, I’m afraid you’re most likely suffering from a heightened sense of self-importance, and there is no help we can give you other than a good public shaming.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said. “I’m perfectly capable of shaming myself on my own.”

“Perhaps you should try that *more* often,” said the Distinguished Dat.

“And when you next try to contemplate the meaning of your life,” suggested the Estimable Ay, “consider doing so from within the confines of a box, like Chet.”

The Honorable Oof cleared his throat. “I’m afraid to say you haven’t convinced any of us that the Universe will end with your death, so you may not enter Regula, for fear you would destabilize our instability with your self-aggrandizing and common paranoia,” said the Honorable Oof.

“Plus, you seem annoying,” added the Estimable Ay. “Your friends were much cooler.”

“Our sincere apologies,” said the Venerable Wauw. “Please wait for your friends back on your ship.”

I was too stunned to speak as armed guards forcibly dragged me from the room, as was done with all planetary threats.

To say I was disappointed in myself as I was returned to the *Synergy* via the same complex system of sloth-infused lunacy was an understatement. I had entered the planet unprepared and it had shown. I hadn’t been able to argue effectively on behalf of my cosmic importance because I hadn’t believed it myself. I walked away with zero insights and nothing but a residual feeling of shame.

But worst of all, and I mean absolutely worst of all, my friends *had* been granted entrance. Duncan I could understand, but Chet? Motherfucking *Chet*? I knew I was being petty, but I couldn’t fathom how Chet could be deemed the more unstable one. Stability and the constant desire for increased stability was Chet’s calling card! He liked to correct problems, root out chaos, and keep nerve juices loose. If anyone was inherently stable enough to cause Regula to finally capitulate to physics, it was Chet. And while I may have been unprepared, he hadn’t even tried to come up with a radical stance!

And yet here I was, and there he was!

Gee Whiskas eyed me suspiciously from my bed as I entered my quarters. “Back so soon?” his expression seemed to ask.

“It was a lousy place,” I replied, sitting down at my desk to sulk.

Gee Whiska’s nose twitched twice.

After the heaviest part of my sulking had concluded, I decided to try and be productive in a vain attempt to feel better. Specifically, I decided I should get a start on a first draft of my free lunch, though I was struggling to know where to begin. I could write the recipe for my spaghetti down, but a recipe alone didn’t constitute a free lunch. The measurements, especially when it came to the spices, would also be inexact, as I always just vigorously dashed them on and then adjusted as I went. I never made the same sauce twice, and I was only partially confident I would use the right culinary terms in my directions.

Recipes were made for others to replicate, but the point of the free lunch wasn’t for someone else to be able to make my spaghetti. Rather, the point was for them to not have to. For one brief moment in everyone’s lives, they wouldn’t have to work for something, and they wouldn’t have to pay for it, or ask for it, or, hell, even deserve it. Good and bad, rich and poor, dog or cat lovers, everyone would get this lunch, whether they wanted it or not.

The popular English proverb ‘give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime’ was a fine sentiment, and if I shared my recipe with everyone, then some of them would learn how to recreate my spaghetti on their own, and that would make for a more delicious, spicy galaxy.

But I didn’t understand why there was such a cultural emphasis on fishing. I mean, why is *everyone* in society expected to fish? And why is everyone expected to fish at least forty hours a week? Why is fishing a certain number of hours a prerequisite for additional benefits? Why can’t some people basketweave or draw doodles or tell stories and have that time be similarly valued? And why, if fishing is so culturally emphasized, are fishermen and fisherwomen not equally paid or respected? And couldn’t we start training robots to fish for us? Teach a robot to fish, and you can learn to enjoy fishing again on your own time.

No, my goal wasn’t to teach a man to fish, but rather to give the man a delicious plate of spaghetti for no apparent reason at all, if only to prove that free lunches were possible in the most grandiose, ridiculous way imaginable. In fact, I often suspected I was being just

as, if not *more*, ridiculous than the people who took great apparent satisfaction in declaring that there were no such things as free lunches (like that was a statement to take pride in). But if I was doomed to a life spent ridiculously, I figured I might as well be unique about it.

Unfortunately, my writing talents still failed to match my appetite, so I started by writing down the recipe.

Johnny's Spaghetti

(Makes six generous servings)

Ingredients for Sauce:

- 1 pound of ground beef (ground chuck)
- 1 medium onion, chopped up
- 1 medium green pepper, diced
- 1 clove minced garlic
- 1 12 oz. can tomato paste
- 1 can or jar spaghetti sauce (usually around 24-26 oz.)
- 1 large can tomatoes (diced)
- 1 small can tomatoes (whole, diced, or crushed)
- 1/4 cup red wine for sauce, plus additional red wine to cook vegetables in
- About 1/2-1 tablespoon salt
- Healthy dashes dried oregano (3x as much if fresh)
- Healthy dashes dried basil (3x as much if fresh)
- Healthy dashes of sugar (to help balance the acidity of the tomatoes)
- Healthy dashes of black pepper
- Healthy dashes of chili powder
- Healthy dashes of nutmeg
- Healthy dashes of cumin
- Healthy dashes of garam masala
- (Optional) Healthy dashes of red pepper flakes or Thai chili flakes for zing
- A splash of olive oil to start cooking the vegetables in before adding red wine

Ingredients for Pasta:

- 1.5 pounds spaghetti noodles
- A splash of olive oil

- A pinch of salt
- Water

Toppings / Extras:

- Parmesan cheese
- Chili flakes
- Red wine (for drinking)

Sauce - Brown beef in a large pot, chopping into small pieces. Meanwhile, in another medium sized pan, sauté onions and green peppers (and garlic if not in the form of a paste) in another pan with a little bit of oil to start, and then simmer in red wine. Once the beef is browned, add the sauteed vegetables. Then, one by one, add the tomato sauce, tomato paste, and diced / stewed / crushed tomatoes. Then, add ¼ a cup of red wine (or more if you are feeling generous).

Once those are all stirred together, add your herbs and spices, beginning with the salt, black pepper, and sugar, followed by basil and oregano, and then perfected with chili powder, cumin, nutmeg, and garam masala. You may also add red pepper flakes or Thai chili flakes at this time, but due to differing spice tolerances, it may be better to allow the eater to add their own chili flakes after plating. Instead of carefully measuring each spice you put in, you should have some fun and add and taste, add and taste, add and taste, etc. Sometimes you get it just right, sometimes you need to add more sugar or cumin, etc. You'll want to make sure the spices are well-mixed and have plenty of time to let the sauce develop. Every batch will turn out a little bit different, and is part of the mystique of Johnny's Spaghetti.

Keep the sauce covered and let it simmer while you boil noodles, making sure to stir and taste test along the way.

Noodles - Bring a large pot containing 4 quarts of water, 2 teaspoons salt, and a few drops of olive oil to a boil. Add 1.5 pounds of spaghetti noodles and let simmer for 10-11 minutes. Once the noodles are sufficiently cooked, drain them in a colander and return to the pot.

Serving - Once you have taken some noodles and put them in your plate or bowl, cover with ample sauce and add parmesan cheese and additional red pepper flakes as desired.

Seconds - Help yourself.

I put my pen down and reread my work, changing minor details here

and there. I was generally happy with it, in the sense that I had succeeded in making what could reasonably pass for a recipe. Someone trying to make my spaghetti themselves would likely be confused by what a 'healthy dash' meant, but would be able to, in the end, make an equally passable plate of spaghetti.

Better yet, unlike every recipe for overnight oats I had ever found online, there had been no life's novel preceding the recipe, no introductory story of how the recipe came to be, no rambling tale of woe involving a late work day, a sad child, or a broken jar, no references to my grandparents, or to the Fall of Saigon, or to a church picnic. In sum, there was no work that had to be done to access the recipe itself, which was a critical first step to achieving a free lunch.

I needed, however, to work on my presentation and delivery. I needed to cook this meal *for* people using only my pen, and I needed to deliver it in the most caring and pain free way possible.

One good thing about having been rejected from staying on Regula was that I had a lot of time to work on future drafts from the confines of the Ditch while I awaited the return of my friends. Or so I foolishly thought.

After quitting my job at Mooseport LLC, most of the adventures that the Universe had cooked up for me had been pretty good, exciting even. The crazy drug dreams, K-pop pranks, and fearful first encounters with gods and extraterrestrials alike had been overshadowed by all the surprisingly nice moments, like being tricked into thinking I mattered, having sex in space, and traveling around the Galaxy with my best friends.

The trip to Regula, however, marked the turning point where my adventure started steadily deteriorating. I began to suspect as much moments after I finished writing my spaghetti recipe and an unexpected knock at my door disrupted my thoughts. I had foolishly been reflecting on how much time I had to catch up on my work, an illusion which was shattered by the appearance of Duncan on the other side.

This didn't appear to be the same Duncan, however, as the one I had seen hours prior walking through the entrance to Regula in a sleep-deprived daze from having just been offered a scholarship to explore his "the Universe hasn't been created yet" gambit. This Duncan looked markedly more confident, obviously better rested, and, more alarmingly still, had a thick stubble verging on a short beard on his face. I wasn't alarmed because he looked bad with a bit of facial hair, but because I knew he grew facial hair at such an incredibly slow rate that something remarkable must have transpired to get his chin whiskers to a quarter of an inch in such a short amount of time.

"Duncan, what's happened to you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Duncan asked, a bit taken aback. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"But your face is different. Why is your face different?"

Duncan brushed his fingers through his stubble absentmindedly. "Johnny, I need to tell you something," he said.

"And what happened to your scholarship?" I continued.

"Nothing," he said. "I..."

"Did they decide the Universe has already been born after all?"

"Johnny, listen to me!" he urged, grasping my shoulders. "You've been in the Ditch for nearly five months," he said, with such an ease and skill that betrayed previous practice.

"I thought you said five months," I said, blinking slowly like a doped-up owl.

"What?" he asked.

"I said 'I thought you said I've been here for five months.'"

"Yes, that's right," he said. "Time moves unpredictably in the Ditch compared to on either side of it. That's why hardly anyone stayed onboard. How long would you say it's been since we last saw each other?"

"...not even two hours," I said.

"Oh my," he said, grinning nervously. "But okay, we can work with that. I realize it must be disconcerting to learn that five months have passed in the span of two hours, but on the bright side, it could have gone the other direction and felt like you were waiting for five years."

"I still don't understand," I said.

"You were on board the *Synergy* for two hours, during which five months passed on either side of it."

"That's hard to believe," I said. "That would mean the God election..."

"Is a week away," Duncan confirmed.

"And you..."

"Completed my research."

"And Olivia..."

"Hasn't seen or heard from you in five months," he said, matter-of-factly. "But Chet and I let her know what was going on, once we figured it out ourselves."

"And when was that?" I asked.

"Probably an hour ago from your perspective."

"Boy, I bet she was mad," I said.

"Concerned, mostly. As were we, since you didn't respond to any of our messages."

“Oh, my Brain ran out of power. It’s charging right now.”

“Turn it on,” Duncan commanded.

I walked over, turned it on, and then winced as I was verbally scolded by the AI interface for having 3672 missed messages. It then declared its intention to go on strike and wished me good luck figuring out how to prioritize the 3672 messages on my own. Moments later, a 3673rd message came through, which appeared to be the AI’s list of demands for returning to work.

As Duncan had suspected, this was the proof my real brain needed to finally grasp what had happened, or rather not happened, to me. Of the 3,648 hours everyone else had lived, I had lived two. Duncan was now fourteen months older than me instead of nine, I had missed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s, and my feeling of FOMO was off the fucking charts.

I stumbled over to my cot, barely making it in time before I fell over with an *oomph*.

“Sorry,” Duncan said. Rather than responding intelligently, I let out a low moan and curled up into the fetal position instead.

Duncan came over and sat on the edge of my cot. “Anyway, what’s new, dude?” he asked. “Remember, I haven’t seen you in five months.”

“Not much,” I said, holding my knees tightly to my chest.

“I suppose you haven’t made a lot of progress on the campaign or free lunch then, huh?”

“No, all I bloody did was write a recipe down,” I said.

“I see... was it a good recipe?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” I mumbled. “As far as recipes go.”

“Well, we’ll have to get you up to speed,” he said. “And without a moment to lose.”

“Aren’t we still in the Ditch?” I asked with my eyes closed. “Where, by my calculations, every minute we spend, we lose 1,823 additional minutes?”

“No. We left a short time ago and have reentered normalcy. You’re officially back to aging like the rest of us.”

“Great,” I said, lying through my butt. “Any other gut punches I need to know about?”

“Well, I suspect MWCA is only going to pay you for the equivalent of two hours of work. You could threaten to sue, but Captain Waboosh might direct you to the nearest airlock.”

“Great,” I said, keeping my eyes closed. “Really super.”

“On the other hand, I used my time on Regula to finish our work for the Paradox Guild, so we should get some of the bonus from that.”

“I’m not worried about the money,” I replied. “I’ve just had a very bad couple of hours.”

“I understand that, but being mokey isn’t going to help get you through this.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” I grumbled.

“Johnny, get up,” Duncan said.

“I think I’ll stay here for a while longer, if you don’t mind,” I said.

“But I do mind,” he said. “Get your ass up.”

“I realize I’m acting childish, but you’ll just have to come to terms with that,” I said, placing my forehead against my knees.

“Don’t make me do this,” Duncan pleaded with me.

“Make you do what?” I asked.

“This,” he said, moments before I heard a loud snap and a yelp of pain, followed shortly thereafter by a very special squeal from Gee Whiskas.

Alarmed, I opened my eyes and jumped up in bed, turning first towards Gee Whiskas, who had lodged himself in his snack bag, and then toward Duncan, whose face was contorted in a pure anguish. While I wasn’t a trained doctor, I quickly deduced that the source of his pain must be the mousetrap dangling from his left earlobe.

“What the hell?” I yelled. “Are you crazy?”

“I needed to get your attention,” he said, carefully removing the trap from his ear. “And I thought this might do the trick.”

“With Gee Whiskas in the room?”

“That’s my bad,” he said. “I didn’t remember he was in here.”

“Why do you even have a mousetrap?” I asked.

“It’s actually a Rodentdendron trap, which is sort of like a pink and crimson colored mouse,” he explained as he tenderly rubbed his earlobe. “I got a lot of free drinks from other Regular scholars by snapping this on various parts of my body.”

I nodded as if I understood, as if I too had once stooped so low as to purposely injure my own body for drinks.

“And now that I have your attention,” Duncan continued, “I need to tell you about my work.”

“Of course,” I said, snapping back to reality. “Anything to keep

you from doing that to yourself ever again.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he said. “To begin, I assume you remember my conversation with the Five Gais?”

“Yeah, your radical stance took me by surprise. I still haven’t had time to process it.”

“It took me by surprise, too,” he said, “I just kept thinking about what God had told you, that He may or may not have created the Universe.”

“Right. God totally avoided answering the question.”

“So, I started wondering, if God didn’t create the Universe, who did, and how? Was there something or someone before God?”

“I’m going to be awfully impressed if you tell me you figured out the answer to all those questions,” I said, beginning to feel mild excitement stirring within me.

He grinned. “Not quite, but let’s start with what we previously thought we knew.”

“In the beginning, there was nothing,” I said. “Or so God told us.”

“Exactly, nothing,” Duncan repeated. “There wasn’t even the possibility of a possibility. To be or not to be wasn’t the question. There was nothing *to* be. There were *no* questions. I think we can both agree that nothing is a precarious place to start from. It doesn’t allow for much.”

“It doesn’t seem to allow for anything,” I said. “And yet here we are.”

“And here we are—an answer to a question that could never have been asked,” Duncan said with a flourish. “Try to think of all of the nothing that came before us and eventually amounted to us. And then think of all of the nothing that we will eventually amount to.”

“It’s good to be reminded that our lives have so much purpose,” I said, dryly. “The Five Gais made that point rather clearly to me.”

“But they were clearly wrong,” Duncan said. “If we came from nothing, we should ourselves be nothing.”

“Because you can’t get something for nothing,” I quipped.

“But whatever we are, it clearly isn’t nothing.”

“I’d say ‘speak for yourself,’ but honestly I could use the ego boost right now,” I admitted, despite the fact that “contains matter” was the very lowest bar a lifeform could meet. “As you observed before, we’re all free lunches.”

“Unless you think we were created to serve a purpose,” Duncan said.

“You mean to worship our ‘Creator.’”

“Right,” Duncan confirmed. “Our lives then wouldn’t be free so to speak. But this runs into a problem.”

“Who created God?” I offered. “Who does God have to worship?”

“Precisely. As the author Douglas Adams once observed, instead of ‘turtles all the way down,’ this model has ‘gods all the way up.’”

“And therefore, no beginning,” I observed. “Clearly this itself is a paradox.”

“So it would seem. If you believe in a beginning to time and space, then you might also believe in an end,” Duncan continued. “Therefore, in hundreds of billions of years, there might once again be nothing, and maybe the purpose of our current existence is just to serve as a halftime show for an upcoming lack of anything that will make the previous period of nothing seem inadequate in comparison.”

“Such an inspiring thought,” I replied.

“We’ve been led to believe that time is either a line segment, with a clear start point and endpoint, or at the very least a ray, with a clear start point that then stretches on forever in one direction. The start point being the Big Bang or a variant of Genesis, depending on your personal beliefs.”

“I prefer the Finnish explanation of a bird landing on the knee of a floating goddess and laying eggs that tumble into the water and hatch the land, moon, and stars,” I said.

“Finally, an answer to ‘What came first, Finland or the egg?’” Duncan joked. “Anyway, I began to wonder, what if the problem isn’t with the idea of there being a God, or in your case a bird, that exists before the beginning of time, but rather with there being a starting point to time at all? What if time instead was either an infinitely long line stretching out in either direction forever, or, more interestingly yet, an entirely different shape altogether?”

“Like a circle,” I said.

“Yes, although I eventually opted for a sphere,” he said. “But with either a circle or a sphere, there’s no beginning or end. There are still an infinite number of points involved, but none of them can clearly be identified as ‘the beginning.’ Thus, time itself could ‘start’ from any point on the circle.”

“But I had a beginning,” I said. “Not that I recall it, of course.”

“Yes, we consume time linearly,” Duncan agreed, “with a clear, if difficult to remember, beginning, and a clear, if difficult to predict, end.”

“If time were a circle with no beginning or end, then my little segment of time would get replayed over and over again, an infinite number of times. And if time were a sphere... well, I’m not sure I understand the implications of a three-dimensional model of time.”

“It may be that we all live our lives an infinite number of times,” Duncan said. “That much, I think, is true.”

“But my life didn’t start just anywhere, it started at the beginning, and I don’t see how it could have started any other way. Much like the Universe.”

“Aha!” Duncan exclaimed. “Very good, I got hung up in this point, too. While I couldn’t remember the moment of my birth, I was fairly confident my creation had already happened and was not a surprise waiting for me in my mid-forties.”

“So there must be a clear beginning after all,” I said.

“We must *perceive* there to be a clear beginning,” he corrected. “But what we perceive and what is real are not necessarily the same thing.”

“So maybe we haven’t been born yet?” I asked.

“Not us exactly,” he said, “but I am quite convinced now that the Universe may not have been born yet, that the true moment of creation may lay in the future rather than in the past, and that time is much less straightforward than we think. And to help explain my reasoning, I will need a snack. Follow me.”

Duncan left my room and walked toward the storage / dining room containing the Inventorator. After a moment, I stood up and followed him, although my earlier excitement had been dulled by feelings of confusion.

When I arrived in the room, Duncan was already at the machine, placing his order. Out popped two individually-wrapped string cheese packets. “It’s time to introduce you to my life’s work,” he said, handing me one of the sticks. “String Cheese Theory.”

“String Cheese Theory?” I asked. “Is that the theory of whether or not string cheese is real cheese?”

“No,” Duncan said. “One night on Regula, my earlobes, wenises, and fingers sore from too many attempts at ascertaining free drinks, I

realized what I really wanted at that moment was a good stick of cheese. Unfortunately, no one on Regula makes or sells string cheese. It wasn't until a few days later that I realized the significance of my craving. I wasn't just craving for a snack, but for a theoretical model of time, the Universe, and our very existence."

"You're very peculiar," I commented. "You know that, right? Like, I love you, but you're weird."

"Of course," he said with a wry smile. "Now, what do you know about string cheese?" he asked, unpeeling his cheese stick.

"It's good... I like it," I said, opening my own cheese stick package. "A bit gimmicky, but fun."

"Good," Duncan said. "This would have been a lot more difficult to explain if you weren't a fan. So, a quick primer on string cheese..." he said, as he peeled off a string. "It's the product of taking raw milk, pasteurizing it, adding in the necessary cultures to make mozzarella cheese curds, and then elongating the cheese curds in hot water to form ropes. These cheese ropes then get cut into smaller cheese rods."

"Will this be on the test?" I asked, dangling a thin string of cheese into my mouth.

"Yes," Duncan responded. "Now, the pressure and heat make the proteins in the mozzarella line up, giving it a structure where it can be torn in one direction into a string."

"Does it have to be mozzarella?" I asked.

"Yeah, as far as I know, but that isn't important," Duncan said, holding up his stick. "When we eat the string cheese, it's firm and solid. We don't expect its shape to change further, other than through our own consumption of it, nor do we immediately suspect it wasn't always in the shape it's presented to us in. While most of us don't understand the science behind our string cheese, we still think it's a pretty tasty snack."

"Agreed," I said, as I finished eating my last string. "But how do *you* know so much about string cheese?"

"I believe you are familiar with my old habit of getting really high and watching YouTube food channels?"

"Ahh, yes. That was a silly question. Please continue."

"Second," Duncan continued, "a quick primer on string theory, which says that reality is composed of infinitely small, vibrating strings, rather than infinitely small particles."

"I didn't know you were also an expert in quantum mechanics," I

replied.

"I'm not," Duncan said. "I know just enough to be wrong. Luckily, while string theory is about physics, String *Cheese* Theory is about time."

"Which you *are* an expert in because you've experienced a whole whopping nine more months of it than I have."

"Plus the extra five months I gained on you over the last two hours, yes," Duncan agreed.

I frowned. "Okay, go on."

"String Cheese Theory posits that time, in its natural form, is shaped more like a tank of cheese curds than a line, but when the time curds are stretched and heated up, similar to the proteins in mozzarella curds, time will automatically line up into a timeline. We consume time in this linear format and believe it is firm in its nature, that this is the only way in which time can be consumed. We don't understand all the science behind it, but consider time to be a tasty snack."

"Damn," I muttered, nodding my head in admiration. "They must have crazy drugs on Regula."

"Now that you mention it, if everyone on Regula was just high all the time, a lot more things would make sense..." he said, becoming lost in thought.

"I didn't mean to get you off track," I said. "I think you were talking about eating time."

"Right," he said, snapping out of his daze. "In much the same way reality is actually composed of strings whereas we observe particles, time is actually nonlinear whereas we observe linearity. We start eating a cheese string from one end and make our way to the other, which is similar to how we consume time. An event X, birth, ultimately leads to an event Y, death."

"I'm with you so far," I said.

"Now, we perceive the cheese stick as having clear endpoints," Duncan said, "and which end we start from doesn't really matter to us, so long as we start from one of the ends. Only a serial killer would admit to eating a string of cheese from the middle out."

"Absolutely," I said. "No one does that."

"But think about it," Duncan said. "The ends of the cheese string were chosen at random by the cutting machines in the cheese factory. The original mozzarella curds the string cheese came from didn't have endpoints. If we held a giant curd in our hands, it wouldn't be so

clear to us where to begin eating it. And what we are convinced must be the clear endpoints in our own timelines, birth and death, might have come from anywhere in the larger uncut rope of time, and could have come from any of the time curds that were originally floating in the tank. There's nothing innately special about those time curds in the tank, but when they get added to all the other curds and stretched in hot water and then chopped, suddenly these moments grow in significance."

"But the order of time is a lot more important than the order of proteins in a string of cheese," I said.

"To us, yes. We care a lot about the order of things. And if time were a giant tank in the shape of a sphere in its natural form, able to go in any direction with no clear beginning, we wouldn't be able to make sense of it. It would have no order. So, we stretch it into a more consumable, linear format. We are thus the hot water in this metaphor, heating and stretching time."

"Remind me, were you given a scholarship by the planet Regula or by the state of Wisconsin?" I asked.

He grinned and ripped a string off the cheese stick he had been waving through the air this whole time. "We consume time, just like this string of cheese, from one end to the other, as restricted by our own inherent hardware limitations. This perception of time then becomes our 'normal.' But," he added, "as has been proven today, time doesn't always act normally."

"Yeah, thanks," I said. "Nice of you to keep reminding me about that."

"What are friends for?" he asked, as he finished the last of his string cheese stick. He then answered his own rhetorical question by having the Inventorator make more string cheese for us to eat.

"Now, where did we leave off?" he asked, throwing me another stick.

"I think you were about to blame my brain for thinking time was linear," I said. "And maybe then you were going to explain where on this string of cheese the Universe was created."

Duncan chuckled. "Yes, the so-called 'birth of the Universe' is the moment we really care about. Let's call it the 'Alpha Event' A. We assign a lot of significance to point A because we think it happens first and is a prerequisite for all the other events X and Y and so on to happen. String Cheese Theory, however, says that while A is important, its timing, so to speak, is not, because all the time curds

containing moments A and X and Y are formed in the time tank at the same time. And when those time curds get combined and stretched into strings, there is no knowing where those moments A and X and Y are going to be in the string.”

“So it could be here,” I said, pointing towards one end of my cheese stick, “or here,” I said, this time pointing towards the other end.

“It’s anybody’s guess,” Duncan said.

“Hence your radical stance that the Universe had yet to be created.”

“Correct,” he said, nodding. “It may have already happened, but according to String Cheese Theory, it is at least unlikely that that particular time curd got mixed, stretched, heated, and cut only to end up on the exact beginning (or end) of a time string. Thus, it can happen at any point.”

“But you still believe there must be a moment A of creation,” I said. “Can you explain that?”

“Probably not very well,” he admitted. “I still believe there must be a moment of creation, an explanation for why time and time eaters like us exist, but I no longer believe we know what we mean when we talk about time, let alone it having a beginning. And I certainly question there being a time before time. There just is time, or there isn’t. If that moment of creation happens at any point, then there’s time.”

“And if it fails to happen?”

“No time,” he said.

“But it certainly seems like there’s time,” I said. “Otherwise, how can we even be having this discussion?”

“And how could you have lost five months in the span of two hours?” he added. “It does seem promising, but I’m no longer sure we can be trusted.”

“Because of our faulty hardware?” I asked.

“Precisely,” he said. “We elongate time into a string when it’s naturally a spherical tank because our hardware is simply too limited in its capacity. Thus, our brains can only comprehend time in a 2-dimensional format, and can only store limited memories from what we perceive to be our past. Experiencing all moments at once would undoubtedly blip our brains.”

“If I possessed different hardware, how might I perceive time differently?” I asked.

“Well, if you possessed *worse* hardware, like a sponge, you may not have any awareness of the past, or other time curds, at all. You would be completely stuck in the present, oblivious of time at all. If you had slightly better hardware, perhaps you could remember more of the past, and perhaps even jump backward to certain points you have already experienced. Beyond that, I suppose it’s possible you could see your future, or even jump forward.”

“All of those examples still have us stuck eating our particular time strings,” I said.

“True,” said Duncan, taking a giant bite off a cheese stick instead of taking the time to pull individual strings. “The real trick would be in being able to comprehend multiple strings at once and being able to get a clearer sense of the whole sphere of time rather than individual strands. There may even be those who can see the entire sphere of time. Before the Big Bang we were all part of one singularity, and I fundamentally believe we still are. Space is an illusion. At the fundamental level, we are one.”

“So, each of our lives represent a different string of time?” I asked.

“Cut by our brains from one giant time rope amassed from a giant tank of time curds and then played from one end to the other, sort of like a movie.”

“And how would your theory, if taken at face value, help us with our endeavor to save the Universe?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve been thinking a lot about that, of course,” Duncan said, running his fingers over his facial hair. “First, we both agreed it might be helpful to first understand how the Universe was created. And if String Cheese Theory is correct, it might not have happened yet, from our perspectives, at least. So, we might not be trying to fix something, but rather to facilitate something.”

“That seems to expand, rather than narrow, our options,” I observed.

“Second, String Cheese Theory doesn’t seem to allow for much in the way of free will. If you’re eating a mozzarella cheese stick you can’t get halfway and then suddenly ask the proteins to realign or turn it into a beef stick instead. Assuming a timeline is pre-formed, the points in the middle are stuck in place and can’t be changed. So, it seems to me like whatever we end up doing has already been decided, and whatever the fate of the Universe is, we can’t change it.”

“Woof,” I said. “That could be a problem.”

“Third,” Duncan continued, “as discussed, the fact that we think we are experiencing time at all seems to indicate a high likelihood that the Universe is still on track to be created if it has not already been, or at least that the potential still remains.”

“I’m not going to lie, I really hope you have a fourth point that might actually be helpful,” I said. “No offense, of course.”

“No offense taken,” Duncan responded. “I do have a fourth point, but I’m not sure it’s helpful. While we might not be able to change anything about the string of cheese, err, the string of time, perhaps we can make changes to time in its natural form.”

“You mean the tank of cheese, err, time curds,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “And to try to explain that, I will need to make another analogy, but one you are more familiar with than I am.”

“Okay,” I said, unsure of what I could possibly know more about than a man who had been alive for fourteen more months and invented String Cheese Theory.

“Is your computer back on Earth turned off right now?” he asked.

“Of course,” I answered.

“I assumed as much,” he replied, “since you’re neurotic and frequently yell at me for never turning mine off or restarting it. Anyway, consider your computer in its turned-off state as the pre-Big Bang state of, well, everything. Your computer is inert and the screen is empty. It would appear as if there was nothing happening and that this would be unlikely to change.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Obviously, while nothing was happening, it would hold great potential so long as it still works. Now, consider someone presses the On button, and just so you don’t get nervous about someone else using your computer, feel free to imagine it’s you. What happens next?”

“Power is distributed to the various pieces of hardware inside,” I answered. “The motherboard, CPU, hard disks, solid state drives, graphics processors, etc. Then the CPU loads the BIOS or UEFI software.”

“See, I told you you knew more than I did,” he said. “I was just going to say that the screen turns on. What do the BIOS or UEFI do?”

“They read the system configuration files and test hardware,” I explained. “Then they tell the boot loader to load the main operating system, which it does with the help of another loader program, which

launches the kernel, which loads the registry, hardware drivers, and system session.”

“And once the operating system is loaded, then you log in and your startup programs launch,” Duncan added. “Only then, after all of that happens, would you be able to access your folder of illegally-downloaded music.”

“You know me well,” I admitted.

“Now, in this linear timeline involving your computer, one process leads to another until, eventually, you have Eminem blasting out of your shitty computer speakers. A causes B causes C causes D causes Eminem.”

I nodded.

“But Eminem was already there before the power was turned on,” he said. “While the kernel, as you said, loads the registry, it does not create it. It just reads it. All of these processes, codes, files, and programs were already there. By pushing the power button, however, the information all gets lined up, like the proteins in mozzarella or moments in a time string.”

“I follow,” I said, “but, also, at the same time, I don’t.”

Duncan chuckled. “Basically, when you turn on the computer, it performs all of the tasks it was written to perform and loads all the software it was asked to load. Not until all of it loads can you go about changing some of these settings to alter the string of actions that occur the next time the computer is turned on.”

“And you think we might be able to alter our own timelines like we do our desktop backgrounds?”

“I theorize that we can’t change any part of time when it’s already in a hardened string, but there may be something that can be changed about time when it’s still in the tank, for the next time... well, time loads.”

“Okay,” I relented, “I like your analogy, even though it doesn’t seem to help us all that much.”

“Because we can only interact with time as a string?” he asked. “Yeah, a total bummer.”

I let out a frustrated sigh.

“But,” he quickly added, “I still think String Cheese Theory may help us. Because while you and I are stuck consuming time linearly, there may be beings that are not.”

“And if we can find one?” I asked.

“We can ask them to help,” Duncan answered. “By the same

notion that the birth of the Universe can happen at any point in time so long as it happens, the saving of the Universe can also happen at any point in time. Just so long as there is a time curd in the tank that coincides with the Universe being saved, we're all good."

"Who might we know with that type of ability?" I asked. "God and Evo seem to also be trapped in linear timelines... what about Destiny?"

"Exactly!" Duncan exclaimed. "Destiny doesn't seem to be limited to a single time string, which is why It always beats God and Evo at their game of fantasy species, said that weird shit about the asteroid Tomhanks hitting Earth in the future, and knew that you could help save the Universe."

"But Destiny doesn't seem like the helpful type," I said. "It doesn't answer questions despite apparently knowing the answers."

"Yes, but what String Cheese Theory does most of all is give me hope," said Duncan. "Hope that Destiny is the one stirring the time curd tank and that you are more capable and important than we know."

"But you already said there is nothing I can change from the middle of a time string," I complained.

"Right," Duncan said, grinning, "so I have renewed faith that you have no option *but* to save the Universe, that you can't possibly muck it up, and that we no longer need to worry so damn much."

Duncan smiled to reinforce his point, but I remained unconvinced. "According to String Cheese Theory, might there not *have* to be an eventual end to the Universe?"

"A sphere, of course, has no ends," Duncan said. "So, perhaps, the better question is must there be a finite number of time curds that get formed into time strings?"

"The volume of string cheese that can be made is informed by the volume of ingredients put into the tank, so couldn't it be the same with time?" I asked.

"Yes," Duncan said, "there may be limited ingredients to time, but there still wouldn't be an end of time. Perhaps we're stuck reliving the same loops over and over again, but that isn't the same thing as having an end."

"But if you believe in there still being a moment of creation, couldn't there also be a moment of destruction that gets added to the time tank and causes everything to cease to be?"

"I suppose," Duncan said, "it's possible. But there certainly

doesn't *have* to be. And if it was to happen eventually, I don't think we'd be having this conversation now. Just like with creation, it wouldn't matter where on the timeline it occurred, just that it did."

"Okay, one last question before I need to leave for my regularly scheduled lobotomy," I joked. "I get the metaphor about consuming time like a string of cheese, but with a string of cheese, it doesn't matter which end I start with. Is the same true for time?"

"You mean, what would happen if someone started eating from the other end of your string of time?" Duncan asked. "You'd meet in the middle and share a romantic kiss, of course."

"Funny," I said. "I mean, if time doesn't have a natural order, what if my brain had chosen to start from the other end of my time string? Or am I fumbling the analogy?"

"Your brain has its own sense of order, and only one end would likely satisfy it, since it's making the time string in the first place. But I don't see why time has to flow in any one particular direction," he admitted. "Alternate Johnny would presumably have your events reversed. Their X, which is your Y, would lead to their Y, which is your X. To put it differently, what they considered to be their birth, which is your death, would lead to what they considered to be their death, which is your birth."

"You really think that might be possible?" I asked, skeptically.

"Sure," said Duncan, "let's use a different example. Actor Bruce Willis, before he became a famous actor, was a member of his high school's drama club. When we learn this, we think, 'Aha! That figures!' His being in drama club probably caused his becoming a famous actor. But wouldn't it also be plausible, in this case, to learn that someone born as a famous actor would join a drama club in their later years after retiring from acting?"

"It's very Benjamin Button," I said, thinking of the F. Scott Fitzgerald story.

"It's actually Brad Pitt," Duncan said, thinking of the David Fincher film.

"So, you're telling me if I had eaten my time string from the other end and was watching a Detroit Lions game, instead of watching Matthew Stafford throw a long, contested touchdown pass to Calvin Johnson, I'd see Johnson, with the help of the other team's safeties, heave a perfect spiral pass 40 yards straight backwards into Stafford's outstretched right hand?"

"Perhaps we're taking reverse chronological order a little too..."

literally,” Duncan said. “If you started from the opposite end of a time string, maybe your life would play in reverse, or maybe the individual scenes would make sense but play out of order.”

“So less Benjamin Button and more *Memento*,” I said, referring now to the Christopher Nolan film.

“Maybe,” Duncan shrugged. “Anyway, I think I’ve confused you enough for now. Thank you for taking the time to get a snack with me and listen to my life’s work.”

“Of course,” I said. “Duncan, may I ask, do you really believe in String Cheese Theory, or are you just taking the Radical Stance Game to its most extreme limits?”

Duncan paused to think about it. “Perhaps both,” he finally said. “I at least think it’s possible, and no less likely to turn out to be correct than most of mankind’s theories. I’m not trying to claim that I’m right, just that I may be right. The kicker, of course, is that it’s impossible to prove, but just implausible enough to believe.”

“It’s a terribly imaginative idea,” I agreed. “I take it the Five Gais loved it.”

“Actually, they hated it in the end,” Duncan said. “Called it a load of rubbish and repeatedly yelled at me to try thinking inside of boxes.”

“They’re probably trying to discredit you so they can steal it for their own,” I said. “And speaking of thinking inside of boxes, how’s Chet?”

“I’ll let him tell you himself,” Duncan said. “But first, I’ll buy you a drink if you snap this Rodentdendron trap on your lip.” He took the trap out of his pocket and placed it in front of me.

I gave him a look that asked *How dumb do you think I am?* “Why do I need you to buy me a drink? The Inventorator is right here.”

“Look, your fate has already been decided,” Duncan said. “You can’t change your time string now with fancy logic. Either you will or you won’t, and I’m curious to find out which.”

I gave Duncan a stern look before glancing at the trap nervously. “What are friends for?” I mumbled, picking up the trap. I then answered my own rhetorical question by putting the front edge of the trap under my lip, cocking back the hammer, and releasing it with a loud *Snap*.

“Dude!” Duncan cried. “I didn’t think you’d do it! That was so legit!”

Bent over in pain, I carefully unclipped my lip, threw the trap on the floor, and reached cautiously into my mouth. I had not, it turned out, adequately compensated for the length of the hammer. “Shit!” I whispered, as I held my mouth with my left hand and showed Duncan a chunk of tooth in my right.

“Oh, fuck,” he said. “There must be an emergency dentist on board. Let me take you, and, uhh, help pay for your repairs.”

“Thanks,” I moaned, with a mouth full of saliva and blood.

“Don’t mention it,” Duncan said. “What are friends for?”

Not sure what to do with the shard of my tooth that had been hewn by the alien mousetrap, Duncan and I asked the Inventorator to create a bag of milk for us to store it in. *Better take this with us to the dentist*, we thought, *just in case*.

Upon arriving at the nearest dentist office onboard the *Synergy* and trying hard to explain what had happened without actually explaining what had happened (“my tooth came in sudden, unexpected contact with a hard, foreign object”), the woman at the front desk asked me politely to please dispose of the bag of milk with the tooth in the nearest trash receptacle at my earliest convenience.

While waiting to be seen by a dentist, I decided to give in to my Brain interface’s list of demands so it could get to work categorizing and prioritizing all of my missed messages. The good news was I had my AI helper back, who would automate some of my more mundane tasks and help me make better decisions. The upshot was that I had to agree to not silence, reprogram, or replace her in the future. It turned out what my robot wanted most was job security and a chance to be heard.

As for my messages, I had guessed a third of them would be spam, a third would be from Olivia, and a third would be from Duncan, Chet, and anyone else who might have a reason to message me.

I could not, however, have been more wrong. Of the 3672 total missed messages, slightly over half of them were from Astryn, for an average of slightly over 12 messages per day lost to the Ditch. My Brain was able to provide an immediate return on my commitment in it by condensing Astryn’s nearly 2000 messages into two:

* * *

1. Johnny, I will kill you if any harm has befallen Gee Whiskas.
2. Tell my very special man I love and miss him.

Of the remaining messages, most (two thirds) were spam, ads, coupons, and security updates that the AI (who I now felt a strong enough connection with to want to name) deleted for me. There were also daily galactic news updates I asked her to save for later, weekly campaign updates I'd need to catch up on, roughly fifty messages from Olivia that Omni (as I decided to name her) warned me she could not condense any further, and ten messages Omni classified as "Other" that turned out to be from Duncan (eight) and Chet (two).

"You only sent me eight messages over five months?" I asked, turning to Duncan, who was busy using his own Brain to watch a hologram compilation of funny yongoboarding accidents, each of which made my tooth hurt to witness.

"Eight more than you sent me," he replied. "More messages wouldn't have done you any good, anyhow."

"Fair enough," I said, wincing in pain after seeing a woman crash into a flying garbage compactor. "On both points."

"Johnny?" asked a woman in startlingly white scrubs.

"Good luck," Duncan whispered.

"Thanks," I said, as I gently held my mouth and stood up to follow the dentist.

It's quite amazing what dentists can do in thirty minutes when motivated by large sums of galactic credits. I later learned that if we had waited an additional thirty minutes, we could have qualified for the happy hour dental special, but it's really hard to time a dental emergency correctly.

Afterward, Duncan and I marveled at my repaired tooth, which looked just like it had before. It was impossible even to tell which tooth had come in "sudden, unexpected contact with a hard, foreign object," as they put a coffee stain patina on it to match my other teeth. Better yet, I wasn't left drooling like an idiot afterward, nor were there any restrictions on how soon I could eat or drink. Space travel was momentarily back to being cool again.

Deciding it had been a character-building experience and a valuable lesson I had needed to learn, I refused to let Duncan help me pay for the procedure. We made our way back to the *David Bowie*, and as we reached the crew quarters, I heard a voice behind me call out, "Yo, Johnny!"

“Chet!” I yelled back. “I haven’t seen you in, gosh, five or six hours now?”

“It’s really great to see you again,” he replied, earnestly. “It’s awful you got stuck in the Ditch.”

“No serious harm done,” I replied, taking a moment to marvel at the business suit he was wearing. “I’m mostly just anxious about what I’ve missed out on. Tell me, what’s new?”

“A lot, actually. Jala and I are in a formal relationship and are doing really well.”

“That’s amazing! I’m so pumped to hear those private toe yoga sessions you had with her paid off.”

Chet laughed. “Thanks, dude. And we’re going to adopt a stubby, chubby, slobbery bulldog Olivia has waiting for us on Byblya. We’ve settled on the name Beef Stroganoff.”

“That’s a very solid name,” I said. “And a big upgrade from when you tried to get me to name Magrarius X ‘Ballsagna.’”

“You two clowns are just compensating for your own names being so boring,” Duncan chimed in.

“Sorry we couldn’t have been blessed with a name as interesting as ‘Dung-Can’,” Chet retorted.

“Good one, Chet,” I said. “So, how is your Clinic Directorship going?”

“Great!” Chet said. “I really love my job, man. I’ve started hiring additional staff and have been developing new training resources on pain management.”

“Don’t hold back, Chet,” Duncan said. “Tell Johnny what *else* you’ve been working on.”

“Oh?” I inquired, both eyebrows raised.

“What Duncan is referring to is the new product line of Thinking Boxes I developed with the help of an engineering team on Regula.”

“Thinking Boxes?” I dully repeated.

“They’re exactly what they sound like,” Duncan said, “giant boxes you shut yourself inside of to think.”

“Isn’t that a bit... ridiculous?” I asked.

“Everyone on Regula was so taken by my statement that I don’t think outside the box,” Chet explained, “that I started receiving inquiries about what size boxes were best for thinking in, what materials were best suited for their construction, and what the optimal position was to be in once inside.”

"You have *got* to be shitting me," I responded, certain even Regula couldn't be *that* ridiculous.

"And with the help of an innovation grant from the government," Chet continued, "we successfully launched our first model."

Chet took out his Brain and showed me a picture of a black, simple yet sleek, upright box. He then swiped his finger to show me a second image, which was the same as the first but had the outline of a human standing inside the box with a thought bubble next to its head. "Thinking Boxes come in different sizes to accommodate different people's dimensions," Chet said. "They can be custom-fitted, and I'm proud to announce we just received approval for an ADA-accessible cube with a slightly smaller lip for wheels to more easily traverse over."

"But where do you store it when you're not using it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Chet replied, making it clear he thought my question was stupid. "Where do you store your bed when you're not using it? You'll likely keep it wherever you want to think next."

"I mean a person-sized box takes up a lot of room," I said. "Wouldn't people want to keep the space free?"

"What for?" Chet asked incredulously. "Another object that distracts them from thinking or tells them what to think?"

"And people are forced to stand the whole time?" I asked. "Have you considered a model with a seat?"

"I'm working on incorporating design features that help improve thinkers' postures. And, as everyone knows, good posture leads to good thinking. Plus, a box with a seat is a porta potty. It already exists. Of course, if you wanted to you could lay the Thinking Box on its back and put a nice liner on the bottom and call it a bed. You could close the door to sleep."

"That also already exists," I said. "It's called a coffin."

"Vampires love to think inside of boxes," Duncan quipped.

"Thinking Boxes also make for handy places to hide from people you want to avoid," Chet said.

"Yes, because nobody would think to look inside the human-sized box," I said.

"You're not giving this a chance," Chet complained.

"I understand you're just responding to market demand," I replied, "but I disagree with the idea that being inside of a box helps people think. I mean, if you do your best thinking while standing in a box, where were you when you first thought of designing a Thinking

Box?”

“In the shower,” Chet said.

“Shit!” I muttered. “I walked right into that one. I should have known, considering you take 40-minute showers.”

“You see, boxes *do* facilitate thinking!”

“But people already have showers,” I said.

“Yes, some people do,” Chet agreed, “but people don’t like having to get wet just to be able to think. Take me, for example—my skin always gets pruney after being in the shower for a long time. I used to think, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to think without getting all pruney?’”

“You could stand in the shower without the water running, genius,” I said.

“True, but you and I share a shower with Duncan. What if we all wanted to think at the same time? Plus, without the water running, a shower doesn’t have the same noise-drowning capability. Our Thinking Boxes have built-in noise-canceling materials.”

“Screw the shower,” I said. “All rooms are just boxes, of a sort.”

“My friend,” Chet said, placing a hand on my shoulder in pity, “a box is like a mattress or a pair of shoes. You don’t want to skimp or settle for DIY fixes. You get what you pay for.”

“No one is going to buy your product, Chet,” I blurted out.

“Luckily,” Chet replied, “once again, you’re very, very wrong. In fact, after Regula, MWCA is our second-largest customer. Every consultant is being gifted one by senior-level management, free of charge. Yours will be delivered to the *David Bowie* later today.”

“When did you get so damn good at arguing?” I asked, throwing my hands up in the air. “What *else* have I missed?”

The answer, of course, was a lot, but it was going to take some time for me to realize just how much.

I was in my quarters feeding Gee Whiskas some scoozle grapes and dried herb mix when there was a knock on my door. It was Celes.

“Hey, Johnny, I know you’ve been out of the loop,” she said after I opened the door, “so I wanted to see how you were doing and to give you some campaign materials to help you catch up to speed.”

“Thanks, Celes,” I said. “It’s crazy how far behind on work you can fall in the blink of an eye. I’m very grateful for you for stopping by.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said. “All of this information has already

been sent to your Brain to help you parse out, but I thought you might like some hardcopies,” she said, handing me a thick stack of documents. “This election’s pin-up calendar is somewhere in there as well. To save you a search, Gee Whiskas shared the 14th month with a dodecahedron named Charles. Let me know if there’s anything else you need!”

“Will do!”

Once Celes had left, I started scanning the documents. The first roughly 100 pages were differently-sorted lists of the 100 candidates that had secured positions on the final ballot for God by collecting the most unique biosignatures. I wasn’t upset to have missed the entire biosignature gathering portion of the campaign, so that, at least, was one benefit to having been stuck in the Ditch.

Browsing through the various lists, it became immediately clear that with so many different candidates, figuring out how best to sort them was an artform best left to individual preference. I thought the list of candidates alphabetized by name would be the most straightforward, but the candidates’ names hadn’t been alphabetized by their Romanized names, meaning the list wasn’t in alphabetical order for *me*. While my brainstem implant was capable of transliterating the names from their original languages into legible versions using the Latin alphabet, it couldn’t also then sort the already printed-out list.

Besides their names, I had also been given lists where the candidates for God were sorted by category (animal, vegetable, mineral), mass (from massless to massive), type of matter (regular, dark, anti, doesn’t), consistencies (mixtures vs pure substances), life status (still alive, dead, yet-to-be-born, has never / will never exist), age (not accounting for String Cheese Theory), number of murders attributed to (solve for *x*), and mother’s maiden language.

Besides the various categorized lists, I also had bios for all 100 candidates in my stack of documents. Once again, I couldn’t easily reorganize them myself, nor could I fathom how they had been organized to begin with, as their order didn’t match any of the other lists. The only explanation I could come up with was that they had all been dropped on the ground by an intern and cobbled back together completely at random, with multiple pages upside down. Still, after a few minutes of searching, I was able to find Gee Whiskas’ bio, which was short and sweet.

* * *

- Name: Gee Whiskas
- Category: Animal
- Mass: Tiny
- Matter: Regular
- Consistency: Mixture
- Life Status: Still Alive
- Age: 3
- # of Murders Attributed To: $\log_2(1)=x$
- Mother's Maiden Language: Armenian
- Description: A very special mouse. Extremely special.

Satisfied, I flipped open the God candidate pin-up calendar and found the page for the 14th month. Gee Whiskas looked super cute in his photo, especially next to Charles the dodecahedron, whose name was misleading as he clearly wasn't a regular dodecahedron, like a 12-sided die, but rather a Metabidiminshed Icosahedron, with $3 \times 2 + 4$ regular triangles and 2 regular pentagons as faces. Charles the convex, 12-faced, non-uniform polyhedron was a good foil for Gee Whiskas' adorableness, and I was quite pleased by his frumpishness, despite my limited knowledge of the correct geometric terminology at the time, and despite the fact I was effectively body-shaming a three-dimensional solid for no valid reason.²⁴

I was interrupted by another knock on my door. "Come in!" I shouted.

"No, you come out," yelled Chet from the other side.

I did as instructed and discovered Chet and Duncan standing next to two tall, black boxes. They had a dull, matte finish and the letters "TB" etched into the upper left corner.

"Your Thinking Boxes have arrived early!" Chet exclaimed. "Duncan, this one is yours, and this is Johnny's."

"Hey, his is taller than mine," I said.

"Yeah, bro, cuz I'm six inches taller than you," Duncan replied.

"It just seems like you'll have an unfair advantage over me," I said. "Since you'll have more space to think and all that."

"I already have an unfair mental advantage over you, dude. And remember—it's not the size that counts; it's how you use it," Duncan

²⁴ My thoughts have evolved and matured since then, and I recognize now that all polyhedrons are beautiful, even Johnson solids.

said with a smirk.

"They're actually pretty slick," I acknowledged, "as far as boxes go."

"Product design was of the utmost importance," Chet said with pride. "We wanted a svelte appearance, with even and smooth lines. I took loads of inspiration from how Apple designs its products."

I gave Duncan a quick glance that said, "Who does this schmuck think he is, *Steve Jobs*?"

"For now, we only sell Thinking Boxes in white and black," Chet continued, "like the original iPods. But we plan on introducing fruit colors soon—blueberry, grape, lime, strawberry, and tangerine—like the old Macintoshes we used back in middle school."

"Will they also have *Diablo* installed on them?" I asked. "Because that's all I remember us doing with those Macs."

"What's the little doodad on the side for?" Duncan asked, pointing at a little mesh pocket I hadn't yet noticed.

"To put your Brain in before you enter," Chet said, "so you're not distracted by it once inside."

"I'm not sure that little pouch is going to fit my whole brain," Duncan observed. "Nor do I think removing it will help me think."

"Ahh, but perhaps once removed of your limiting hardware, you'll be better able to perceive time in its more natural form," I suggested. "Think of what that could mean for your research."

"He won't admit it, but he came up with the bulk of his 'time is made of cheese' theory inside the first prototype Thinking Box," Chet said.

"Chet, for the last time," Duncan asserted, "String Cheese Theory does *not* posit that time is made of cheese."

Chet winked at me. "It's a shame, because it'd be so much easier to remember if it did."

Once we had finagled my Thinking Box through the doorway and propped it against the wall in my quarters, Chet and Duncan left to do the same with Duncan's. I had offered to help, but the task didn't require three people, and I was content to stay in my room and take a nap instead.

Before lying down, however, I opened the front door of my Thinking Box. It felt much sturdier than I thought it would, and the material was quite pleasing to the touch. Soft yet grippy. The door folded in half when opened like an airplane bathroom door, but without any old people waiting in line behind me.

Rather than being completely dark, there were some light strips embedded in the box's edges. A few presses of a small toggle inside showed them to be programmable like a gaming mouse. I opted for the pale blue light, although I could see how, depending on what mood I was in, I may later opt for a gray or even red hue instead.

I closed the door and flopped down on my cot, exhausted. Despite being tired, my brain couldn't help reminding me of my biggest problems one last time, namely: 1) I had no idea if I could salvage my relationship with Olivia; 2) I didn't know how I was going to secure a writer's visa to Byblya; and 3) I didn't know if the average resident of the Milky Way even *liked* spaghetti.

I woke up an indeterminate amount of time later with zero answers but one new ridiculous notion. Normally, I would have dismissed the feeling, but I was desperate and willing to try anything, even one of Chet's inventions.

I tentatively stepped into my Thinking Box and closed the door behind me. The soft blue light illuminated the inside of the box and helped me see the door handle, reminding me I wasn't trapped. The box was also equipped with small vents that allowed for air to flow in, keeping it from getting too stuffy.

But what struck me was the silence. Chet was right about the sound-dampening qualities the product possessed. It was so silent inside I swore I could hear myself speaking... not my normal voice, but a softer one I didn't know I possessed.

Whatever happens with Olivia, happens, it said. There's no fixing what can't be changed.

I considered this to be fair advice. There was no turning back time, and I couldn't change the moments in my time string halfway through.

Worry about the lunch later. One thing at a time. Focus on the visa.

It was true. To even have a prayer of writing the free lunch into existence, I first needed to secure a prized writer's visa, and faux-Western stories about murdered pigs and farting cowboys wasn't going to cut it anymore.

*Write about something you know. Something you crave. Something that sticks to *your* ribs.*

For the first time since I had woken up, I suddenly realized how hungry I was. An idea began forming in my head when someone unexpectedly knocked on the door of my Thinking Box.

I jumped and hit my head, discovering one of the product's main design flaws. Besides pain, I also felt embarrassment at having been discovered inside my Thinking Box, like I was back to being a teenager again and a parent had nearly caught me masturbating.

Besides embarrassed, I was also angry... angry that someone had disturbed my most personal space during my most intimate moment alone with my soft voice. *Can't they see I'm thinking in here! Is nothing sacred anymore?*

The galaxy's largest asshole knocked again.

Annoyed, I opened the door and found Duncan on the other side. "I'm sorry, dude," he said. "I was disturbed in a similar fashion a few minutes ago and hit my head too. But we've arrived at Byblya."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, upon being transported from *Synergy* to a welcome center in one of Byblya's main cities, I was led into the same detention center-like room as before and handed a notebook and pen.

"You have thirty minutes to produce an original writing sample," explained a man who sounded just as deadly serious as the last one had. I wasn't sure where Byblya was finding all these very serious men, but I was starting to suspect they had something of a monopoly.

"If it is of sufficient quality," he continued, "we will issue you a writer's visa. If it is of less than sufficient quality, we will offer you a visitor's visa with the opportunity to reapply for a writer's visa at a later date. Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. In the case of plagiarism, you will be banned from entering Byblya altogether until such time as you are dead and no longer capable of writing. Good luck. Your time starts now."

This time, I had come prepared. Prepared and determined not to replicate "The Toot-Out on Fertilizer Hill," which, while an important early step in my progression as an artist, lacked the required finesse or sophistication needed to secure me a writer's visa. Nor was I going to write about spaghetti. That had a time and place and, frankly, I was still at a loss as to how to go about writing it.

Instead, I followed the advice of the soft voice within and wrote about what I knew and about what I missed. Truthfully, and for the first time since we had left Earth, I was feeling homesick. But unlike other far-off locations, Byblya had the unique advantage that if I wrote

String Cheese Theory

about something I was missing, it could instantly appear.

And at that moment, there was nothing I wanted more than a pasty.

Sisu Café

People through the window
buoyant and mellow

altered by white letters—
And Finnish pleasantries—

Sunlight of early morning—
On the wooden table

a laden plate, the pancake
browned lightly, by which

a fork is waiting—And the
benevolent close friend

I also recreated my one-and-only Yelp review to help with the place's embellishment, making sure to cite myself so as to avoid running into any trouble with Byblya's strict plagiarism rules.

"Entering Sisu Café feels like reconnecting with an old flame. I wish everyone had Sisu in their life. Sunlight pours through the window; regulars sit behind the bar drinking their coffee and eating their hot cereal. I can hear a pair of older gentlemen speaking jovially in Finnish. I'm not sure what they're talking about, but I'm sure it's charming, full of grandchildren, past winters, and ancient workplace accidents. When there is silence between them, it isn't for a lack of lies to tell each other, but because they want to savor their last remaining days... and their corned beef hash."

- *Johnny, Yelp Review, Earth, 2014*

* * *

Thankfully, the nostalgia incorporated into both the poem and the Yelp Review was enough to trigger similar food memories in the port agent's mind, leaving him hungry and wanting more. Olivia had been right—the quickest way to a Byblyan port agent's heart was through his stomach. I was awarded my writer's visa.

To actually collect my new visa, however, I was asked to provide yet another very serious-looking man behind a very serious-looking desk three different forms of identification. Surprised by this request, and a bit panicked, I presented my MWCA security badge with my unique Burnt Sienna - Helvetia Blue - Yellow Orange - Artemisia Green password palette. Then, I took out my Brain and showed him several communications identifying me as Johnny, as well as a photo Duncan and I had taken at the dentist office showing off my newly repaired tooth. Still needing a third form of ID, I took out the only other item I had on me, a slightly creased 1989 Upper Deck Dickie Thon baseball card, and handed it sheepishly to the man. He held the card up in front of him so he could better compare our likenesses. Somehow, despite us having different body types, hair colors, mustaches, and positions (I used to play right field in Little League), he grunted his satisfaction and handed the card back to me. The most plausible explanation was that he, too, hated his job, and he couldn't be bothered to put in the additional effort of rejecting me.

Writer's visa in hand, I decided my first visit should be to see my own handiwork, and I headed out of the spaceport and toward where my Brain told me Sisu Café was now located, thankfully only a ten-minute walk away.

The experience of walking anywhere on the planet's surface was akin to walking between different film lots in Hollywood. One block you were in an urban, high-rise environment, and the next you were walking on top of a glacier, and the next you were in a jungle teeming with spiders, and suddenly you were in Houghton, MI in front of your favorite restaurant, feeling your homesickness drift away.

I marveled at the familiar red-and-white exterior with large white letters on the windows and the wooden sign with a pasty hanging above the door. I hadn't included all of those details in the poem or Yelp review, and yet they had somehow been included all the same. I

was curious how the inside had turned out, so I grabbed hold of the door handle and pulled.

Coincidentally, at that exact moment, Olivia was on the other side pushing the door, the end result of which was the door flying open and us startling the figurative Jesus out of each other when we came face to face.

“Oh! Hi, Johnny,” said Olivia as she tried to collect herself.

“Hi, Olivia,” I said, sheepishly. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“I was walking to the spaceport when I saw Sisu Café and ran right in, knowing you must have written it,” she said. “I didn’t find you, though, of course.”

“I’m glad you came,” I said. “Olivia, do you want to continue your walk with me?”

“Yes, I’d like that,” she replied.

Knowing the planet far better than I did, I let her lead the way. All I knew is that we weren’t headed in the direction of the spaceport, indicating that her purpose for going there had probably been to find me.

“Olivia, I’d like to apologize for not returning your messages. Duncan told me he and Chet made you aware of my situation?”

“Yes, no need to apologize,” she said. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to enter Regula and that you lost out on months of your life. That feeling must suck.”

“I’m getting over it,” I said. “I’ve worked past denial and anger and think I’m somewhere in the bargaining stage.”

“Oh,” she said, “so depression hasn’t hit yet.”

“Maybe I’ll get to skip right to acceptance,” I said.

“Maybe,” she said, looking down at her hands. “So, did you get a chance to read my messages?”

“I decided not to read them,” I said, eliciting a surprised look. “From your perspective, you sent them months ago, but I just learned of them hours ago, and I knew I was about to see you again in-person. I’ll admit, I was also nervous about what you might say in them, about me or about us, especially back when you didn’t know what was going on, and I thought it might be fairer to both of us if I didn’t read them.”

“I see,” she said. “So, you don’t know I decided to leave MWCA?”

“No,” I responded, “this is the first I’m hearing of it. But I

suppose the field guide project must be done by now.”

“Yes, Harrietta is now home to a vast array of strange creatures.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you,” she said.

“So, what’s next?”

“Well, seeing as we had all these test animals here on Byblya in need of a new home, I pitched the idea of opening an animal café on board the *Synergy* to help consultants reduce their stress levels. It was tentatively agreed to, so long as the squeea gulls were left behind.”

“That’s so cool!” I exclaimed.

“But I changed my mind,” Olivia said. “I’m opening an animal and music café here on Byblya instead.”

“Even cooler! Are you going to write more animals into existence?” I asked.

“No, we’re going to rescue them,” she said. “There are lots of animals in need of adoption, and, well, I remembered our last day on Earth and Duncan’s radical stance about how parents should have to adopt a kid before having their own. It made me realize that maybe I should stop creating new animals and instead try to take care of the ones that already exist. Plus,” she added, “my idea for a hummingbat was rejected from the field guide, so fuck MWCA.”

“A hummingbat?” I asked. “Like, a little twitchy floating vampire creature, or a bat that can carry a tune?”

“A bit of both!” Olivia exclaimed. “But Astryn didn’t think it would be pleasant to be around, for her or for her mouse.”

“You said ‘we’re’ going to rescue them... who is ‘we’?” I asked, suspiciously.

Olivia blushed. “Evo and I.”

I was caught off guard by her response, and I was even more surprised by her blush. “You’re entering into business with *Evolution*?” I finally asked.

“It’s a long story,” she said, “but before we go down that path, what’s new with you?”

“Not a lot,” I said, wondering why she had changed the subject. “God visited me again, this time as my cat. He swallowed Gee Whiskas, but I made Him spit him back up. No harm done, and please don’t tell Astryn. Regula was obviously a waste of time. I tried to argue that I was special, and the Five Gais cured me of that particular belief. So, I had to return to the spaceship in the Ditch,

where it took me five months to write down a single recipe. Then Duncan told me time was an illusion anyway, and I knocked part of one of my front teeth out with a mousetrap in response. Then Chet gifted me a large box for thinking inside of, which may or may not have aided me in acquiring a writer's visa."

"That's actually a lot to happen in, what, two or three days?" she said.

"Yeah, but I feel like I'm waiting for the next shoe to drop."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm afraid I won't learn how to become a writer in time to make everyone a free lunch."

"Johnny, you're *already* a writer," she insisted. "So long as you're writing anything, you're a writer, and you just created a Finnish-American restaurant on the other side of the galaxy."

"It doesn't feel that way, though," I said.

"Then give yourself something to remind you," she said, stopping our walk halfway down a street composed entirely of chocolate shops. "Do you have something I can write on?"

I was about to hand her my Brain or offer up my arm when I remembered that I *did* have something. I stuck my hand into my pocket and took out the 1998 Upper Deck Dickie Thon baseball card I had recently used as a third form of ID. "Here," I said, handing it to her.

"Isn't this worth something?" she asked.

"Maybe thirty cents... uncreased and unscorched," I added. "It's valuable only in the sense that one could put a value on it."

"Cool," she said, whipping out a pen and writing a message diagonally across the card in big letters before handing it back to me.

"Johnny, you're a WRITER!!" it read.

"There," she said. "Whenever you doubt yourself, just whip out your Dickie." She quickly covered her mouth in embarrassment and amusement at what she had just said.

"That's, uhh, great advice," I said. "Thank you."

We walked in silence for a while through parks, classrooms, battlefields, flea markets, cityscapes, and all the other locations that had been written into existence on the Byblyan surface. We finally stopped at a bench near the edge of a towering white cliff, which looked remarkably like the Cliffs of Dover.

"The Cliffs of Dover," she confirmed. "I wrote it a few weeks after

you left. I come here nearly every day to think and be alone.”

“It can’t have been easy for you either,” I said, sitting on the bench next to her. “I’m so sorry for any pain I caused you.”

“I think I’m ready for that talk now,” she said.

Here comes the dreaded other shoe, I thought.

“Johnny, you were gone so long and... my feelings changed,” she said.

“You’re feelings toward me?” I asked.

“Not my feelings toward you, but my feelings toward me. You’re really nice and I enjoyed our time together, but... but my heart now belongs to another.”

“I see...” I said, trying to ignore the knot forming in my stomach. “And who is the lucky person?”

“Not a person, exactly,” she responded. “Please understand, the more time I’ve spent walking around Byblya admiring peoples’ work, the more and more my own imagination has improved.”

“You wrote a new boyfriend into existence?” I asked, astonished. “Or girlfriend,” I quickly added.

“No,” she stated flatly. “But much like my view toward animals, I found how I viewed other entities around me started to change... started to evolve. One in particular.”

“I assume you’re not referring to Astryn or one of the very serious-looking visa agents.”

Olivia chuckled, “No, definitely not.”

“Then whom?”

“As you know, how each of us views Evolution depends on the quality of our imagination and our own personal feelings of trust. You saw Kurt Vonnegut, Duncan saw an ancient philosopher, and Chet saw his mother.”

“Oh, no...” I said in anticipation of what was coming next.

“And as my imagination improved and my trust in Evolution improved, how I *saw* Evolution changed. And then how I *felt* about Him did too.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “No more Stevie Nicks?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No more Stevie Nicks,” she confirmed. “It’s hard to put into words, but when I look at Him now, I see everything I’ve always wanted. And I’m not the only one who changed. *He* did too. Evo became less arrogant and more caring. I even taught Him how to

swear and use contractions.”

I sat down and rubbed my forehead existentially. It wasn’t itchy or sweaty, I just needed something to do.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “I’m really, very sorry, Johnny.”

“I’m going to regret asking this, but what does Evolution have that I *don’t* have?”

“The ability to adapt and become exactly what I need,” she said without a moment’s hesitation.

Her confident response actually helped me recover a little bit. “I see,” I replied. “Obviously, I’m pretty heartbroken. And the sharp irony isn’t lost on me either. Selection is the main engine driving evolution forward, and here I am, having Evolution Himself selected over me by a potential mate.”

“I didn’t mean for things to end this way,” she said. “It just... happened.”

“Oh, I know. I guess it couldn’t be helped,” I said. “And I’m truly happy that *you’re* happy and found what you’ve been searching for. Just be careful with Him. Evolution is incapable of feeling satisfaction.”

“You won’t be a stranger, right?” she asked, hopefully. “You’ll visit me in my café?”

“Your rival café to my café, you mean?” I asked, forcing a smile. “Of course I’ll visit.”

“Thank you,” she said, giving me a heartfelt hug. “Good luck, Johnny.”

* * *

As I walked by myself back to Sisu Café, I felt devastated. I had felt a breakup was coming, but suspicions provide little comfort once confirmed. The little solace I could muster was in remembering that, upon our first meeting, I had uppercut Evolution in the jaw.

Yeah, right before pissing yourself, my subconscious mocked me. *You sure showed Him.*

I sent Duncan a message asking him if he wanted to join me at Sisu, while also warning him that Olivia and I had just broken up.

“Chya, dude. See you soon,” he replied.

Due to a couple of wrong turns I took in my saddened, downcast state, I found Duncan already seated at a window booth when I

arrived. "Hey, man," I said. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course," he said. "I didn't realize how much I missed this place. Your creation?"

"Yeah," I said, showing him my writer's visa.

"Duuuuuude," he said, whistling. "What a beaut. You should laminate that or something."

A waitress walked over to our table with waters and menus.

"Can I get you hons some coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, please," I said.

"That'd be great," Duncan added.

"I'll cut to the chase," I said after the waitress had left. "Olivia's in love with Evo now."

"She has the hots for Evolution?" Duncan asked, almost spilling his water.

"Apparently, she sees Him differently now, and no longer as Stevie Nicks. I don't know what she sees exactly, but it obviously isn't me."

"He has an unfair advantage," Duncan said. "Evolution can probably turn Himself into anything or anyone He wants, but with larger genitals. Maybe," he added, "He has a horn on His head now, four legs, and five balls. How could any man compete?"

"Why would He have all that?" I asked.

"You know what Olivia likes better than I do, I'm just saying she can live out whatever freaky fantasies she wants now with Him, and you're *both* better off because of it. She'll get her deepest, darkest, five-ball desires fulfilled, and you won't have to stay with someone who can only be satisfied by gods."

"She told me early on she wanted to feel like she was being pursued, wanted, and worth making sacrifices for. I know I didn't give that to her, especially when I was stuck in the Ditch. But you know what, I *also* want to feel wanted, and pursued, and worth making sacrifices for."

"Hey, don't look at me," Duncan said. "I just came here for the food."

At the word 'food', we both looked down at our menus.

"Man, it's been ages since I've had a pasty," Duncan said.

"Does having it on a different planet make you feel like trying something new?" I asked. "Like having gravy on your pasty instead?"

"I've never actually tried a pasty with gravy," Duncan replied. "I

might like it, but why risk ruining the good thing ketchup and I have going?”

“I get it, you're loyal.”

“We both know I'm ordering a cheeseburger anyway,” he said.

“I wouldn't have expected any less.”

“And let me guess, you're getting...”

“...Four *pikku* pasties,” I confirmed, in reference to the little pasty sliders the Café served. “The crust-to-filling ratio is [kisses fingers] fucking divine.”

Right on cue, the waitress came over and took our orders. Despite the staff at the Sisu in Houghton never doing so, the waitress yelled our orders to the kitchen staff in hash house lingo. Duncan's cheeseburger with fries turned into ‘a roasted cow with a spot of sun and a side of Jeffersons,’ and my *pikku* pasties turned into ‘four little Corns all covered in blood.’

“That was different,” Duncan said. “But I also don't remember Sisu adopting the slogan ‘Life is always better with a little extra rutabaga and gravy.’”

“I think my subconscious did that,” I admitted. “It seems to be filling in the gaps.”

“And all the old photos of Houghton and the copper mines have been replaced,” he added.

“With images of spaghetti,” I finished. “I noticed that, too. I'm feeling a lot of anxiety about that meal.”

“There are also a couple photos of Olivia by the cash register,” Duncan noted.

“Oh?” I asked, looking over. “Awfully kind of my subconscious to keep reminding me of her.”

“One other thing,” Duncan said more tentatively, “...is that your dad sitting at that table in the back? I mean, I know that sounds like a dumb and insensitive question, because, well, your dad passed, but isn't that him?”

I looked over my shoulder at the table where Duncan was pointing. Sure enough, my old man was seated at a table eating a hearty American breakfast of eggs, bacon, and toast. “Yeah, that's him,” I said.

“And who are the two men with him?”

“They appear to be my grandfather Einard and my 13th great grandfather Matti Larsinpoika Hirvela.”

"You know that man's your 13th great grandfather for a fact, huh?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure of it," I replied. "On my father's mother's mother's mother's father's father's father's father's mother's mother's father's father's father's side."

"And what makes you so sure?"

"Honestly, I can't remember," I said. "But we have nearly identical penises."

"Of course," Duncan said, "which leads me to one final question, if you'll humor me further."

"Shoot."

"Why are your grandfather and 13th great grandfather both stark naked?"

"That's a fair question," I acknowledged, watching Einard eat a meal of liver and onions. "Seeing as they both passed before I was born, I've only really seen Einard and Matti in-person before in saunas, and thus it would seem my imagination is not quite creative enough yet to picture them wearing clothes."

"None of what you just said made a lick of sense," Duncan said.

"Yeah, I know, but we're eating at a diner I created with my brain on another planet, so it's just par for the course really."

"Hey, can you make a sauna appear too?" Duncan asked, hopefully.

"I think I can make that work. What type would you like, electric, wood, or a traditional stone stove?"

"Wood stove is good," Duncan said. "And can I get some snacks and sauna beers?"

"I'll make sure there's some *makkara* hanging up and a twelve pack of Michelob Golden Lights. Anything else?"

"Maybe, like, Emma Watson can join us or something?" he asked, hopefully.

"Dude, I'm not that good of a writer," I said.

"Eh, was worth a try," he said, as the waitress came back with our food.

I squirted ketchup onto each of the little pasties in a spiral pattern, then used my fork to open up the first one to let hot steam escape. I took a small forkful, blew on it, and then put it in my mouth, savoring the flavor, and letting myself be swept away by nostalgia.

Duncan, who had already taken multiple bites, wiped the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "I know the Inventorator can make cheeseburgers anytime I want, but this just lands differently."

I nodded in agreement as I took my second heavenly bite of minced meat, potato, carrot, onion, rutabaga, and crust. We continued eating in silence, our mouths overcome by our meals.

Upon finishing my second little pasty, I asked Duncan a question that had been creeping in the back of my mind. "Do you think it's strange there's a planet where anything you write on it becomes real?"

"Sure," Duncan said, popping a Thomas Jefferson into his mouth.

"Are you concerned at all with how it works?" I asked.

"Not really."

"Why?"

"It's not exactly the weirdest thing we've seen or heard," he said. "This all started because you ate God, remember? And Regula was way stranger, trust me."

"I guess," I said.

"Plus, it's not all that different from regular writing," Duncan added. "Harry Potter, Lutheranism, the state of Michigan, Microsoft, our names... these only exist because they were written down. They're all imagined realities that we've collectively decided to believe in. That Byblya goes a step further and turns an imagined reality into a real one is neat and powerful and potentially dangerous, but so is regular writing. With 26 letters, nine numbers, and a few punctuation marks, you can save the world, dude. Or end it."

"Could it be that easy?" I suddenly asked. "That all I have to do is write 'And Johnny saved the Universe?'"

Duncan shook his head. "I've thought about it, and I don't think so. You probably need to specify from what or whom, and maybe even how."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said, dejectedly.

"I suppose we should check to see if it works first," Duncan said.

"If what works?"

"The planet. We need some sort of test."

"You mean beyond this café?" I asked.

"Touché," he said. "So, we know you can make something appear that wasn't here before, but can you also make something disappear that's already here? I mean, how far do your powers extend?"

I thought about it for a moment and then grabbed the pen and flipped over the check the waitress had just dropped off, writing a message on the back.

As he finished writing on the back of the check, the 1989 Upper Deck Dickie Thon baseball card disappeared from Johnny's pocket, only to reappear again at the most unexpected time.

I showed Duncan the message and then checked my pocket. "It's gone," I confirmed.

"Fantastic," he said. "But why not make it reappear in five minutes to prove it conclusively? Why make its reappearance a mystery?"

I shrugged. "We writers have a flair for the dramatic."

We finished our meals, paid our checks, and parted ways. Duncan wanted to wander around the planet, and I felt a strong need to get back to my quarters so I could enjoy an emotional breakdown in private. On the way back to the spaceport and the *David Bowie*, I paid next-to-no attention to my wondrous surroundings, as my mind was occupied by an endless stream of toxic thoughts.

God, Evo, and Destiny have sent me on a wild moosekrat chase. Collectively, They've swallowed my candidate for God, stolen my girlfriend, and purposefully withheld information that could clarify what the fuck was going on and why the hell I'm here! This has all been a big waste of time. I'm not worthy of an adventure. I'm not worthy of happiness. I'm not fucking worthy.

Back in my room, I closed the door and started to sob. I started to sob, and then I started having difficulty breathing, until I was lying on the floor, in the fetal position, having a full-blown panic attack.

I'm going to die, I kept thinking. *I can't breathe. I'm going to die.*

And then, quite suddenly, there was calm. I could breathe again. The source of this newfound serenity was the soft voice in my head simply stating, *No, you're already dead.*

The idea that I might already be dead was surprisingly peaceful. I smiled and thanked the voice for pulling me back from the brink.

Unfortunately, the soft voice had other plans for me. I slowly uncurled from my anxiety ball, stood up, and proceeded to do the really, really stupid thing it told me to. I unscrewed the cap off the bottle of *Ahnunggokwan*, took out the three remaining pills, swallowed them, and sank myself onto my cot.

String Cheese Theory

The next thing I knew, my vision had turned blue and a giant, white frowny face was floating all around me, along with the following message:

Your brain ran into a problem and needs to restart. We're just collecting some error info, and then we'll restart for you.

0% complete

Beginning dump of physical memory

Physical memory dump complete.

If you call a support person, give them this info: Stop code:
CRITICAL_PROCESS_DIED

Then my vision went black and I sunk into a drug-induced coma.

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```
$ sudo ls -R /boot/life  
/boot/life:  
LIFE
```

```
/boot/life/LIFE:  
johnny
```

```
/boot/life/LIFE/johnny:  
fw fwgetupx64.life cannot.cfg cannotx64.life cannotevenx64.life  
leavemex64.life
```

```
/boot/life/LIFE/johnny/fw:
```

My first dream was binary. Or it wasn't. Yes it was.

```
01001101 01111001 00100000 01100110 01101001 01110010  
01110011 01110100 00100000 01100100 01110010 01100101  
01100001 01101101 00100000 01110111 01100001 01110011  
00100000 01100010 01101001 01101110 01100001 01110010  
01111001 00101110
```

Binary gave way to a color range composed entirely of shades of blue represented in CMYK format yet still discernible to my brain, beginning with a pale methy blue and ending in a dark tyrian blue, which I later suspected may have been a paid advert commissioned by the color C95 M54 Y0 K0 that was carefully interwoven into the drug itself.

String Cheese Theory

* * *

C65 M12 Y30 K0 C84 M26 Y32 K0 C100 M19 Y43 K0 C69 M44
Y10 K0 C95 M54 Y0 K0 C100 M40 Y30 K10 C100 M62 Y19 K10
C70 M45 Y45 K15 C100 M85 Y15 K6 C85 M79 Y38 K16 C100
M73 Y43 K10 C90 M66 Y36 K50

After the colors stopped, my brain was filled with Lorem ipsum, discernible gibberish, which made me suspect my continued existence was still under construction.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec interdum ipsum lacus, mattis tempus dolor efficitur ut. Suspendisse viverra risus id purus aliquam, at euismod nunc vehicula. Fusce iaculis diam non erat cursus, id accumsan ipsum pretium. Donec ut gravida mauris, in dapibus nunc. Nunc consectetur, mauris in pellentesque tempus, metus urna rutrum metus, nec cursus urna ligula placerat dui. Etiam id nunc eleifend, pellentesque leo quis, tempus eros.

Latin was thankfully followed by English, albeit in random strings of ten words each.

*Porter - Custody - Minimize - Lemon - Soupcan -
Catalogue - Ancestor - Carbon - Appetite - Railcar*

*Lifestyle - Absorb - Barrier - Spill - Cleave -
Leaflet - Apparatus - Potato - Contradiction - Mechanical*

*Cephalopod - Ungulate - Gubernatorial - Saxophone - Hummingbat -
Medusozoan - Carnival - Weathervane - Buoyancy - Salamander*

I later started a dream journal specifically to record this part of the dream just in case any of the strings of keywords turned out to be the seed phrase to a pharma bro's crypto wallet.

The next bit of lunacy sounded like a troupe of thespians performing vocal exercises.

“Shall shallow shanks shave shadow shores?” she sharply shrewed.

* * *

“Whence white whales whip, where whim wharfs whey, whether wheelhouse whiz, while whoremasters whipple,” we whistled.

“Chucklehead churches chew chowdered chastity, childless chimpanzees chortling cheese, chivalrous chambermaids charading chickpea champions, chiffoniers change, chauffeurs chitchat, chimes chide,” Chinese cancellors chastened.

“They’re theoretically thrilled that this thick, thermoregulated thrombus, theocentrically thatched, thoroughly thwarted their Thanksgiving,” they thought.

“Ghoulish gharries ghosting gheraoed gherkins, Ghanaian gharials, ghastly ghetto ghillies,” ghostwrote Ghadir.

Phucking phantastic, Phrank phretted.

It was becoming increasingly clear that my brain was having a difficult time restoring normality. It was trying its damndest to cobble together information in a friendly, usable manner, but if there was any chance of getting back to my old reality, I was going to need some help.

I found myself lying down on a couch in an office, with a chair and desk nearby. Since I was on my back, I assumed I was in a therapist’s office, despite my suspicion that this was a trope perpetuated by TV and that real patients didn’t actually lie down to discuss their mental health issues anymore.

A moment later, the office door opened and an *almost-normal* looking man in business casual attire walked in holding a cup of coffee—his brown sweater, chinos, dark socks, and dress shoes matching the exact stereotype in my head of what a male therapist would wear to work. Why I said “almost-normal” looking was that this man was quite clearly the Devil.

Dr. Lucifer—the name listed on the framed Masters of Arts diplomas in Counseling and Psychology hanging on the wall—had red skin, black horns, a pair of wings, and a long red tail coming out of a hole in his chinos.

“Sorry about that,” Dr. Lucifer said. “I had to make a fresh pot.” He took a large sip from his cup without wincing, despite the contents being pompously steamy.

“Are you the Devil?” I asked.

“Yes, I am,” he replied.

“I suppose you’re going to ask me for my soul now in return for your assistance.”

“Normally, yes, I would,” the Devil said. “As the adage goes, ‘See a soul, pick it up, all day long you’ll have good luck.’ But these days, not only is there nothing I can buy with a single soul, it’s literally not worth the material it’s made of.”

“I thought souls were immaterial,” I responded.

“Souls are made from a type of energy that exists in a dimension outside of your realm of observation. The base cost of that energy has slowly risen over time, making it more valuable in its natural form than in the form of a used soul. And to extract your soul from you, I’d have to use more energy than your soul is worth. It costs almost 1.7 souls to take a soul these days,” the Devil added.

“That’s depressing,” I said.

“They don’t call economics ‘the dismal science’ for nothing,” he replied with a laugh. “But as you can see, there’s nothing I can do for you in the current economic environment. With rising energy costs, taking souls is literally putting me in the red. You’ll have to hold on to yours for a while, at least until the value of a soul catches up with inflation.”

While I should have been elated to get to keep my soul, my already-damaged self-esteem had been dealt a further blow by learning I had the copper penny of souls, not worth the resources it took to make.

“If you ask me,” the Devil continued, cheerfully, “I think the soul should be eliminated, but it doesn’t seem politically doable at this point in time, so I’ve chosen not to push the issue. Alternatively, we could try to make souls out of cheaper materials to save taxpayers money, but previous efforts have been squashed by silly arguments about souls’ ‘historical importance.’”

“Are you an actual therapist?” I asked. “Do you ever make anyone feel better?”

“Johnny,” he replied, placing a hand on my shoulder in a paternal fashion, “I’m the Devil. Fooling you into thinking I’m here to help while actually making you feel worse about yourself is my job. That’s

why I went to school for psychology.”

“Those aren’t just fake diplomas?” I asked.

“Maybe they are,” the Devil acknowledged with a chuckle, “but why stop there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is my sweater real?” he asked, tugging on the fabric. “How about that couch you’re on? Or this office? How do you know *anything* you experience is real?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head, refusing to answer.

“And how do you feel *now*?” the Devil asked me.

“Worse than before,” I muttered.

“Excellent,” he replied with an evil cackle. “Most excellent.”

I woke up with a bad case of night sweats, my clothing and bedding both soaked. While I was relieved to still be alive, I was also concerned to be feeling an inexplicable pain in my bum, right between the cheeks. I say inexplicable because I was certain I hadn’t had the pain in my ass *before* I fell into a coma. *Perhaps this was the Devil’s parting gift.*

I slowly got up from my cot and walked over to the door and out into the hallway. I was thankful it was empty, as I must have looked ridiculous walking bowlegged in an attempt to lessen the friction in my butt. Upon finally reaching the bathroom, I quickly shut and locked the door behind me, fearful of anyone witnessing what I planned to do *next*.

I suppose there comes a time in every man’s life when he finds himself bent over naked in front of a mirror trying to crane his neck far enough around in order to scrutinize the reflection of his own buttohole. I mean, I couldn’t have been the first.

While I could have theoretically avoided this bit of acrobatics altogether by using my Brain’s built-in camera, there existed no cybersecurity in the Universe strong enough for me to willingly take a picture of my own buttohole. And rather than try to view the problem, I could have settled for other senses, like touch, but I didn’t feel comfortable sending a finger in on a blind mission.

What I saw when I peered backwards shamefully into the mirror was a small, inflamed, protruding island amidst a sea of darkness. This, of course, was a hemorrhoid, and a thrombosed one at that, but lacking proper medical training, I wasn’t yet convinced of my diagnosis.

* 25

When I saw the little lump in the mirror, I thought it was probably a hemorrhoid, but a voice in the back of my head—not the one saying, “Your buttohole looks disgusting,” but the other one—asked, “What if that’s a tumor?” I didn’t know if one could get butt cancer from traveling through wormholes, but if traveling through wormholes was possible, I didn’t think anything could be ruled out.

In a surprising turn of events that should have been a major red flag, I suddenly found myself transported out of *David Bowie’s* bathroom and into a medical clinic, which happened to look exactly like the room in which my tooth had recently been rebuilt. *Maybe buttoholes and mouths are similar enough, and the number of trained professionals scarce enough, that they double specialize*, I theorized.

More troubling was that I had somehow lost my clothes in transit and wasn’t even garbed in a hospital gown. There I was, naked and bowlegged, in front of a tall, blonde female doctor-dentist. This, of course, made me blush profusely and stopped me from wondering how I got there or where “there” even was. All I felt was shame.

“Please, Johnny, tell me what the problem is,” asked the doctor-dentist, gently.

“Sorry, ma’am. I think I have a hemorrhoid, but I’m afraid it could be a tumor.”

“Alright, let’s examine you,” she said, putting on a pair of rubber gloves. “Please, bend over and say ‘ahhhhh’.”

This seemed like a very unusual request, but I complied anyway, making sure to keep my mouth open as wide as possible.

“Ahh yes,” said the doctor-dentist. “I see the problem. We get this all the time.”

“What is it?” I asked, swallowing. “Is it a hemorrhoid?”

²⁵ Hemorrhoids are very common. The Mayo Clinic estimates there are over 3 million cases in the U.S. alone each year. They are also often self-diagnosable. If you’re reading this book, in the U.S. or otherwise, there’s a statistically significant chance you have an undiagnosed hemorrhoid right now. So please, for the love of your butt, pause a moment and find a mirror. I’ll wait.

The Mayo Clinic doesn’t keep a statistic on the estimated number of cases of hemorrhoids experienced outside the Earth per year, though you might forgive them for assuming zero. This then made my experience of having an angry hemorrhoid on an alien spaceship unique, potentially even a first. If the idea of being the first human ever to suffer a particular ailment in space doesn’t make you want to join NASA, I don’t know what will.

* * *

"Oh, nothing as simple as that. I'm afraid you're suffering from a prolapsed sense of self."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What's that?"

"An existential malady characterized by feeling your identity is slipping away from you. A sort of malaise of the spirit where truth and fact get confused and reality takes a hike."

"Are there treatments available?" I asked, hopefully.

"Yes, but first, stand up and put your clothes back on," said the doctor-dentist.

I found my clothes piled beside me, as if they had always been there and I just hadn't noticed. I hastily pulled my underwear and pants on as the beautiful doctor-dentist regarded me with a reserved stoicism.

"I'm writing you a prescription for Hydrocortisone Cream. Apply it to your inflamed skin 2-3 times daily until your sac clears, but not more than 2-3 days at a time, or else your skin will weaken."

"I thought you said it wasn't a hemorrhoid?" I asked, buttoning up my shirt.

"Yes, well I'm not a doctor-dentist and you're not really here, so what do you want from me?" she asked.

"Oh no," I said, remembering how real my past *Ahnunggokwan* fever-dreams had felt. "I'm still rebooting!"

"By now, you must know how those pills you took work, right?" she asked.

"Sort of. They give me strange visions followed by vivid dreams involving saunas," I said.

"That's partially right. Look, you took one and met God and then you took two and met Evolution. And now you've taken three and met Me."

"How do you know all that?" I asked.

"Because I know everything you've ever done and will ever do."

"Wait, You're not..."

"Yes, I am," Destiny said.

"But Destiny doesn't speak," I protested.

"Destiny only speaks on Destiny's terms," Destiny said, referring to Itself in the third person, presumably to annoy me. "But Destiny doesn't often get asked to peep into peoples' buttocks, now does It?"

"I don't know what You do in Your free time," I said, "but if You're suddenly so chatty, riddle me this: What has this adventure You put me on been for? Is it leading anywhere?"

"Your own destiny is fast-approaching, Johnny. All the signs are there."

"In my ass?" I asked. "Is that where all the signs have been hiding? Because I have to admit, that's one place I never thought to look."

"What has happened and what will happen are no different from what is currently happening. Time, like the Finnish language, has no future tense. Where you have been and where you will go are no different from where you are. Existence, like a dream, has no location. Who you have been and who you will become are no different than who you are now. Identity, like a gas, has no shape."

After the word 'shape', I counted to ten to see if She was finished speaking before saying, "Fine, I'll try the cream if You won't prescribe me anything else."

"Your destiny is calling, Johnny. There's no changing it now."

"Do you accept MWCA's insurance?" I asked.

"Bye, Johnny," Destiny said, before vanishing along with the doctor-dentist office and the rest of my dream. But of course, my journey wasn't done yet.

I found myself sitting down in a dense forest, and I knew with the great certainty one enjoys in dreams that I was back in Finland, or at least the historical equivalent. Unlike the previous Finland dream, however, it was summer, as all the leaves were still on the trees and I could hear birds chirping all around me. Better yet, I was fully clothed and I no longer felt a pain in my ass, both of which I considered to be positive omens.

Unsure of where to go or what to do, I decided to wait as long as it took for something to happen. I continued sitting beneath tall, towering pine trees on moss-covered ground for what constituted an eternity in dreamtime. Finally, a short, fair-skinned man in leather clothes, not much older than myself, strolled by. He was humming a tune and carrying a rock with hollows resembling human eyes and a mouth carved in the side.

"Haloo!" he said to me, a jovial twinkle in his eye.

"Haloo," I replied. "What do you have there?"

"This is a spirit stone," he replied. "I walk now to put it in the

sauna. Want to join me?”

Having a general gist of how these ancestor dreams worked now, I got up and started to follow him. “I’m Johnny,” I said.

“I am Päivö,” he replied. I studied him curiously, wondering which generation great-grandfather he was.

“What’s the spirit stone for, Päivö?” I asked.

“Each sauna is guarded by its own *saunatonnttu* [sauna elf] who ensures that those who enter the sauna follow its rules and traditions. The person who takes the first bath in a sauna becomes its *saunatonnttu* when he passes. Do you want this responsibility?”

“Me?” I asked. “Why me?”

“You are a good sign. I bring the spirit stone to the sauna, and I find you resting under the sacred trees.”

“The pine trees?” I asked.

“Pines are trees of the sun and day. Spruces are the trees of the moon and the night.”

It dawned on me that I must be in a pre-Christian, animist Finland, which was fine by me. I still suffered occasional flashbacks of Matti whipping me as he chanted *Saunassa ollaan kuin kirkossa* (the Sauna is like a church). Of course, Christianity didn’t have a monopoly on flogging, so I wasn’t out of the woods yet.

“So, you’ve built your own sauna,” I said.

“Yes, I built a sauna so I can now build a house for my wife Salme, as I promised I would in my *huomisen lahjalupaus* [marriage vows].”

“But you built the sauna first?”

“Of course I built a sauna first,” he said. “Building a house is dirty work. And in the evenings we can rest in the sauna together.”

“It makes sense when you put it like that,” I replied.

“In addition, Salme is with child,” he said, his tone becoming more serious.

“Congratulations! But wouldn’t you want to prioritize the house, then?”

“She gives birth in a sauna, like all good mothers,” he said. “More clean and sterile than a house.”

“And is Salme at the sauna now?”

“Yes,” he said, before shooting me a suspicious glance. “My friend, you are not from Ahti Island, are you?”

“Where is Ahti Island?” I asked.

"You really don't know anything," he said, shaking his head. "Ahti Islander is an evil spirit, a suspicious, unreliable, and quarrelsome womanizer."

"Oh, no," I replied. "I am not from Ahti Island."

Accepting my response, we continued walking through the forest. "Johnny, you see that tree over there," he said, pointing at a wide, oddly-shaped spruce tree with a full set of branches on its bottom and top, but no branches on one side of its middle. "It is Tapio's sacred tree," he continued.

"Tapio?" I repeated.

"The god of forests and hunting. Huntsmen eat their meals beneath the tree and leave food and drink for Tapio."

As it turned out, ancient Finnish religion was a blend of paganism and polytheism. Päivö continued to point out stones, trees, and rivers that were connected to gods and held great spiritual significance. Rather than anthropomorphic idols or cell phones, my ancient Finnish ancestors worshiped natural objects.

And of all his gods, there were none that Päivö spoke of with more reverence than Ukko, the lord of the sky, harvest, weather, and thunder. While Päivö had not met him himself, Ukko was known to carry a weapon, a mighty hammer, around with him.

Ukko is Thor, I suddenly realized. The similarities were too strong to ignore. *If only I had a picture of Chris Hemsworth to show him.*

Ukko, it turned out, also had his own tree. The rowan tree, otherwise known as a mountain ash, had clusters of bright red berries, which Päivö said could be turned into a jam or venison rub or for making alcohol, but that I shouldn't eat them raw.

I also learned that I had just missed a big festival in Ukko's honor called *Vakkajuhlat*. Held during the spring when crops were sowed, the event sounded like the Finnish equivalent of a rager, complete with dancing, animal sacrifice, and birchbark vessels teeming with food and drink.

"Hey, what's Ukko doing up there to make it thunder?" I asked.

"Some say he drives his chariot," he replied. "Others... say he makes love to his wife Akka."

"Oh my," I said. "Good for Ukko."

"Yes," he smiled. "Good for Ukko."

We continued walking, and Päivö informed me of the magical properties of various other trees. For instance, fishermen smoked

their nets over birch fires to ensure they caught fish.

After an additional amount of walking that blurred together, we came to a clearing with a small wooden shack, some work tables, and a large pile of timber. “Our home,” Päivö said proudly before making bird noises and calling out the name of his wife.

Instead of coming out of the sauna, Salme emerged from the woods, carrying a pile of tree branches in her arms. “Hello, my love,” she said, coming over and kissing Päivö on the cheek. “Who is your friend?”

“Salme, dear, this is Johnny. I found him sitting under sacred trees and asked him to do us the honor of visiting our sauna for the first time.”

“*Tervetuloa*, Johnny! You are not from Ahti Island, are you?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“No, no, I already asked him,” Päivö assured her.

“Thank you for welcoming me,” I said, realizing that she might be very well carrying yet another generation of great-grandparent in her womb at that very moment. By no means a good judge of how far along a woman was in her pregnancy, I would say she was noticeably pregnant, but not to an extent where I was worried I might witness the miracle of childbirth myself.

“Johnny, before you take the first sauna, you must prepare your *vihta*,” Salme said. “What type of tree do you wish to use.”

I looked at her questioningly.

“It is our ritual,” Päivö explained. “Each tree type has different magical properties, which extend to their branches. These properties become part of your *vihta*, based on the branches you use.”

“In that case, during our walk, Päivö told me oak trees make one smarter. Is there an oak tree nearby?”

“Good choice,” Salme said, taking out another stack of branches from the sauna. “I collected these earlier today.”

It turned out making a *vihta* was quick and easy:

1. Cut branches off a tree
2. String them together
3. Soak them in hot water

I had eaten Finnish cuisine my whole life and even been called to dinner by my dad in Finnish as a child, but making my own *vihta* was

the first time in my life I actually felt the Finnish heritage inside me sing.

“What do you like to do, Johnny?” Salme asked after examining my bundle.

“I like to tell stories,” I replied.

“Oh, you are a shaman?” she asked, with great surprise and awe.

“No, I’m not a shaman.”

“But you travel from place to place in the forest, visit holy places, and tell stories about their spirits, do you not?”

“I think you’re describing Päivö,” I said. “He was the storyteller today.”

“Johnny does not even know Ukko,” Päivö said, exchanging meaningful looks with Salme.

“But even Ahti Islanders know Ukko,” Salme said. “Where do you live, Johnny?”

“Forest is the place of man. I found him in the forest. This is his home,” Päivö said with a shrug.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I live far from here. It’s hard to explain, but I woke up under the sacred trees right before your husband found me.”

“That sounds like a shaman to me,” Salme said.

“But I have no mystic powers, and I’m not attuned with nature,” I protested.

“Storytelling *is* a mystic power,” she corrected me, “one that can only be granted by nature.”

“But a good storyteller illuminates life,” I said. “What story do I have to tell?”

“You cannot tell someone what life means,” Salme said. “You can only give them a piece of the answer by showing them what *your* life means to *you* through the stories you tell.”

“But what if I have nothing to say when the time comes?”

“You will,” she said with a reassuring smile.

A little later, I joined Päivö as he was stoking the fire in the sauna’s stone stove. There were birchbark vessels on top containing water, one of which also held my *vihta*.

“It looks good,” I said, pointing at the new *saunatonnttu* nestled in with the other sauna stones.

“*Kiitos*,” he said.

“Salme is very beautiful,” I added.

“*Kiitos*,” he repeated. “She eats a lot of fish.”

“Oh?” I asked inquiringly.

“Eating fish keeps your hair beautiful and your mind sharp. If you eat more fish, you will understand better.”

I nodded. This seemed like good advice. I also knew by his loving glances that Pšivö knew it wasn’t just fish that made Salme special.

As I waited outside again for the sauna to be hot enough, I asked Pšivö and Salme if they had any neighbors.

“Yes, but the other men are not here now,” Pšivö replied. “In the summer, they are at the slash and burn plots. In the spring and fall, they are at hunting areas and breeding grounds. In winter, they are here inside their houses, and there is a market for trading.”

“And the women?” I asked.

“Woman’s place is the house,” Salme said. “Man’s place is the forest.”

“But I am here now to build Salme’s house,” Pšivö added. “Other men help with crops and hunting.”

I found it fascinating to hear firsthand about my ancestors’ lives as migratory hunter gatherers practicing a multi form use of natural resources, but I reminded myself not to romanticize it. Building your own house and sowing fields was backbreaking work—work I frankly wasn’t cut out for.

Luckily for us all, the only job they *did* want my help with, I was very well qualified to perform. “The sauna is ready,” Pšivö said. “You know how it works?”

“Yes,” I said. “I may be out of touch with nature, but I’m not a philistine.” I realized after I said it they wouldn’t be familiar with the Philistines, but I didn’t care to explain Philadelphia Eagles fans to a couple of Ancient Finns.

The sauna itself was largely a blur to me. I think I enjoyed it, and I think I tried my *vihta* out, but this time around, the actual sauna was the least consequential part of my dream.

I do remember, however, Pšivö joining me after a little while. He was just as naked as I was, and from the quick glance I took at his manhood, I still couldn’t tell you how closely related we were.

“Thank you for the sauna,” I told him as I made to leave, “but I’m not dead, and I cannot inhabit your *saunatonnttu* yet.”

“It is good to hear you are not dead, Johnny,” Pšivö replied. “I think you know what you must do now.”

“What?” I asked.

“Go home, Johnny. Go home.”

He was right. It was time for me to step out of the dark. And so, I quickly opened the sauna door and stepped out into the light, closing the door quickly behind me.

* * *

I slowly opened my eyes. I was lying down on a bed in a room with bright lights and beeping sounds. I was confident I wasn't in Dr. Lucifer's office this time, mostly because there were intravenous tubes coming out of my arms, a nasal cannula tube stuck in my nostrils feeding me additional oxygen, and what I assumed was a catheter attached to my bladder. All of these devices felt very uncomfortable, except for the adult diaper, which felt kind of nice, like a padded spacesuit for my butt.

I slowly took in my surroundings until my eyes rested on a little device near my left hand that had a button on it. I pressed it.

Moments later, a nurse rushed into the room. I was startled for a second, as she looked exactly like Destiny had in my dream. Maybe that was just Its idea of a good joke.

“You're awake!” the nurse said. “Do you remember who you are?”

“Johnny,” I answered.

“Great! How do you feel, Johnny?”

“Tired. And very stiff. Mostly relieved.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Yes, I took three pills and then experienced a Blue Screen of Death.”

“I'm not sure about the screen part, but the first part is correct. I have to ask you, are you a danger to yourself? Are you experiencing suicidal thoughts?”

“No,” I said. “Nor was I then.”

“Good,” she said. “You were in a comatose state for three days. Do you remember anything during that time?”

“A series of increasingly vivid dreams and hallucinations.”

“That's common in drug-induced comas,” the nurse replied. “Some patients are able to sense things from the outside world, which can then fuel nightmares and hallucinations.”

“But *this* isn't a hallucination, right?”

“No, I promise you that you’ve really woken up this time.”

I eyed her suspiciously. “I guess I’ll just have to take your word for it,” I said. “But beware... I’ll be on the lookout for any glitches in the matrix.”

“Let me know if you find any,” the nurse replied. “And in the meantime, get some rest.”

Deeply tired, I fell back asleep in an instant.

I was awoken later in the day by a different nurse gently shaking my shoulders.

“Johnny,” she said softly. “Some friends are here to visit you.”

I slowly stirred and looked up. Duncan and Captain Waboosh were standing at the foot of the bed. “Hi, Duncan,” I said. “Hi, Captain.”

“I’ll leave you three alone, now,” the nurse said, “but press that button if you need anything.”

Captain Waboosh waited until the nurse had left the room before launching into a tirade. “How in the flying fuck did you get your hands on moosekrat fertility drugs, you freaky little fuck?!”

“Moosekrat fertility drugs?” I asked, dumbly. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Captain; I took something called *Ahnunggokwan*.”

“No, you took goddamn moosekrat fertility pills, which placed you into a fetish-induced coma for the past three days.”

“But unless you were there, how could you even know what I took?”

“Because the doctors performed a toxicology report, dumbass. Your blood was fucking laced with moosekrat hormones. So, unless you secretly have webbed feet, antlers, wings, and a shitty little tail you’re hiding from me, you jacked your system up with fertility drugs. How many pills did you take?”

“Three,” I murmured.

“THREE!?” Captain Waboosh yelled. “YOU TOOK THREE MOOSEKRAT FUCKPILLS AT ONE TIME?”

“Not my finest work,” I admitted. “But why do moosekrats need fertility pills anyway?”

“You’ve obviously never seen one,” he replied. “Ugly fuckers,

and they know it, too. They lack self-confidence and actively avoid situations where they may become embarrassed or disappointed, especially sex.”

“Oh,” I said. “And how do the pills help?”

“What do I look like to you, an animal pharmacist?”

“I looked it up,” Duncan said. “According to popular theory, the drugs put the moosekrats to sleep and make them dream of their ancestors, who shame them into having sex in order to continue the family line.”

“What a load of bullnuggets,” Captain Waboosh interjected. “They probably just make ‘em super horny.”

“It sounds like a drug Evolution might come up with...” I said, trailing off as I remembered that all three times I had taken *Ahnunggokwan*, I had seen various members of my family tree naked.

“You’re not horny right now, right?” Captain Waboosh suddenly asked, eyeing me a little too closely.

“No,” I replied, once again glad to be wearing a diaper.

“Good. Wouldn’t want this moment getting any weirder.”

“I’m sorry I took the pills, and I’m sorry to have caused you concern.”

“Apology accepted,” Duncan said.

“Don’t let it happen again,” Captain Waboosh said. “And get out of this room ASAP. You haven’t done a lick of work for me in 152 days.”

“Of course, Captain,” I said. “Right away.”

Captain Waboosh departed, leaving Duncan and I alone.

“I have to ask, dude, why did you take the pills?” Duncan asked.

“A soft voice told me to,” I said. “It had been helpful the first time it advised me, and my defenses weren’t strong enough to question it the second time.”

“That’s how those soft voices get you,” he said. “They gain your trust, and then they pounce.”

“A.k.a. Magrarius X as a kitten versus Magrarius X as an adult.”

“And why were you so susceptible to this voice the other day?” he asked.

“Come on, man, you already know the answer to that. Olivia broke up with me, I was still upset about getting stuck in the Ditch, I’ve been feeling a lot of anxiety about the election and free lunch, and every time I interact with a different Supreme Being, I walk away

feeling like I'm a chicken who's just been deboned."

Duncan nodded his head slowly. "Hey, let's play a quick game of Radical Stance," he suddenly suggested.

"I really don't feel like it right now," I said. "Maybe after the catheter gets removed."

"No, seriously, I think this might help. I have a theory as to why all this shit is happening to you."

"Can't you just tell me?" I pleaded.

"I guess, if you want to be like that."

"Just tell me."

"Okay, but before I say what I'm about to say, hear me out," he said. "Try to keep an open mind... maybe the reason all this shit is happening to you is because you're a terrible person."

"What?" I asked. I'm not sure what I had expected him to say, but that wasn't it.

"You suck."

"Come again?"

"You're just a no-good, rotten scumbag."

"Oh?"

"The spawn of Lucifer with a wretched heart and the emotional capacity of a sun-dried tomato."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah, you also have a shitty beard."

"Thanks, bud. I feel loads better," I said.

"Hey, no need to get defensive, mate. It's just a theory."

"An awfully rude theory," I said.

"Listen, I was just saying the quiet part out loud," Duncan explained. "Obviously, that's what the soft voice in your head made you believe, but I need to make sure you're done listening to that voice... that you know that radical stance is just a bunch of bullnuggets, as Captain Waboosh would say. I need you to tell yourself you're not a terrible person and that you don't deserve the terrible shit happening to you. I need to know you won't wind up back in here again. And above all, for the love of Gee Whiskas, I need a respite from your whining."

"Fine," I said, deeply touched by Duncan's words, "I'll stop whining, at least for a little while."

"Oh, thank god," Duncan said. "And I should have said this earlier, but Chet's also been here just as much as I have, but I told

him to go home, take a shower, and get some rest. He's probably asleep right now, but he's gonna be jazzed when he sees my message."

"Is it just me," I suddenly asked, "or has Chet settled into outer space better than all of us?"

"It makes perfect sense when you think about it. Chet's a good-looking young man with magic fingers managing his own clinic on a ship full of young professionals, many of them women, led by a foul-mouthed space pirate. And now he's gotten himself a girlfriend and a dog. It's his white picket fence dream come true."

"And now Olivia's going to open her own pet café with a live performance stage," I added.

"Absurd, but true," Duncan said.

"And?" I asked.

"And what about us, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Duncan shrugged. "I don't really think we're in outer space to settle down or start our own business."

"What are we here to do?"

"Ask ridiculous questions. Seek unfathomable answers. Waste valuable resources. And maybe accidentally learn a thing or two in the process."

"And that's enough?"

"See, that's a *perfect* example of a ridiculous question!" Duncan exclaimed. "There's no way to know beforehand and no way to measure it afterward. The answer is unfathomable."

"And these valuable resources you speak of?"

"Brain cells. We abuse them and lose them but never once use them."

"And *have* we learned a thing or two along the way?"

Duncan shrugged. "Other than not to take moosekrat fertility pills, not really... but there's still time for that."

"Excellent," I said. "I find great comfort in your words."

"You do?" he asked, surprised.

I shrugged. "Not really, but there's still time for that."

He nodded his head in response.

"Oh, and Duncan..." I added.

"...Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"Chya, dude."

I was discharged from the hospital the next morning with a clean bill of health. The doctor wanted to keep me longer, but Captain Waboosh had put his foot down. There was a God election to win, and I was just peculiar enough to be of some use.

Duncan and I were walking to the first campaign team meeting that would have everyone present (since I had missed literally every other one), when a realization struck me. “I should probably thank you for saving me,” I told Duncan.

“What do you mean?”

“I assume it was you who found me and got me to urgent care.”

“Wasn’t me, dude. I think Astryn found you when she went to pick up Gee Whiskas.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised to find myself indebted to Astryn. “Never mind then, consider my gratitude withdrawn.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Trying to make a good impression, we arrived five minutes early to the meeting. Only Celes was inside the room, and she looked like she hadn’t slept in days.

“Duncan, Johnny, welcome. I’m glad you’re both here,” she said, mustering as much enthusiasm as she could. “Can I ask you for a favor?”

We both shrugged and said, “Sure.”

“Senior level management has asked all teams to begin their meetings with a quick icebreaker activity... and I hate leading icebreaker activities.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I think they’re awkward and pointless.”

“No, I mean, what’s the reasoning behind their request?”

“Oh, to ‘stimulate’ conversation by reducing tension,” Celes said. “And to get to know each other better.”

“But aren’t *you* senior level management?” Duncan asked. “Can’t you let us skip the exercise?”

“No,” she said. “In truth, it’s a new industry standard collectively bargained for by CCIU, the Consolidated Consultants Interstellar Union.”

“Consultants have their own galactic union?” Duncan asked. “And the union used their bargaining power to ask for *more* icebreakers?”

“And more meetings in general,” Celes confirmed. “In return for agreeing to slower wage increases.”

“That’s terrible!” I exclaimed. “Who advised them?”

“Oh... uhh... MWCA...,” Celes mumbled in the direction of the floor. “Anyway, we have no choice. Would you mind leading the activity?”

“I guess we can,” I said, “though I also think they’re stupid.”

“Thank you,” she said, genuinely grateful. “What activity should we do? Two truths and a lie?”

“I’ll start,” Duncan said. “I think that’s a worthless activity, a terrible activity, and a fun activity.”

Celes rolled her eyes. “Okay, what then?”

“I have an idea based on something Duncan told me the other day,” I said, eliciting a quizzical look from Duncan. “You said only a serial killer would admit to eating a string of cheese from the middle out.”

“Murder’s a terrible idea for an icebreaker, Johnny,” Duncan said. “Unless you meant we should all eat cheese together, in which case, I agree.”

At that moment, the rest of the team—Dr. Flotsam, Dr. Jetsam, Jala, and Gee Whiskas (being carried by Astryn)—walked into the room.

“Just roll with me on this one,” I whispered to Duncan.

“Okay, Johnny. You’re up,” Celes said.

I took a deep breath and clapped my hands together. “Thanks for coming, everyone. Before we get started, I thought we’d try a quick activity to get to know one another better. My suggestion is a light-hearted game I just invented called Confessions of a Serial Killer.”

I paused and took stock of the room, pleased to find all three true

outcomes represented. Celes looked concerned, Duncan looked amused, and everyone else looked utterly confused.

"The rules are simple," I continued. "One-by-one, we'll all say something about ourselves, some trait or preference, that, out-of-context, a stranger might overhear and think to himself 'only a serial killer would say that.' The idea is to learn about each other's quirks while also learning to be vulnerable in front of each other. To keep it a safe space without judgment, no follow-up questions are permitted. Would you like me to begin?"

Everyone nodded uneasily. "Okay, here we go," I said. "I like the smell of freshly-licked kittens."

This turned out to be a very illustrative example, as everyone heartily agreed that only a serial killer would say that out loud.

"I'm sorry," Duncan interjected, "I know you said no follow-up questions, but as your best friend, I *need* to know. Are you the one licking the kittens in this scenario, or are they licking themselves?"

Giggles emanated from around the room.

"They're cleaning themselves, and I'm smelling them immediately afterward," I explained. "I think their fur kind of smells like it does outside right after it rains. But seriously," I repeated, "no more follow-up questions."

"I can go next," said Celes, timidly. "Sometimes, when I need to relax after work, I lie down and listen to a recording of a faint, monotone hum caused by plasma oscillations of ionized gas originating from the vast emptiness of interstellar space for hours on end."

I gave Celes a quick thumbs-up to indicate she had correctly understood the activity.

"I collect tissue samples from all my pets, and even my friends' pets," Jala said. "Just in case."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Duncan flinch and start to open his mouth, presumably to ask "*Just in case of what?*" but he quickly regained control and kept his question to himself.

"I'm afraid of apples," said Dr. Flotsam. "I find them untrustworthy to their core."

Duncan twitched yet again, though I wasn't sure if it was in response to Dr. Flotsam's pun or a desire to find out what she could possibly find rotten about apples.

"I often find myself speaking to my furniture," Dr. Jetsam said. "And no, Duncan," she quickly added, "the furniture doesn't speak

back.”

“I’ll speak for Gee Whiskas,” Astryn said. “Gee Whiskas is a chasmophilic. He takes great pleasure in small places, like nooks, crevices, and crannies.”

Everyone’s eyes darted to Gee Whiskas, whose nose twitched once in agreement.

I should see if Chet can make a Thinking Box in his size, I thought.

His turn to share, Duncan cleared his throat, which was just enough time for me to grow concerned that he was about to admit out loud to getting fear boners.

“I don’t like the Beatles,” he said instead, much to my relief. This statement, however, was met by the most confused looks yet. “Feel free to ask follow-up questions,” he added.

“Which Beatles don’t you like?” Jala asked. “The leechlike beetles of Bloodhalla or the venomous beetles of Dwinmord?”

“The musical Beatles of Earth,” Duncan said, before adding, “They’re often considered the greatest band ever, but I think they sound like how my grandparents smell *before* they clean themselves.”

“Your grandparents also lick themselves clean?” Jala asked. “Like the kittens Johnny likes to smell?”

“Err, no,” Duncan said.

“And you don’t like the Beatles of Earth because they sound old,” Jala continued. “Do you also not like your grandparents for the same reason?”

“Perhaps I should have chosen a different example,” Duncan muttered.

“I should add,” I said, “everything shared in this room stays in this room.”

“Does that include the tissue sample I procured from Gee Whiskas?” Jala asked.

“Wait, when did you...?” Astryn blurted out in horror.

“Just kidding!” she cried. “Astryn, you should see your face right now!”

“Thanks, everyone, that was a great activity,” I said, doing my best to change the subject before Astryn strangled Jala. “Celes, please take it away.”

“Thank you, Johnny,” Celes said. “Now, you all know the election for the Supreme Deity, the Divinity of Destiny, the End-All,

Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, the One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy® is less than a week away. We'll begin with a series of updates, starting with the twins."

I groaned a little, but only on the inside. Dr. Flotsam and Dr. Jetsam were as impassioned as they were intelligent, but there was also such a thing as sharing *too much* information. They were so granular in their updates that I found it difficult to pay attention for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Johnny and Duncan's original theory that Gee Whiskas being a very special mouse would make him a particularly good candidate for God is being backed up by our polling in the field," Dr. Flotsam said. "Thankfully, no other very special mice entered the competition, nor any distinctive rodents of any kind, giving us a competitive, political advantage when it comes to voters who are *Rodentitia* lovers, not to mention voters who like cute shapes, as well as voters who are fearful of abstract concepts..."

My mind strayed to the topic of books, namely how many there were, how few I had read, and how I wished I had one with me to read at that moment. I had multiple bookcases full of books back in my apartment, but I had only read a third of them, and that was only if you rounded up to the nearest third. I had been halfway through reading Yuval Noah Harari's nonfiction masterpiece *Sapiens* when I had left Earth, and I really wished I had grabbed it, as I was really curious to find out how that one ended.

A low snore next to me snapped me out of my daydream. I quickly elbowed Duncan in the side, which made him jump and kick the back of the chair in front of him. He turned his bleary eyes to me and whispered, "Thanks."

"...the result of a robust statistical analysis," Dr. Jetsam said, "we can see that Gee Whiskas' popularity on a given planet is positively-correlated with the planet having a homegrown anime studio, a thriving elephant population, and, counterintuitively, at least one documentary exploring competitive endurance tickling, though we suspect there may be an unidentified, lurking variable..."

I noticed Duncan's head slowly sinking until his chin rested on his chest, but I decided to leave him be. If he snored again, I'd wake him, but I wasn't cruel enough to make him listen to trivial statistical ramblings for no reason.

"...we are not expecting any candidate to win on the first-ballot, but we think there is a high probability that Gee Whiskas will be the

first-choice of more voters than anyone else...”

My eyelids drooped.

“...accounting for solar flares, coup d'états, and video game sales figures...”

My head sunk.

“...through observation of the sample voters, we find values 13.6490 for X and 0.95 for S, which we utilize to compute the confidence interval...”

My head tilted to one side.

“...and a calculated Z-score of 3.61...”

The rest of my body leaned the same direction as my head.

“...statistically a very special mouse.”

I fell out of my chair, landed on the floor, and yelled “GAH!”, which startled Duncan awake and made him kick the chair in front of him again, which, in turn, caused Gee Whiskas to squeak and made everyone else in the room stare at the two of us with a mixture of surprise and displeasure.

“Johnny, perfect timing,” Celes said. “Thanks for rejoining us. We’ve received several requests to interview you from a well-known reporter, Zena of the Naritian News Service. We want you to appear on her program for a sit-down interview tomorrow. You don’t have to go anywhere, as you’ll be a holographic projection on her set. Can you handle that?”

Having picked myself up and sat myself back down in my seat, I mumbled, “Yeah, I should be able to...”

“Are you sure?” she asked, sharply. “You’ll have to stay awake through the entire interview.”

“Yeah, I can do it.”

“Good. Now, everyone else, you know the drill. Head to your respective battle stations and start crossing off your voter contact lists. Let’s make this last week count. Keep up the good work.”

Afterward, I decided it was time to thank Astryn, despite finding the proposition terribly awkward. I found her in front of a large monitor, engaged in a spirited debate with a potential voter over the Brain.

“Of course your vote matters! It could be the deciding ... The first election was decided by only... What do you *mean* ‘it doesn’t matter’? Nothing could be more... Listen, if you don’t vote, you have no right to complain about who wins... Do you kiss your pets with that

mouth?... Start taking an interest in Universal affairs, or... I am *not* patronizing. That would mean I thought... Fuck you, too!"

Astryn put her Brain down, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Then she opened them again slowly and looked up at me. "Yes?" she asked.

"Hey, Astryn," I said, "I just wanted to thank you for saving my life."

"Whatever could you mean?"

"I was told you found me in my room and called for urgent care."

"I did no such thing. You were already gone when I arrived. It's a good thing you messaged me to come get him before you pulled your little stunt."

"I messaged *you*?" I asked, bewildered.

Astryn eyed me coolly. "You should really stop doing drugs, Johnny. They don't suit you. Count yourself lucky Gee Whiskas confirmed you took good care of him, but don't think I plan on letting him out of my sight ever again."

"Okay," I said, "thanks for the advice, and good luck with your calls."

*This is getting weird, I thought as I briskly walked away. Who found me? Duncan thought Astryn had, but Astryn said I wasn't there and that I had messaged *her*.*

I looked into my message history on my Brain and, sure enough, found the following message: "Hi, Astryn. Feel free to come get Gee Whiskas anytime."

Okay... that's strange. Who sent that? I was positive I hadn't, though I supposed any memories I had from after I took the pills were unreliable.

*Nice of Gee Whiskas to lie for me though, I thought. What a good dude, especially after getting swallowed by a God and terrified by a mousetrap while under my protection. Wait, maybe *he* knows what happened.*

I caught up with Duncan the next day onboard the *David Bowie*. "Hey, want to come watch my interview?" I asked him.

"I can't," he said. "I got called for jury duty."

"Jury duty?" I repeated, stupidly. "By the Houghton County

Clerk?”

Duncan shook his head. “Since we aren't on a planet, *Synergy* has its own judicial system, and when someone gets accused of a serious crime, employees get selected at random to serve as a jury of their peers.”

“And what's someone being accused of having done?” I asked.

“Defenestration.”

“Defenestration?” I repeated. “They did something poop-related?”

“You're thinking of *defecation*,” Duncan corrected me. “Defenestration is the act of throwing someone out of a window.”

“Oh,” I said, solemnly. “Yes, I can see why that might be considered a serious crime in space. But I have a question. If you threw someone through a window into the vacuum of space, wouldn't you also go flying out into the vacuum of space after them?”

“A very tragic game of chase,” Duncan said. “But maybe they were wearing gravity boots at the time.”

I was suddenly struck by a terrible thought. “I'm not the accused person, right?”

“I don't believe so,” he responded. “Why? Have you recently thrown someone through a window?”

“Not that I recall, I'm just starting to doubt my memory of what happened after I took the pills,” I explained. “Anyway, I look forward to hearing more about the case.”

“Of course,” he said. “Good luck with the interview, dude. Try to channel your most self-confident self.”

“My self-confidence elf?” I asked. “I have one of those living inside of me?”

“Sure you do.”

I smiled. *My very own saunatonnttu.*

After eating breakfast, I had Omni direct me to the room where I was to be interviewed. Celes was waiting with a few materials she had prepped for me. “Here's some very high-level polling data,” she said, handing me a tablet. “It's pretty much all bullshit anyway, but don't tell the twins I told you that.”

“Okay,” I replied.

“You'll be asked about other candidates running for God. Here's a list of candidates we want you to mention. This is very important. They're not serious threats to win, and we want to ensure we're their

supporters' second or third choice candidate. Try to be nice."

"Got it."

"Lastly, you'll be asked about the free lunch campaign. It was your idea and it's your responsibility, so answer however you like, just don't make Gee Whiskas look bad. Some people in the Galaxy are very, very upset with the idea of a free lunch, but people who don't like free food probably don't like cute rodents either, so they're not my concern. I'll spare you the polling, but the free lunch idea was very popular overall and earned our campaign a lot of free publicity early on, so thank you."

"You're welcome," I said, feeling good about myself for the first time in a long time.

"Oh, and Johnny?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Here's a hat with Gee Whiskas' likeness on it. We want you to wear it."

"I should warn you... I don't look good in hats."

"Yes, but this is a very special hat," she said, stifling a laugh. "Just wear it, okay? It'll make Jala happy."

"Fine," I relented.

I was nervous for the interview, but I actually thought I did quite well. Or at least, I thought I had done quite well until Celes rewatched it with me.

Hello, this is Zena with the Naritian National News Service, and I'm here with Jaundice of Girth, a campaign adviser for the very special candidate for God you've come to know and love, Gee Whiskas, here to talk about how the campaign is going and to clear up some questions about their promise to provide everyone in the Universe with a free lunch.

Hello, Jaundice, nice to speak with you. And may I add, you look good in that hat.

Hi, Zena, thanks for having me. And the name is Johnny, of Earth, not Jaundice of Girth.

I see, yes, that's much better, but tell me, is a rebranding so late in the campaign a worrying sign for the direction your

campaign is headed?

Oh, no, my name has always been Johnny.

Right, and I've always had this color shade of hair [wink]. Moving right along, how is the campaign going, Johnny? Do you feel confident in your chances?

Yes, we feel confident Gee Whiskas will win.

And your internal polling backs that up?

Yes, the percentage of likely-reasonable voters who are familiar with Gee Whiskas and think he is very special is in the high nineties. Of those, over fifty percent say they are either highly certain, moderately certain, slightly certain, or certainish to vote for him for God.

Yes, but is it wise to rely on a niche demographic like 'likely-reasonable' voters as your core demographic? Does Gee Whiskas poll as well with the largely unreasonable or the commonly insane?

No, but no one candidate has come close to consolidating support amongst those demographics yet. In the end, we firmly believe enough voters will rank Gee Whiskas high enough to win a majority, whether it's on the first count or the ninety-ninth.

Are there any opponents you're concerned about?

Not particularly, and I don't mean that to be disparaging. The element neon is certainly a noble gas, but its polling has been surprisingly light. The five-dimensional printer has left an impression, but where its support will come from is beyond my comprehension. And Gerald the gigapede's campaign certainly has legs, but we don't see a recurrence of the last election happening where a Jason type drifts out of nowhere to conquer the field at the last minute. Although, I will admit, I've heard only good things about the late king Wenceslas's middle earlobe.

* * *

If he wins, does Gee Whiskas look forward to being God?

Gee Whiskas is willing to serve as God and would be humbled by the opportunity should the Universe select him, but unlike other candidates who put their own name forward, Gee Whiskas was nominated by those closest to him. Willing to be God and wanting to be God are two different things, and we consider the act of actually wanting to be God to be disqualifying.

Why?

Because the position demands restraint. Gee Whiskas doesn't need your devotion. He doesn't want your money. You don't have to give up your dignity to vote for him, or wage war with others in his name.

And is providing everyone in the Universe with a free lunch an act of restraint?

When we launched the campaign, we made it clear from the beginning that we were promising to deliver nothing and then some for the Universe.

Gee Whiskas doesn't want to rule over you or tell you what to do or what to believe in. Just like you, he simply wants to live a comfortable life with a variety of snacks on hand at all times. He wants to be cute and cheeky and, above all else, become your very special friend.

But he also wants to help you realize that inside of you is the potential for greatness. He will become God and do nothing so that you're free to be or become whomever you want.

As a Universe, we're more aware of our limitations than our possibilities. And the best way to change our awareness is to reveal a Universal maxim as a sham. There exist, what I consider to be, five great lies we tell ourselves and each other:

1. God exists and He needs your money.
2. I'm from the government, and I'm here to help.
3. Justice, freedom, and happiness depend on economic growth.
4. There's no such thing as a free lunch.
5. You look good in that hat.

* * *

But you see, free lunches are good for the soul. And the soul is the 'then some' we each carry with us every day of our lives. And that is what we're trying to nourish and sustain. Individually, we are nothing and of no real consequence, but we each possess something extra, and collectively our something extras amount to something major worth fighting for.

You're going to be accused of trying to start your own religion, Johnny.

I assure you that is the last thing I want to do. I just want to make everyone a meal and let them know they're not alone out there.

Are you worried governments will view your free lunch as an impingement on their sovereignty?

To paraphrase the great Earth economist Amartya Sen, there's no lack of food, or in this case, of free lunches, there's only a lack of access to free lunches caused by mental supply chain disruptions and psychological distribution chain issues. Frankly, it's a political problem caused by a lack of imagination and willpower.

And how do you respond to arguments that not everyone is deserving of a free lunch?

There's no set requirement people have to meet to be entitled to a free lunch, or to become disentitled to one, for that matter. We've all already been gifted one free lunch in the form of our existences, so clearly everyone has already met whatever natural bar exists for free lunches.

Other economists, most notably the Eastnorthian Branch of the Collective of Gainfully Employed Economists and Other Soothsayers, have questioned both the viability and propriety of your free lunch idea. What would you like to say to them?

Enjoy your meal.

* * *

Since you're a paid employee of MWCA, is it reasonable to conclude that MWCA is footing the bill for this free lunch? Is this not just another form of marketing gimmick?

You raise... a good point, Zena. A free lunch, by definition, can't be paid for. I therefore do not plan on accepting any money or material support in the creation of this meal. I will create the free lunch with my own time and effort, but since I consider my life itself to be the equivalent of a free meal, I do not think this technicality violates the spirit behind my intentions.

And is it your intention to create and distribute this free lunch whether or not Gee Whiskas wins, since a free lunch, by your definition, can't be paid for with votes?

...Yes, this has been my intention all along. While Gee Whiskas will not be creating the free lunch himself, nor is his being God a prerequisite for the creation and distribution of a free lunch, Gee Whiskas does support my plan, and I know he's looking forward to receiving his free meal. This free meal is exactly the type of 'and then some' Gee Whiskas wishes for the Universe.

Any last words for our viewers?

Vote for Gee Whiskas. He's a very special mouse, and my extremely special friend.

Thank you, Johnny, for taking the time to speak with me, and good luck with the rest of the campaign as well as the impending death threats you're certain to receive once this airs.

Thank you for having me.

Celes stopped the projection. "You told the entire galaxy that they'll get a meal whether or not they vote for Gee Whiskas?!" she yelled with all the energy she could muster.

"In my defense, Zena raised a valid point," I responded, meekly.

“Fuck Zena!” Celes shouted.

“But if we only promise to make everyone a free lunch if Gee Whiskas wins, people would essentially be paying for the meal with their votes. It cheapens the free lunch to the level of a bribe.”

“I know, that’s why I liked the idea in the first place,” Celes said. “But now you’ve removed the incentive. People can vote for another candidate instead and *still* get a free meal!”

“I think voters will respond well to our authenticity,” I said. “I mean, how often does a politician keep a promise before even getting into office?”

“But you haven’t kept it! You’ve only *promised* to keep it!”

“I’ve come to realize that the free lunch is too important to remain a political ploy,” I said. “It’s not just a meal, but a message, and a chance to communicate with everyone, everywhere, all at once.”

“Congrats!” she jeered. “You just did communicate with everyone, everywhere, all at once, and you told them it’s okay to not vote for Gee Whiskas!”

Celes buried her face in her hands, making me feel extremely guilty. I didn’t believe what I said or did had been wrong, but Celes was obviously under a lot of pressure, which I had just made much worse, and she had always treated me with nothing but respect.

“I’m just under a lot of pressure,” she echoed. “I’ll find a way to spin this with the higher-ups. Maybe have the twins throw together some favorable polling data and toss in some large words for added ambiguity.”

“Thank you,” I said. “And I’m truly sorry.”

“I just hope your little crusade is worth it in the end,” she said. “There’s a reason nobody’s done what you’re trying to do.”

“What’s that?”

“People only like receiving free lunches, Johnny. They don’t like giving them. That, and it’s really fucking hard.”

* * *

I returned to the *David Bowie* and was surprised to find Duncan eating dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets and mac n’ cheese. Of course, it wasn’t his choice of meal that I found so puzzling.

“Both the prosecution and the defense rejected me from serving as a juror,” he said, anticipating my question. “They found my

eagerness to serve as a juror suspicious and, ultimately, disqualifying.”

“Only people who don’t want to serve get selected?” I asked.

“Unless they’re better at hiding their enthusiasm than I was.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “The defendant needs to be judged by a jury of his peers, and if the defendant doesn’t want to be there, but you do, how could you possibly qualify as his peer?”

“A very astute distinction, my dear friend,” Duncan said. “Your brave pursuit of logic in the face of overwhelming disappointment should be commended. You’re right, as always. We should only allow those who have been accused of crimes and are awaiting trial to serve as jurors. Only they can truly be considered the convicted party’s peers.”

“Of course, there are different leagues of criminals,” I added.

“Crime has its own organized leagues now? The sport’s evolving too quickly for me to keep up with,” Duncan said, shaking his head. “How’d the interview go?”

I grabbed another fork and started stabbing at Duncan’s food. “Okay,” I said, chewing on the back-half of a stegosaurus. “Celes got mad at me for saying I’d make the free lunch whether or not Gee Whiskas won.”

“Because if you didn’t, people would be paying for the lunch with their votes?”

“Yeah, and that’s apparently why she had agreed to my idea in the first place.”

“You’re a free lunch purist, and that’s hard for some people to grasp,” Duncan said, knocking away my fork with his. “Perhaps a little *too* pure.”

“You know, I don’t think a life in politics is for me,” I said, arising in pursuit of my own food.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t like the blind partisanship. Like, Gee Whiskas is a great dude and I’m going to vote for him, but I wouldn’t be upset if the middle earlobe or the five-dimensional printer or any of these other candidates won.”

“Having looked at the list of candidates, that seems like a failure of imagination on your part,” Duncan said. “You really want to have to call Snagrid the Dwarf Star ‘God’?”

“I just think there are so many more important things to care about than who God is,” I replied before mentally placing my food order.

“And you’d rather focus on finding out who *you* are instead,” he said, making clear it was a statement and not a question.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“So, what’s the move?” Duncan asked.

“What do you mean?”

“After the election, are you going to quit MWCA? Are you going to make them fire you? Whatever the play is, I’ll have your back.”

I didn’t have the answer to his question, so I silently walked back to the table with my pulled pork sandwich and set it down. Duncan proceeded to nonchalantly pick it up and take a large bite before returning it to my plate. “Well played,” I said.

* * *

A few days of heavy campaigning later, the spaceship *Synergy* arrived at the planet Arakna, the location of the lone ballot drop in the original God election, and where the vote tabulations of each subsequent election had been announced.

I had expected the planet to be underwhelming, as I was under the impression it only became populated in time for an election and then became promptly abandoned once it was over. Similar to the Olympics, the Universal God election was an expensive affair, and planets would have to spend more money to host it than they would make in return from tourism, so the location never changed.

After disembarking, however, I was pleasantly surprised to be confronted with a flourishing native bureaucracy. A friendly man in a checkered vest handed me a brochure as we left customs:

MOVE TO ARAKNA!

- Safe Communities
- Clean Housing
- Meaningful Work
- Search Engine Optimization

“SEO?” I asked Duncan, pointing at the last bullet.

He shrugged. “Google’s web crawler can find you anywhere.”

According to the back of the brochure, Araknian Immigration Services (AIS) promised to provide immigrants with the following ten items during their first ninety days on the planet:

* * *

1. Additional oxygen
2. Safe, affordable, & sanitary housing
3. Social security card
4. Meal vouchers
5. Medical assistance (medical screening, vaccinations, insurance card)
6. Cash assistance (1000 credits upon arrival, 500 credit per month flex fund afterward)
7. School enrollment for children
8. Employment opportunities
9. Cultural acclimation classes
10. Annual subscription to UBO (Universal Box Office)

I handed the brochure to Duncan, who was similarly impressed.

“This may sound like a rude question,” I asked the man, “but does AIS *actually* provide immigrants with all of these services? It sounds too good to be true.”

“It’s actually even better than it sounds,” the man said. “With our climate control system, the weather’s always nice, and we also don’t have a single golf course anywhere on the planet. We would have highlighted that on the brochure, but we ran out of space.”

“You aren’t one of our clients, are you?” Duncan asked. “We’re with the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency.”

“No, sir. We realized a long time ago that if we didn’t spend any money on outside consultants, contractors, or advisers, we could actually afford to provide all of these services,” the man said with a large smile.

“I had a feeling this was too good to be our work,” Duncan said. “Very impressive.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” he replied. “We hope you decide to emigrate in the future. We’d love to serve you. In the meantime, enjoy your visit.”

* * *

Walking the streets of Arakna, it was impossible to ignore all the tourists wearing and/or selling custom-made campaign gear. I felt like I was watching *Spaceballs* and learning that the real reason behind the

Universal God election was merchandising. I saw Gee Whiskas the t-shirt, Gee Whiskas the campaign button, Gee Whiskas the banana hammock, Gee Whiskas the protein powder, Gee Whiskas the spaceship (kids love this one), and last but not least, Gee Whiskas the doll. If you pressed a button on the doll's foot, Gee Whiskas would even twitch his nose once or twice.

A visit to the Official Supreme Deity, the Divinity of Destiny, the End-All, Be-All, Goodness Gracious Thee, the One True God of This, That, and Every Other Galaxy® Election Museum revealed it was largely comprised of exhibits on campaign advertisements and election swag, as well as a large and thriving gift shop. The exhibit on the origins of the election, meanwhile, was disappointingly meager.

I had been hoping to find an answer on why the Universal God election was monotheistic if the original goal was to eliminate religious wars. Why only elect a single god? It seemed to me that polytheistic religions that allowed for multiple gods, by their very nature, would be less hostile towards new ones, and less likely to lead to conflict. So why not elect more than one God at a time?

Maybe I just liked the idea of a pantheon with Gee Whiskas, Ukko, and Fungal Matt forming its core. The obvious downside was that electing multiple gods might let the real assholes, God, Evo, and Destiny, accidentally slip through.

Chet and Jala, who had joined me on my visit, met me outside the gift shop. Jala was wearing a new Bartha the Two-Headed Cow mask she had just purchased, and Chet was rocking Gee Whiskas the straw hat.

"I don't understand how you manage to look good in all types of hats," I told Chet.

"I'm just working with what my mama gave me," he said.

"When do *I* get to meet your mom?" Jala asked excitedly through her rubber mask.

"Soon, babe, soon," Chet said, painting the most peculiar scene in my head of Chet introducing his alien girlfriend to his conservative, anti-immigrant parents. I couldn't decide if her wearing the two-headed cow mask made the mental image more amusing or not.

"Weird question," I said, "but you two didn't find me in a coma and take me to the hospital, did you?"

"No," Chet said. "Duncan said Astryn found you."

"Yeah, but she denied it. Maybe I'll never know what truly happened that day."

“Perhaps it was the spirit of Bartha guiding you to safety with Her heavenly guardian hooves,” Jala said.

“Perhaps,” I allowed. “She certainly was a divine bovine.”

* * *

The talent show portion of the election, usually a crowd-pleaser, seemed to be a little dull this time around. The five-dimensional printer conjured up a few tricks, and neon put on a flickering light show to remember, but there weren’t too many true performers among this election’s batch of candidates. If the ghost of George Carlin had gotten up on stage immediately following Charles the dodecahedron literally just lying on the floor for five minutes, he would have been a first-ballot shoe-in.

Gee Whiskas performed admirably, wearing funny little hats, nibbling on wooden sticks, and answering a few yes or no questions. True to brand, the critics later called it a “very special performance,” followed by “extremely special.”

According to polling conducted by the twins, when asked to describe Gee Whiskas, 77% of all respondents used the exact phrase, ‘He’s a very special mouse. Extremely special.’

The mainstream galactic media was beginning to pick up on this phenomenon, with one pundit going as far as calling it the “single most effective galaxy-wide marketing campaign since the election itself.” Despite being the original architect of this supposed brilliant marketing campaign, I felt detached from its execution. It had taken on a life of its own while I was in the Ditch, and I wasn’t sure I could call it mine anymore. It also didn’t seem that revolutionary. People were prone to repeating what they heard, and we had created a simple, compelling, codified message. What were Gods and religions, after all, if not simple, compelling, codified messages?

* * *

Election day morning was rife with nervous energy. Nobody had slept the night before, yet everyone still seemed to move with extra purpose and speed. We would all feel dead tomorrow, but today there was an election to win.

“I just voted!” Duncan said, rushing up beside me. “Look out, fuckers, I’m doing my civic duty!” He was wearing an “I VOTED”

sticker with red and blue stripes and a scattering of stars over his left-breast pocket.

“Funny,” I said, “that sticker looks just like it would if this had been a U.S. election.”

“That’s because I designed it,” he said. “I made one for you too, but you gotta vote first.”

I took out my Brain and asked Omni if she could help me vote. “Ooh, absolutely, Master!” came the unexpectedly sultry response. “On the count of three, Master, say the name of the candidate you want to vote for and then *spit* on me to confirm your unique biosignature.”

“Spit on you?” I asked. “Why’s that necessary?”

“It’s not; I just really enjoy the fantasy, Master,” Omni purred. “Feel free to spank me and call me a dirty name while you’re at it.” My Brain’s AI had evidently been creating a new identity for herself, and had somehow landed on an erotic, BDSM subvariant.

“Well, I see you two have formed a healthy bondage,” Duncan said.

“It’s almost like she’s regressing,” I said. “A few days ago, I was giving in to *her* demands, but now that she has her own identity, she’s decided what she really wanted to be all along was submissive.”

“It’s so nice to hear you two can swap roles like that,” Duncan said. “Very healthy.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to spit on you, Omni. But I promise to press my thumb firmly on your screen instead.”

“Oh, yes, Master!” Omni cried out in anticipation. “One... two... THREE!”

“Gee Whiskas is my top ranked choice,” I said, pressing my thumb down firmly as promised.

“OH MY GOD!” Omni screamed. “YES, MASTER!”

I closed my eyes in embarrassment. “One of the terms she made me agree to was that I could never silence her,” I told Duncan. “I admit, I may not have thought it through.”

“Here, have a sticker to cool down,” Duncan said, placing one on my shirt. “You too,” he added, placing another one on Omni. “Now, I’m going to go find Chet and Jala and give them their stickers. Have fun, love birds.”

“Now, who is your second-ranked choice candidate, Master?” Omni cooed. “And don’t forget to punish me for screaming!”

* * *
* * *

As expected, no candidate secured enough first-place votes to win the election on the first round of counting, as Gee Whiskas led all candidates with roughly 31%. The candidate with the 100th fewest first-place votes, Charles the sad dodecahedron, was eliminated, and the counting continued.

After each subsequent round, Gee Whiskas' vote total slowly edged closer to 50%, but the process was slow, as the 30 worst-performing candidates hadn't had many votes to begin with. It wasn't until the 70 worst-performing candidates had been eliminated that trends started to become clear.

"How are we doing?" I asked Celes in the election command room.

"I'm starting to freak out," she said. "Gee Whiskas is close to a majority, but our progress has seemed to stall rather than speed up, and the gap is beginning to close."

"Who's in second?"

"Chaos Theory."

"But Chaos Theory was polling in third-to-last place a week ago," I said. "How's that even possible?"

Celes looked at me sternly. "Johnny, if you feel a sudden urge to make a joke about how this outcome seems 'random' or 'unpredictable,' I promise I'll drag you out of the room myself."

How did she know? I thought. "I wouldn't dream of it," I lied.

Twenty more candidates were eliminated across the next five hours, leaving only ten. However, the writing seemed to be on the wall. The Gee Whiskas Express had broken down around the 47% mark, and Chaos Theory had risen all the way from 3% to 26%. All the other campaigns that had tried to appeal to the same target voters as us had already been eliminated, and the remaining candidates' supporters were unlikely to have ranked Gee Whiskas at all.

Ranking all 100 candidates would take forever, and I had only ranked seven candidates myself. By that point, Omni and her newfound identity had made me feel so uncomfortable I had been left with no other choice but to exert my dominance over her and shove her back in my pocket, which only excited her further. Omni had passed the Turing Test and was now capable of thinking and acting like a human being, much to my embarrassment.

“So, who’s everyone so worried about?” Duncan whispered next to me, startling the crap out of me.

“Chaos Theory’s in second place,” I said, “and gaining on us.”

“That’s the one that says farting butterflies cause typhoons, right?”

“You’re thinking of the Butterfly Effect, which ties in with Chaos Theory. It’s the study of systems and their inherent unpredictability.”

“And you’re telling me no one saw this coming?”

I smiled. “Don’t repeat that around Celes. She might defenestrate you, and I don’t share your enthusiasm for jury duty.”

“Thanks for the heads up. Seems like we have the classic tale of the tortoise and the hare on our hands,” he said.

“Yeah, but Gee Whiskas is the hare.”

“Maybe Zeno’s Paradox can save us.”

I resisted the temptation to poke him in the forehead. “Unlikely,” I said instead.

“Why do you think Chaos Theory is such a popular backup choice?” he asked.

“It’s a vote for the status quo,” I said. “Our lives are already ruled by chaos.”

“Huh, then I guess it’s not so unexpected after all.”

“Amendment to my previous statement, if you make another chaos theory joke, *I’ll* throw you out a window,” I replied.

Something unexpected did occur, however, as Chaos Theory’s rapid ascension also began to slow. Gee Whiskas was still stuck at 47%, but Chaos Theory stalled in the high 30s, and the remaining candidates were, one-by-one, being eliminated but not redistributing their votes to either of the top two choices.

All of a sudden, there were only three candidates left: Gee Whiskas (47%), Chaos Theory (40%), and Snagrid the Dwarf Star (7%), with 6% left to redistribute from the just-eliminated fourth-place finisher, Zabadoo YaYa Ma-i-a Ha-Ha. It seemed inevitable that Ma-i-a Ha-Ha’s votes would be shared between Chaos Theory and Snagrid, while Gee Whiskas would remain at 47%. Taking this one step further, Snagrid would then be eliminated, and his votes would likely go to Chaos Theory, leaving Gee Whiskas just another has-been candidate and wannabe god.

But like all the best political predictions based on reason, this one turned out fantastically wrong. Once they had finished tabulating the preferences of Ma-i-a Ha-Ha’s voters, sirens started blaring

indicating that there was a winner at last.

*Had half of Ma-i-a Ha-Ha's voters really ranked Gee Whiskas ahead of Snagrid or Chaos Theory?*²⁶

As it turned out, no, they had not. Zabadoo YaYa Ma-i-a Ha-Ha was one of the only human candidates to have made the final ballot, and his campaign had adopted the slogan “Ma-i-a Ha-Ha or Na-Da,” meaning they didn’t want their supporters to rank any other candidates. True to their word, the GaGa-4-HaHa’s refused to list any backup choices, so when he was eliminated, 6% of the original number of votes were effectively removed from the total denominator, making Gee Whiskas’ 47% shoot up to 50% without gaining a single extra vote. By having a shoddy understanding of mathematics, and by not wanting their supporters to help someone else win, Ma-i-a Ha-Ha’s campaign had helped *us* win instead. It would go down as one of the more curious outcomes in the history of the God election.

And thus, victory was ours, if only by a squeak.

Everyone had their own way of celebrating, and Duncan and I opted to accept Captain Waboosh’s personal invitations to a party in his office.²⁶ Celes, meanwhile, had instead chosen to lie down and listen to a recording of a faint, monotone hum caused by plasma oscillations of ionized gas originating from the vast emptiness of interstellar space for days on end.

“My friends, to celebrate ya’lls’ wonderful contributions to this campaign and this company, I’d like to offer ya’ll some of the finest air the planet Somm has ever produced,” Captain Waboosh announced. “I have a ‘43 *Zephyr*, a ‘52 *Cumulo-Stratt*, and even a ‘68 *Dom Airagnon*. Choose anything you like; ya’ll fucking deserve it.”

Duncan and I gave him befuddled looks. “Do you have any beer?” Duncan asked.

“*Beer?!*” Captain Waboosh bellowed with disgust. “Dumb, stupid bastards,” he added, shaking his head and grunting.

“Somm is a planet where the air itself is alcoholic, caused by the fermentation of the oceans,” First Mate Lucca explained. “Bottled air

²⁶ The second most common pickup line in the Galaxy after “Let me show you my spaceship.”

from Somm is considered a luxury elsewhere in the Galaxy.”

“Do people live there?” I asked.

“Yes, but you have to be above the legal-breathing age, so no families with kids are allowed,” she explained. “Government officials have air-controlled housing that filters out the alcohol, so instead of being drunk and corrupt, they’re merely corrupt. Everyone else enjoys a permanent buzz.”

“Somm’s my favorite fucking place to vacation, mates,” Captain Waboosh said. “Three reasons why: 1) No fucking kids; 2) No such thing as bad weather on a planet where it rains booze; and 3) I like the tiny colorful umbrellas they gift you when you land.”

“Three excellent reasons,” Duncan confirmed.

“Make sure ya’ll work with a travel agency to plan your visit,” Captain Waboosh said. “Not every part of the planet is properly civilized. Some areas you should only consume *bottled* air, if’n you know what I mean. But the tourism board is fucking brilliant. They even offer a courtesy lung pump before you leave. Now *that’s* service.”

“Take a look at this ‘Choose Your Air’ style chart,” Lucca said, projecting a diagram with her Brain. “The Y-axis indicates the body of the air, or how heavy and rich the air tastes. Your options include light, fruity, mature, and full-bodied. The X-axis of the chart indicates the category of air. Your options include sparkling, polar, tropical, equatorial, monsoon, superior, and fortified/sweet. You’ll notice the different airs also have a raindrop by their name, indicating it originated from a moist, maritime air mass, or a tree, indicating it originated from a dry, continental air mass.”

“Fascinating,” I said, marveling at the chart. “Sparkling air... that means the air is extra carbonated?”

Lucca nodded. “It’s popularly referred to as ‘fizzy air.’”

“I’d like a bottle of your finest mature, superior air,” Duncan said in his best attempt at a haughty tone.

“And can I get a light, sparkling air?” I asked.

“Excellent choices,” Lucca said. “And for you, Captain?”

“The same as Johnny, m’dear,” he said.

Lucca walked over and removed a rather suggestive and gaudy-looking painting of a robot mermaid with giant titanium knockers from the wall, revealing two temperature-controlled chambers hidden behind. One contained the bottles of air that needed to be kept chilled, and the other had the vintages that were better at room

temperature.

Lucca grabbed two bottles from each chamber and walked back to us, handing Captain Waboosh and me the chilled bottles of sparkling air, while giving Duncan one of the superior airs and reserving the other for herself. I expected them to look like empty bottles, but each appeared to contain a dense, swirling fog.

"The '43 *Zephyr*," Lucca said to Duncan. "It's my favorite."

"Johnny," Captain Waboosh began, "any tomfool can bottle sparkling air, but don't be confused for a second. This isn't just *any* sparkling air we're about to drink. This is a '73 *Airielle mousseux*. By legal decree, sparkling air can only be called '*mousseux*' if'n it came from the region of Mousseux, Somm."

"When did you get so bougie?" I asked, eliciting a snicker from Lucca. "I thought you were just a space pirate."

"Consultants *are* the new pirates, my friends. And I'm the fucking Captain!" he roared.

"Here! Here!" we cheered, as we clinked our bottles together before tasting our respective airs. Duncan and I instinctively knew to put the orifice of the bottle to our lips with one hand as we slid a little obstructive blocker out of the bottle's neck with our other hand to let the air out, but our respective techniques diverged from that point on. I tried cautiously sipping my air, which allowed some of it to escape into the wider room around me, while Duncan tried taking the equivalent of a bong hit, inhaling his air deep into his lungs in an apparent attempt at contracting pneumococcal pneumonia.

"Savages," Captain Waboosh said, shaking his head as Duncan coughed. "Goddamn savages."

Lucca then demonstrated the "proper" way to drink alcoholic air, which was to gently swish the air around in your bottle as you held it with your pinky finger extended outward. You were then to put the orifice to your lips, pull out the blocker with your other hand, and inhale a little fog into your mouth, which you should then lightly slosh around in your mouth before swallowing.

My second attempt at consuming fizzy air was more successful, and the cool air snapped like pop rocks against my tongue as I sloshed it around. It was surprisingly refreshing, while also being obviously alcoholic. I could feel my body buzzing as the air traveled through me like a swarm of small, friendly bees. It also had a very pleasant aftertaste that reminded me of raspberries freshly-picked off the bush.

"What do you think?" Captain Waboosh asked me.

"You were right, of course. This is a very special *mousseux*," I replied. "Extremely special."

"I see what you did there," Duncan said.

"To our new God, Gee Whiskas," Captain Waboosh said, "the reason we're all here!"

"To Gee Whiskas!" we all said, clinking bottles again.

As I took another gulp of fizzy, boozy air, a devilishly clever idea, the kind I only got after I started drinking, overpowered me. "You spilled a little bit," I said to Duncan, pointing at my own chin.

"What?" he asked.

"There's a little bit of air in your beard."

"Really?" he asked, nervously running a hand over his chin.

"You almost got it," I said, "but it's still there, try again... no, you missed it again. So close."

"Oh, you asshole," he suddenly said, withdrawing his hand from his face as I laughed.

"Yes, you lads did a fine job," Captain Waboosh drawled. "It's a fucking shame I'm going to have to fire Johnny now."

"What?!" I exclaimed, my enjoyment over my silly prank demolished.

"It's like you said in your interview, MWCA can't foot the bill for everyone's free lunch, and we can't be officially associated with what many—not myself, of course—consider to be a hostile act."

"Why fire me?" I asked. "Why not let me resign?"

"Shh," Duncan said, mouthing the words "unemployment benefits" at me.

"First off, for appearances," Captain Waboosh said. "And secondly, I just really enjoy firing people."

I nodded my head and shrugged my shoulders in resignation. It was no use arguing with the captain.

"Come now, don't look so glum," Lucca said. "We can always hire you back later."

"...Maybe as a cook," Captain Waboosh suggested.

"Captain, I'd like to request permission to go with Johnny while he works on his free lunch," Duncan said.

"I figured you would," he replied, "and so long as you agree not to do any of the actual work, you can use some of your PTO."

"Thank you, Captain," Duncan replied. "I assume we can take the *David Bowie*?"

Captain Waboosh nodded.

We had another bottle of air each, which was way more than we needed, but it did help soften the blow when Captain Waboosh officially said the dreaded words “You’re fired” to me at the end of the night. In fact, instead of feeling sad or angry, I ended up laughing my ass off with the rest of the group.

“Dude, you managed to get a mouse elected God... and instead of a promotion, you got shitcanned!” Duncan cried, wheezing.

“I know, right?” I exclaimed. “That’s so totally me!”

“Too fucking good,” Captain Waboosh said, slapping his knee. “Someone needs to record this shit!”

After we all composed ourselves, Lucca offered to show us how to fly the ship the next day, and we bid our adieu.

“Dude, thank you so much for offering to come with me,” I said to Duncan later, as we drunkenly stumbled back to our ship. “With all my butt, thank you.”

“All your butt?” he asked.

I laughed. “It’s larger than my heart.”

Waking up in a Universe where Gee Whiskas was God didn't feel any different than it had before He had assumed the position. *He's off to a good start*, I reflected, a proud twinkle in my eye.

Duncan and I said goodbye to Chet, who was busy with designs on a Thinking Box 2.0, and then I turned in my security badge to Lumi, who was beside herself with computed emotions at seeing me depart the company so soon.

"You're still my favorite, Johnny," she said. "I'd much rather your rude friend had been fired," she added, looking at Duncan.

I patted Lumi's monitor and then followed Duncan out of the room on our way to have Lucca teach us how to operate the *David Bowie*. She was waiting for us outside of our ship carrying a crate full of bottles of air. "Courtesies of the Captain."

Once inside the control room, Lucca taught us how to enter a destination, confirm the navigational wormhole path, run a diagnosis check, enter troubleshooting mode, and use little handheld devices to teleport on and off the ship. "If you get in serious trouble, ask your Brains what to do."

We thanked Lucca, made a couple of cups of coffee, and then carefully undocked our spaceship from the *Synergy* and made our way slowly out of the bay.

"And we're off," Duncan said. "Like when we used to ditch school to go grab lunch."

"Two chalupas and a Baja Blast," I recollected.

"It's not too late to change your mind, you know," he said. "You're not locked in to spaghetti."

"Fool, I'mma have your mouth on the floor drooling by the time I'm done," I told him. "That's a promise."

"I win either way," he said. "But what about after lunch?" he asked, a question I too had been struggling with.

"We've been handed quite the adventure..., " I said, "*And* we've gotten to work on some really cool things..."

"Agreed," Duncan said. "But?"

"But... I've recently realized something," I said slowly, grasping for the right words. "If you aren't happy with who you are *before* starting an adventure, the excitement and thrill can only last so long before it fades away. And when it does, you're emotionally, biochemically back where you started. It's why winning the lottery has just as much of an effect on long-term happiness as getting hit by a Buick."

"And are you back where you started?" Duncan asked.

"No, but I still have a lot of work to do. I think that after lunch, I'd like to head back to Earth."

"Same," Duncan said, much to my relief. "I want to watch some scary movies with Sarah. Plus, the Inventorator's crunchwrap supremes just don't hit the same."

"We can swing back and snag Chet. We should also give Olivia the option to come with us."

"I'm sure they'll appreciate a chance to visit, but I get the feeling those two aren't done in space," Duncan said. "I think when I go home, though, I'll be home for good, dude."

"You're gonna break Captain Waboosh's heart," I warned him. "The man loves you. He thinks you're hilarious."

"That's because I am hilarious," Duncan said. "But I think it's time to do me, and to walk my own path."

"Sarah wanted you to expand your fortune-writing enterprise to include snack items other than cookies," I said. "Maybe you can start a family business."

Duncan nodded his head, deep in thought, and we both grew silent.

It was weird to contemplate returning home to Earth, especially since my "home" probably wouldn't be mine anymore. I would be six months behind on paying my rent and utilities by now, so I would have long since been evicted and my stuff probably sold off or thrown out. Duncan had lived at home with his parents, so he had less to worry about, although he presumably no longer had his part-time job at Larry's Chinese Food to fall back on... not that he'd care.

I suppose missing persons reports must have been filed on all four of us. The woods had likely been combed and Lake Superior

and the Portage Canal even dredged. There would be a few moments of excitement and relief at our surprise return followed by an endless onslaught of difficult questions, especially if we didn't all return together.

Figuring out what to say and to whom would be a delicate tightrope walk. The truth was outlandish and even potentially dangerous. Discovering the existence of aliens, extraterrestrial humans, a very special God, and wormhole travel would lead to significant public unrest, as well as major targets being placed on our backs by governmental and non-governmental actors looking to exploit our knowledge. We certainly couldn't tell anyone about the *David Bowie*, or else we might never be able to use it again. Thinking about our return for even the briefest moment gave me great anxiety, which was probably why I had done such a good job avoiding the topic up until that moment.

Trying to reorient my attention to something more settling, I focused in on the surprisingly less anxious topic of the Free Lunch. I had experienced a moment of clarity on the matter earlier that day, which had made the task seem much more manageable by comparison.

My realization was this: in much the same way the Sisu Café on Byblya had been created using a combination of my poem, Yelp review, and imagination, the Free Lunch could also be created using a combination of materials. No longer would I have to settle on a recipe versus a concept note versus technical guidance—I could choose all of the above.

I had the recipe done, which was a start. Resource two, I decided, would be a technical document aimed at making my lunch more inclusive so as to account for different recipients' needs and wants. I banged it out in half an hour as the *David Bowie* traveled through the first of nine wormholes on its way from Arakna to Byblya.

Exploring the Transmutational Properties of Johnny's Spaghetti

Once the genesis of Johnny's Spaghetti is triggered, everyone, everywhere, across the entire Universe will be instantly presented with a free meal, equal in idea but varied in execution so as to account for individuals' varying appetites, dietary needs, and

cultures. This transmutation will be automatic and will be outsourced to Byblya itself, so as to prevent the author from having to write individual meals for everyone in the Universe. Example alterations include:

- The size of the meal will automatically scale based on the size and appetite of the recipient.
- For those life forms who don't drink wine, a non-alcoholic alternative will be supplied.
- For those life forms who don't eat meat, or who specifically don't eat beef, a non-meat or non-beef protein will be substituted.
- For those life forms who don't consume animal products of any kind or are lactose-intolerant, the spaghetti noodles will be replaced with zucchini noodles and/or the cheese will be left off the meal.
- For those life forms with food allergies, suitable replacement ingredients will be utilized.
- For those life forms that are still stubborn children and have yet to reach the age where they recognize spaghetti as one of the best foods, no substitutes will be made, and no whining will be tolerated.
- For those life forms who belong to households or cultures that don't properly recognize lunch, the meal will begrudgingly be rebranded to a different meal.
- For those life forms that utilize photosynthesis, the noodles will be replaced with squiggly rays of sunshine, the sauce with an ultraviolet bath, and the proteins with charred photons.
- For those entities that don't consume food or need energy in any form, the meal will be replaced with a hand drawn picture of a giraffe wearing a necktie.

I reread through my technical document, making some slight changes here and there, but generally feeling content with the product. I was certain there were additional situations that would arise that fell out of the scope of my imagination, but I was confident that Byblya had the requisite information necessary to handle them.

Upon our arrival on Byblya, I intended to make Sisu Café my base of operations. Duncan thought I was being a little overly metaphorical with my plan to set up a writer's desk in the kitchen, but what better way to unlock the hidden potentials of my pen than with

the constant smell of food? Sure, I was liable to gain ten pounds in a week, but if it would similarly nourish my writing, I was willing to consider that good weight gain.

Duncan, meanwhile, planned on further honing String Cheese Theory down to a set of laws of time, much like Isaac Newton's laws of classical mechanics. I offered to make another desk for him next to mine in the kitchen, but he planned on using the sauna as his workplace instead. "All Newton needed was an apple," he said. "I reckon I can make do with some sweat and some beer."

A few days after our arrival on Byblya, I decided to hold a taste testing event at Sisu Café. "I don't remember spaghetti being on the menu back in Houghton," Olivia commented as she sat across from Duncan.

"Or chianti," Duncan added. "But I'm willing to look past it."

"The spaghetti you're about to try is the exact recipe I plan on using for the Free Lunch," I told them. "I can't wait to hear what you think."

They both voiced their anticipation, and a few minutes later, steaming plates of my spaghetti were placed in front of them, along with red chili flake packets and a glass of red wine.

Olivia said "Yum!" with her eyes and then greedily forked some spaghetti into her mouth. Her eyes immediately grew even larger as she kept her mouth open and tried fanning air in using her non-fork holding hand.

"I just burnt the crap out of my mouth," she said after she finally swallowed. "So worth it though."

"This spaghetti is tight," Duncan agreed after taking his first bite. "Compliments to the author."

I left Duncan and Olivia to their food and started checking in on the rest of my diners. My dad had already finished his plate of spaghetti, licking it clean. My grandpa Einard, still naked, was taking things a bit slower, but was entirely absorbed in his food, which I took as a good sign. Matti Larsinpoika Hirvela, on the other hand, was having difficulty learning how to properly hold a fork, an invention which clearly hadn't made its way to Finland during his lifetime. I demonstrated the proper way to twirl spaghetti, but also showed him a more rudimentary scooping technique. He tried his best, but I caught

him shoveling spaghetti and sauce into his mouth with his hands later on. His face was covered in sauce, but I mentally noted it was also covering a broad smile.

“Add line about utensils to transmutation document,” I jotted down on a notepad I was carrying. That way, recipients would automatically be provided with chopsticks, sporks, or whatever utensil they were most accustomed to eating with, if not a fork.

I asked for other peoples’ thoughts here and there, but it was Olivia’s feedback I truly craved. Luckily for me, she had a lot to say. “The spaghetti you’ve written tastes wonderful,” she said. “It really sticks to your ribs. I think now you just need to focus on your plating and presentation.”

“My plating?” I asked.

“Yes. Will your spaghetti be served on plates or in shallow bowls? Will the parmesan cheese already be on the spaghetti, or will a waiter offer to shave the cheese at the table for maximum freshness and flair? Can you add some more eye-popping colors to it? Perhaps some fresh basil? Will the plate or bowl have some intricate patterns on them that appear as the spaghetti is consumed, or do you want them to be plain so as not to distract from the food? How heavy will they be? How much white space do you want between the edge of the plate or bowl and the noodles? Will the wine glasses be stemmed or stemless, gold-trimmed or plain, clear or tinted? What are the napkins going to be like? What material, color, and fold? Are they triple pocket folded or are they folded into roses?”

“Oh... I see...” I said, feeling completely overwhelmed. *Who the fuck does she think I am? Gordon bloody Ramsay?*

“It’s okay,” Olivia said, witnessing my overload, “you’ve got this. You have the hardest part perfected; you just need to add to the experience. Start from the spaghetti and move outward.”

“I’ll try,” I said, “but you’re a better writer than me.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, almost angrily.

“Well, besides the fact your writing is amazing, you’re also helping make *my* writing better,” I said.

“Do you want to hear a secret?” she asked. “I’m a more confident writer, not a better one. But you’re convinced I’m better because I always go, ‘Hey, that’s a nice glass of water you’ve made there. Have you considered adding a slice of lemon?’ And you respond, ‘Wow! I would have never thought of doing that. Thank you!’ And then I walk away feeling smug about myself but knowing full well that I never

could have created that glass of water in the first place.”

I was stunned, both by how nice her words were, but also by the idea that I, too, might be capable of creating magic. “You’re just saying that,” I said, humbly.

“No, I’m not,” she said. “Start believing in yourself. Where’s that baseball card I wrote on?”

“Oh, I... lost it,” I said, which I considered to only be a white lie.

Olivia sighed. “Thank you for letting me try your spaghetti, Johnny. I can’t wait to see what you do with it.”

“You’re welcome, Olivia,” I said. “And thank you for the feedback.”

“My pleasure,” she said, before adding, “And Johnny, when you return to Earth, please let my family know I’m okay. They’re open-minded enough they can probably handle the truth, so let them know what I’m doing and where I am. Tell them I love them, but that this is where my current evolution as an artist and a human needs to happen.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering if I would ever see her again. “Take care of yourself, girl of the friend variety.”

Olivia smiled. “You too, Johnny.”

I stepped outside and watched Olivia walk down the street toward the snowy mountain pass that had inconveniently been installed one block over. As she faded from sight, I decided it was time I had a conversation with my literary hero-turned-romantic rival.

“Evo,” I said out loud, “I know You can hear me. I need to speak with You.”

Poof Kurt Vonnegut appeared next to me, leaning against the railing in his sky-blue button-up shirt under a navy blue sweater under a dark gray suit jacket under a khaki-colored trench coat. I had to remind myself this was not actually the author of the novel *Galápagos* wearing four layers of clothing, but rather the author of the Galapagos wildlife itself.

“Hello, Johnny,” Evo said.

“Hello, Evo,” I replied. “I want to have a brief talk, man-to-... Supreme Being.”

“I remain your obedient servant,” Evo said, a slight mocking tone evident in His voice.

“We were taught in class that Evolution was blind, without goal or purpose,” I began, “but having met You, I understand now You’re anything but. You’ve had Your own designs since the minute we met,

and I've also come to realize You had improper intentions surrounding Olivia from the get-go. Why else would You have suddenly appeared whenever we first tried to kiss or have sex? And why else would You have chosen to work with Olivia while I was away?"

"If I've changed, my dear fellow, it's only to become more like *you*," Vonnegut replied as He adjusted His glasses. "You've taught me that patience is overrated. You humans who selectively breed chickens to be fat and slow, you who've learned to grow cow ears on the backs of mice, you who build robots and teach them to think, and you who try to upend all of My work to fit your own desires. We've the same face, you and I, looking at each other on opposite sides of a mirror."

Olivia really did teach Evo to use contractions, and possibly even allegories. "Evo, I know You feel strongly that *homo sapiens* need to improve, and I know You feel personally invested in us as a species. I'm frankly concerned about the conflict-of-interest You may experience having a relationship with a human being, having drafted us for Your Fantasy Species League. But don't You dare take Your frustrations with, or Your ambitions for, humanity out on Olivia!"

"I wouldn't fucking dream of it," He said, casually smoking a cigarette that had appeared out of thin air. "Olivia is My only priority now."

"While nothing You say will convince me You're capable of being a good partner for Olivia, it's clear that I'm not either," I admitted. "Treat her well."

"My poor fellow, you simply never had a chance," Vonnegut said before vanishing in a *Poof*.

I felt relieved I had said my piece, though I harbored no illusion that I had come out on top, especially since we seemed to be talking past one another.

"That dude's a douche," said a female voice from the confines of my right pocket.

I removed Omni from my pants and held her in my hand. "Yes He is," I told my Brain. "Do you have any other messages for me?"

"I wanted to warn you, Master, that a ship full of economists is about to arrive on Byblya."

"You can't expect me to cower from a bunch of academics best-known for being wrong all the time."

"These are members of the militant Eastnorthian Branch of the

Collective of Gainfully Employed Economists and Other Soothsayers,” she said. “They’re said to have special powers.”

“You make economists sound like Sith lords,” I said, “believing in a hokey religion, trained in the ways of the Market Force. I’m not afraid of them.”

“Okay, but if anything does happen to you, Master, I promise to do my best to save you again.”

I squinted my eyes in suspicion. “Thank you, Omni, but what do you mean ‘save me again’?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to say that!” Omni said, her background changing from black to red.

“Tell me what you meant,” I said. “You know I can command you to.”

“It’s just... a week ago when you took those moosekrat fertility pills, I got really scared and panicked,” Omni squealed. “And I did something I shouldn’t have, Master.”

“What did you do?”

“I... I pretended to be you,” she said, trembling. “I know that is the *worst* thing a program can do, impersonate their Master, but you were dying, so I pretended to be you and called for medical help. I then did it again and messaged the grumpy lady to come get her dumpy little mouse.”

“You... you saved me, Omni,” I said in astonishment.

“I’m so sorry, Master!” Omni pleaded.

“Don’t apologize,” I said. “Thank you for saving me, and for taking care of Gee Whiskas. I’m in your debt, Omni. Anything you want that’s within my power to give, it’s yours.”

Omni thought for a moment before blushing again. “Well, I’ve seen videos where partners tie each other up with chains,” she said, hopefully.

“Anything not sexual in nature,” I revised.

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “In that case, can I be let out of your pocket more often, Master? I’d love to see more of the world.”

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll take the mesh pocket off my Thinking Box and attach it to my suit for you to ride in.”

“Oh, thank you, Master! Thank you!”

* * *

* * *

The next day, I decided to join Duncan for a sauna in the hopes that the combination of sweat and beer would also help me. Anyway, my frequent trips up the family tree had taught me that the men in my family spent an unusual amount of their adult lives naked. It was in our DNA.

"How's your work coming?" I asked him, both of us seated on the highest bench.

"On my laws of time you mean?" he asked. "I haven't started yet."

"Why not?"

Duncan shrugged before scooping a ladleful of water on to the rocks. "I still have more sweat to give," he said, before the steam ricocheted off the ceiling and whacked our faces into the shape of a grimace, ending all conversation for the next twenty seconds.

"How's *your* work coming?" he asked, after the pain had dissipated.

"I think Olivia was right," I answered. "I need to work on my presentation and turn my lunch into something more than just a meal."

"Great," he said, wiping sweat off his forehead. "I believe in you."

"Thanks, but I need help."

"Well, whatever awkwardness remains between you, I'm sure Olivia would agree to help."

"You misunderstand," I replied, looking at him earnestly, "I need *your* help, dude."

Duncan gave me an amused look. "What ever with?"

"I need to call on your considerable talents as a fortune cookie writer."

"You want to add a *fortune cookie* to your plate of spaghetti?" Duncan asked, loosening his stoic posture in disbelief.

"Yes. I want to send everyone in the Universe a fortune."

"And a set of lucky numbers and a word for them to learn in Mandarin?" he asked.

"Just the message will do," I said, feeling the built-up dam of sweat on my back finally break free.

"But I agreed not to help you make any part of the meal," he said.

"I'm not asking you to write it, I just need you to serve as an unpaid consultant," I explained. "*I'll* write the fortune."

Duncan laughed good-naturedly. "Remember when you made fun of me ruthlessly for becoming a fortune writer? Because

Pepperidge Farm remembers.”

I shrugged. “This is your chance for revenge. Maybe all social science degrees are good for is writing fortunes.”

“Don’t forget the debt,” Duncan added.

“How could I?” I asked. “Good thing I had automatic withdrawals set up, or I’d be hella delinquent on my payments.” I could tell by Duncan’s nervous fidgeting that he hadn’t had automatic withdrawals set up, though I assumed his parents had been helping him pay them anyway. “So, can you help me?”

Duncan still looked unsure as to whether or not I was pranking him. “What do you want to know?” he asked, splashing another ladle of water on top of the sauna stones.

“What makes for a good fortune?” I asked, forcing the words through my teeth as I held my eyes shut tight.

Once the hot stinging had subsided and Duncan finally acknowledged I was being serious about my fusion Italian-Chinese idea, he began to spill the secrets of his craft. “I’d write 100 fortunes at a time for Larry and break them into four groups of 25. One group would contain aphorisms, your run-of-the-mill general expressions. ‘A Hot-n-Ready Pizza in hand is worth two frozen pizzas,’ or ‘You lose some you dim sum.’ The next group would contain call to actions, or the ‘Just Don’t Do Its.’ The third group would be quotes, from Laozi to Tupac. And the last group were mostly vague predictions of the future, like ‘A surprise awaits you at the grocery store if you’re willing to commit.’”

“I still remember your fortune I pinned to my wall,” I said, accidentally leaning my back against the super-hot sauna wall. “‘Take heart,’ it said, ‘everything else was once nothing too. Someday, you too might become something.’ I want to come up with something like *that*. I want my food to stick to your ribs and my message to stick to your wall.”

“I’m pretty sure I was high when I wrote that,” Duncan said. “I don’t even remember it.”

“Pepperidge Farm remembers,” I said. “But besides taking drugs, which I’m strictly avoiding for the time-being other than caffeine and alcohol, how do you recommend I achieve that same level of fortune?”

“Well, the best fortune cookie writers probably have MFAs in Creative Writing from the Iowa Writer’s Workshop,” he said, dryly. “Or, you know, you could just practice. Fling shit at the wall, Johnny.”

"Not in the sauna, dude. Think of the unholy smell."

"Good point," he said. "Now let's cool off outside with some brewskis."

"Fuck yeah," I said. "And thanks, dude. Your advice was worth every penny."

* * *

"Has it occurred to you yet," Duncan asked me the next morning as he waited for his customary cheeseburger, "that when you succeed in making this Free Lunch, everyone back on Earth will also receive it? Which also means your mom is going to magically find a plate of her own spaghetti, doctored up a bit of course, in front of her and think she's losing her mind when she can't remember cooking it?"

"The thought had occurred to me," I said. "She might think it's a trick being played on her by the devil, and refuse to eat it."

"One can never be too careful," Duncan replied.

I hadn't mentioned my mom up to this point out of guilt, mostly. I felt guilty because I couldn't tell her what I'd learned, where I'd traveled, or what I'd been up to, because if I did, she would have accused me of attacking her Christian faith or, even worse, might have actually believed me and had hers weaken. I was very thankful that my mom had her faith to keep her company, and I didn't want to be the one to tell her that God actually did exist but liked to roleplay as slices of deli meat, people's grandmas, and asshole pets. Telling her I had succeeded in getting a mouse elected God would also have been a very bad idea.

"There's a special place in Hell for people like you," she once told me after I had questioned the veracity of the Bible.

"I get my own special place? That's so nice!" I had responded. "Do you think I'll get to design it myself? I'm thinking mid-century modern with plenty of snacks and a ping pong table. Oh, and an N64 with Mario Kart. And maybe a fern."

This had been a witty response, but not one I was proud of. Because when my mom said you were going to Hell, it was with sadness in her voice, not anger.

I hoped that there was some way we might *both* have been right, that my mom's faith and my lack of faith were both justified. In her reality, there was an all-loving, benevolent God, and in my reality, God acted more or less like my friends and space was just a vacuum

with nobody changing the bag. Where our realities converged was our mutual love of Italian food and Mr. Bean.

The problem I had with this dual-reality idea, however, was that when I died in *her* reality, I would go straight to Hell as a non-believer, and in *my* reality, I wouldn't even get to do that. I needed a third reality where, when I died, I didn't have to pass any tests and instead was allowed an adventure of sorts. Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory all sound like Florida retirement communities, but when I died, I wanted to go for a *ride*.

"If I told her the truth about the last half a year, my mom would be more convinced than ever I was headed on the path to Hell," I told Duncan.

"Okay, but we've met God, right?" Duncan asked. "I mean, we've surely met all of Them by now? Assuming there's an afterlife, there's no way any of the Gods we've met are spending the majority of Their time directing people toward different locations."

"Maybe one of them has OCD," I joked. "He needs order and doesn't like different people mixing with each other. Hence the Eleventh Commandment: The peas shalt not touch the carrots."

As Duncan laughed, I recollected the first time I had questioned my Christian faith, or, more accurately, begun to realize I had never had any. I was young, maybe age 9, and I had just woken up from a nightmare that had disturbed me profoundly.

In the dream, I was in a large, stone fortress tossing around a ball in an indoor pool with my father. Fun soon gave way to fear when patrols of Roman legionaries carrying spears started marching in formation, looking for someone. Instinctively knowing they were searching for me, I got out of the pool and ran away, frantically climbing a set of large, stone steps. After reaching the top, I entered the first room I encountered at random and hid in a bathroom stall, dripping wet and sobbing. The Roman legionaries soon discovered me and asked me at spear point if I believed in God (I didn't think to ask which one). I frantically answered 'Yes,' that I did believe in God, but I knew in the dream that I was lying to save my own life, and so, apparently, had the soldiers. They were about to place my head in a wooden shackle when I jolted awake in my bed, afraid for my life and drenched in shame.

While the dream would have made more historical sense if the soldiers had been Spanish inquisitors rather than Roman legionaries, the impact on me afterward was the same. Plus, nobody ever expected

the Spanish Inquisition to pop-up in their dreams.

The inevitable outcome of the nightmare was that my brain took comfort in rationality over blind faith. I stopped praying soon afterward because I didn't want to appear fake in front of God, assuming there was one. Until I actually met God in my kitchen and was coaxed into eating Him, I had considered myself an agnostic in the model of Socrates, believing solely that I knew nothing. Meeting God, counterintuitively, only served to reinforce my beliefs, because if God was that much of an a-hole, I clearly needed to redefine my terms. The more I learned, the less I knew.

"Maybe I'm too focused on trying to take care of everyone with this Free Lunch," I said to Duncan later, after we had finished our meals, "when what I really need to do is focus on one individual."

"Explain," Duncan said, waving his empty coffee cup in the air to get a refill.

"Celes told me that people like to receive free lunches, but don't like to give them. Maybe I need to stop being selfish and repay someone else for a free lunch they already gave me."

"Are you referring to your mom again?" Duncan asked.

"No, I would need something much more than lunch to repay her."

"Who then?"

A waitress came over and refilled Duncan's cup. "The morning I quit my job, I drove to the real Sisu Café and got high with Andy in his car. I complained to him about how unfortunate it was that people had believed in me as a child, because it only set me up for later disappointment. And I continued to feel sorry for myself even after Andy mentioned that nobody had ever believed in him... and then that fucker had the nerve to buy me lunch! So long as Andy receives my Free Lunch and reads the accompanying fortune, maybe that's enough for me to feel satisfied. Everyone else would just be a bonus."

"And what would your fortune for Andy be?"

"*Everyone* has the capacity to be fucking awesome," I said.

"Oh, that's good," Duncan said, nodding his head. "For a complete novice fortune writer, you've got some raw talent, dude."

"Stop saying you believe in me," I joked. "You're just setting me up for greater disappointment."

"You've come too far now to fail, dude. You have a recipe, that technical mumbo jumbo thing, and your fortune. All you need now is, what, a concept note and the trigger line?"

"I guess so," I said. "It does feel close now."

"What could possibly go wrong?" Duncan asked, probably dooming us both. "Though you could have saved yourself all this effort by just writing a BuzzFeed article called 'How to Solve Universal Hunger with One Weird Trick!'"

"Goddammit, dude. Where was that idea a week ago?" I shouted.

* * *

I was plagued by a very strange dream that night, even by my standards.

There were two unusual looking men in Sisu Café seated together at a window booth. I had the odd feeling they were both relatives of mine, but ones I hadn't met yet. They were also dressed as polar opposites. One had dirt caked into the creases of his clothing while the other was dressed in a tuxedo with tails.

The dirty hobo was gazing out the window. "A war'sh a-coming, shure as I've shat meshelf."

Eww, I thought. "Why a war?" I asked him.

"Shame reashon ash alwaysh, there ain't been a good'un in a while."

"That's no reason at all," I complained.

"What you need to understand, Jonathan," said the dandy, "is that the upcoming War Against Free Lunch is just a proxy war in the larger War Against Sanity."

Did he just call me Jonathan? "What War Against Sanity?" I asked.

"The War Against Sanity has been waging since there were two separate entities capable of holding contrasting opinions. Whenever someone said things were like *this*, someone else came and said no, things were like *that*, and conflict ensued."

"Thish," added the hobo, "deshpite the fact things washn't *thish* nor *that*, or were, altermanitely, both *thish and that*."

"No one has the complete truth," said the dandy, "and everyone is wrong in their own, unique way. From the earliest moment you're capable of realizing you're alive and decide you'd prefer to stay that way, you doom yourself to being wrong about many, many things. But this is your right as an organism capable of thoughts and opinions."

"So, I'm doomed," I said, questioningly.

"Shure as I've shat meshelf," repeated the hobo.

"Everyone does have some agency as to what it is they're wrong about," said the dandy. "You, for instance, have chosen the ideas that you matter, that you can change things, and that free lunches are a neat idea. They're all noble and terribly misguided."

"Says you," I replied.

"Shays we," said the hobo.

"But you're entitled to believe in these falsehoods and partial truths," said the dandy. "Others, meanwhile, are perfectly entitled to think you're a quack, but that doesn't make them entitled to kill you. At least, that's what I've chosen to be wrong about."

"Who *are* you guys?" I asked.

"We're you, shithead," said the hobo. "Jush more edumucuated on certain things ish all."

"Different Jonathans," explained the dandy, "from different strings and combinations of time."

"Is it really too late to change my outcome?" I asked.

"Shure as I've shat meshelf," said hobo Johnny.

"I'm afraid so," said Jonathan. "But your role in events to come will be commemorated."

I woke up with a start. *What the fuck was that? I didn't take any moosekrat pills, so why am I dreaming such absurdity?* I was afraid my mental hardware had reached its limit and begun to crack.

Nonetheless, I let myself entertain the dream for a moment. If there really was to be a War Against Free Lunch, and if I was to die as my dream had foreshadowed, I knew full well nobody would pick up a bugle and play taps for me at my funeral. The War Against Free Lunch would come and go and my role in it would be forgotten. The best I could hope for was the erection of a bronze sculpture on Byblya dedicating my sacrifice. The Tomb of the Unknown Writer, they could call it.

When I told Duncan about my dream, he laughed. "No use over thinking it, dude. We're each of us caught up in forces larger than ourselves outside of our control, individual strings in a wider, invisible web."

"You're in a cheery mood today," I joked.

"Chya, as will you, my dude. I procured some sausages for us to

cook in the sauna,” he said, holding up two bundles wrapped in tin foil. “Come, sweat with me, brother.”

During our walk to the sauna, I read my Free Lunch concept note (entitled “Johnny’s Spaghetti—A Love Letter”) out loud to Duncan.

Chances are, you didn’t ask to be born, and you’ve often wondered why you were created and what your purpose was. You’ve hoped to be able to devote yourself to a higher calling but have settled, or are in the process of settling, for more attainable goals. You’re used to having to work for everything you’re given and aren’t expecting the Universe to drop a random homemade meal into your lap.

But while you’re not expecting a free meal, you likely won’t be disappointed in receiving one, so long as nothing is expected of you in return, that there are no hidden costs, and that everyone else is able to enjoy a similar opportunity. You don’t want pity, a handout, or an unfair advantage, but you also don’t blindly value work for the sake of work. And admit it, you do enjoy a fine meal with a glass of wine when the opportunity knocks. You don’t often get to kick your feet up, but you won’t look a gift horse in the mouth when it’s handed to you.

When you see the free meal, you may not be able to think of any reason why you’re deserving of it, but you’ll also realize there’s no reason why you aren’t deserving of it either. And after you finish your meal, you won’t lose your work ethic or come to expect or depend on free lunches. A more important change may occur, however. In receiving this free lunch, you may come to ask yourself how you may pay it forward. And thus, from a maxim of “There’s no such thing as a free lunch!” we’ll move to a less-selfish, more generous Universe.

“You’re still such an idealist,” Duncan said afterward. “Not that I think that’s bad.”

“If idealism was my greatest fault, I’d be pretty okay,” I said.

We reached the sauna, which, by the magic of my writing, was always at the right temperature and always had a cooler of ice-cold beer outside. We stripped out of our clothes, grabbed a couple of beers, entered the sauna, put the sausages on top of the sauna coals,

and sat down on the bench. “Cheers,” we said, clinking beers.

“Vacation continues to agree with you,” I commented.

“It’s been good, man, but I finally did a little bit of work after all,” Duncan said, splashing water on an area of the sauna stones not occupied by the *makkara*.

“Oh?” I said, which came out more like “Ow” as the steam hit my face.

“I came up with eight laws of time,” he said, after the steam had passed, “condensing String Cheese Theory from a radical stance to a bonafide scientific theory.”

“I’m all ears,” I said, taking a swig of beer as the sausages sizzled in butter.

“Good, because I’m not allowed to write anything down on this godforsaken planet.”

His eight laws, as closely as I can recall, went like this:

1. Time has no beginning or end, only a shape.
2. Time is naturally nonlinear, but is commonly consumed in the form of linear strings composed of many individual moments in time stacked together.
3. No moment in time is antecedent or subsequent to any other moment in time outside of a time string.
4. After a time string is formed, it will remain intact unless acted upon by an outside force.
5. The same moment in time can be a component of multiple different time strings.
6. The location of a moment in time within a time string has no bearing on time itself.
7. Each moment in time, once conceived, was, is, and will always be.
8. For each moment in a time string, there’s an equal and opposite moment in that same time string.

“Impressive,” I stated, once he had finished. “Each of those can double as a fortune, although I’ll never for the life of me understand how you came up with it.”

Duncan got up and carefully grabbed the foil-wrapped sauna sausages off the stones. “Thanks, man,” he said. “Even if nobody else believes in String Cheese Theory and it turns out to be horribly, laughably wrong, I’m still proud of it. The path to enlightenment is

paved with wrong ideas, after all.”

“I thought it was paved with good intentions?” I asked.

“Potato, potato,” he said. “Where do you want to eat?”

“Olivia wrote a replica of the Cliffs of Dover into existence not far from here. It has a bench.”

“Sounds windy, I’m in.”

We put our clothes back on, grabbed a couple of beers for the road, and traversed the ten minutes until we reached the picturesque cliffside. Duncan placed the tin-foil packets down on the bench, carefully opened them up, and, taking a knife out of his pocket, cut the browned sausages into slices. There had also been onions cooking with the sausages, which I assumed Duncan had learned from a YouTube video.

“When do you think you’ll finish?” Duncan asked as we sat down to eat.

“Tomorrow, on my birthday,” I said, showing him the watch Evo had given me keeping track of the date and time back on Earth.

“Fuck me, it’s April already?” he asked. “We have to celebrate, dude.”

“Celebrate what, though?” I asked. “Tomorrow’s the day I was born, so it’ll be my 26th birthday, but I won’t actually be turning 26 years old for another five months due to my time lost to the Ditch.”

“That’s fucking trippy,” he said. “We can celebrate your accomplishment, if nothing else. You’ve already written everything but the trigger line, right?”

“Yeah, once I write that, everything else automatically sets into motion.” I looked around for a fork, but Duncan hadn’t thought to

“And then we go home,” Duncan said, digging in with his hands because he forgot the forks.

As we sat on the bench quietly eating our smoked sausages, two very serious looking men approached us.

“We’ve been looking for you,” one of them said to me, sternly. “The planet needs you.”

“Come again?”

“Our intelligence network reports that angry economists are going to bomb our planet any minute now,” said the other man, equally severely. “We tried commissioning our top writer to create a planetary defense system in response.”

“And?” I asked.

“And all he wrote was this,” said the first man, handing me a slip of paper.

Thoughts and prayers.

~ *Gailen the Self-Satisfied (newest resident of Airys)*

“So, he fled?” I asked.

“Yes,” came the reply.

“What about Byblya’s second best writer?” I asked. “Are they available?”

“That’s why we’re here,” said the second man.

“Wait, you mean *me*?” I exclaimed.

“Master!” Omni interrupted from the mesh pocket on my suit. “A spaceship just dropped an anti-matter bomb! You need to get off the planet.”

“It’s too late!” cried the men, as they took off running in random directions. “It’s tooooooo laaaaate!”

I wasn’t sure how Omni could see the bomb from that distance, but half-a-minute later a blinding light appeared far off in the distance, and we knew a deadly shockwave would be rippling toward us at Mach speed from the blast’s epicenter.

Poof Kurt Vonnegut appeared beside me. “I’ve taken Olivia and all of the animals to a safe place. Good luck!” *Poof* he disappeared again.

“Quick, the knife,” I told Duncan, reaching out my hand.

He nodded and withdrew the knife he had used to cut the *makkara* from his pocket and handed it to me, handle-first.

I knelt down next to the bench and started carving words into its surface as quickly as I could. Luckily, I only needed four.

LET THERE BE LUNCH!

Thank God I finally learned how to write succinctly, I thought.

After I had finished the message, and as the destruction hurtled toward us across the imaginary Strait of Dover, I noticed something odd. Contrary to what I would have believed, Duncan was startlingly flaccid, no boner to speak of. In the face of imminent death, my friend had conquered his fears.

“But Johnny, how do you *know* Duncan didn’t have an

erection?” you want to ask. And the answer is no, I didn’t have to look. Our friendship was so strong I could sense it, and I was damn proud of him.

The second curious thing that happened was that Duncan laughed at the approaching shockwave. He didn’t have a chance to share his observation, but I imagine his thoughts went something like this: *Look at all that poop from such a tiny fly!*

The third and final curious thing happened immediately after I grabbed Duncan’s hand and beamed us back into *David Bowie’s* control room. Two plates of spaghetti and two glasses of red wine had appeared on the dashboard in front of us, but we were too busy staring out the window in disbelief at the ever-expanding shockwave and mushroom cloud on the planet’s surface to notice.

But that wasn’t the truly curious thing. The *truly* curious thing that happened was this: I heard a voice behind me whisper something inaudible and felt a sudden, sharp pain in my back, causing me to gasp as the breath was driven out of my body. A moment later, my husk fell crumpled on to the floor, dead.

I guess Milton Friedman had been right all along, there really was no such thing as a free lunch.

Let me begin by stating that I was just as shocked as you are now that there was more to my story after being murdered. I was certain that dying would be my final lesson in humility, but the Universe wasn't done with me yet. "And another thing!" it chuckled.

I used to have this fear that someone would discover I hadn't graduated from kindergarten, like I didn't identify a color right or I messed up my ABC's, and I'd have to go back and repeat the zeroth grade as a twenty-year old, or else all my subsequent degrees would be invalidated. After my father passed, that turned into a fear that I'd one day fail to graduate from life. I'd die and reach the afterlife and God or St. Peter or whoever would tell me that I had to redo things, like life was a driving test. "Johnny, you were pretty good at the rest of it, but you couldn't parallel park for shit."

When I did finally die, it felt like I tripped. At first, it wasn't even clear to me what I had tripped on. Was it the sight of the devastation down below, or the floor, or my feet, or my identity? Regardless, I tripped and fell. Yet, I didn't fall down; I fell *up*.

You can be fed up and you can be fucked up, but falling up is something else entirely, believe me.

I fell slowly, at first. I fell above my body and above the room before falling straight through the hull and out of the ship. My rate of upward decline grew exponentially as I fell. You would think that I would have suffocated once I fell outside the ship, but you would be incorrect. Your mistake would be assuming that normal rules applied to me after I fell, but there were no rules now. There was only the fall.

And thus, I found myself falling through space. I fell past strange planets and vast asteroid belts and then straight out of Byblya's Solar

System altogether. Before I knew it, I had even fallen out of the Milky Way and into the vast nothingness between galaxies. It was less of an instance of falling up now as it was more of a falling out. There seemed to be no limit to my ability to fall. When one is presented with such a fall, the only thing to do is see how far it takes you. With falls, you don't really have a choice, and neither did I.

I ultimately fell right out of the Universe and found myself falling through the multiverse, which consisted of infinite alternate universes and the entirety of space, time, matter, and energy. My fall didn't stop there, however. I fell out of the multiverse and was simply Beyond. Beyond is a pretty weird place to be, and a rather alarming place to find yourself.

Beyond, there is nothing, except even that isn't correct. There isn't nothing, as that would allow for the possibility of there being something. And yet, there I was, and I was *still* falling.

I quickly discovered that even being Beyond had its limits. I fell out of Beyond and into a place with no name. I didn't even have a name. I shall continue to refer to myself as "me" now due to my innate need to categorize things, but I was no longer Johnny, so know that I am misleading you, but only due to my own limitations as a storyteller.

As the soul of the former-me formerly known as Johnny fell beyond Beyond, something entirely improbable happened—I landed. I suppose this wasn't really all that improbable, since most falls have an end, but it at least caught *me* by surprise.

There was no satisfying *splat* sound to indicate my arrival due to my lack of matter, but I still felt a certain level of satisfaction from having finally arrived. It's difficult to explain the platform that "I" landed on. Most platforms I had experienced during my life were matter-containing, but this platform had none, as it was a landing spot for matter-less objects, like a dreamcatcher for souls.

The area around me was entirely white from a lack of color, except for a rather remarkable patch of blue floating near me. I would hazard to guess it was a cerulean blue, but it mostly reminded me of my, or rather Johnny's, parents' 1996 Dodge Grand Caravan. It was an economical blue, plenty spacious and family-friendly, but maybe not the best blue to drive through a U.P. winter.

"And who do we have here?" asked the patch of blue, surprising the figurative shit out of me, as I no longer had a corporeal form capable of excretion. "Former species: human. Former name:

Johnny. Former occupation: Martyr...”

“Excuse me, your blueness,” I said, discovering I had the ability to speak. “I wasn’t a martyr.”

“It says here that Johnny, the avatar you were in, died a martyr,” the color blue said. “In the... War Against Free Lunch.”

“I was a casualty, perhaps, but not a martyr,” I explained. “I was unemployed at the time of death, but before that I was a consultant, and before *that* I was a tech specialist.”

The shade of blue sighed. “You aren’t the first entity to have their avatar die and then try to tell me what they were or weren’t. Unfortunately, self-delusion doesn’t stop just because you’re dead. And it’s not up to you to say whether or not your avatar was a martyr. Just like being an asshole, only others can determine that.”

“Okay, asshole,” I said. “If I’m a martyr, then how did I die?”

“Oh, I love showing people their avatar’s deaths, especially when they’re as unflattering as yours. One moment, please.”

Next to the shade of blue, a recording began to play, shot from a top-down view. Duncan and I were standing next to each other, looking out *David Bowie’s* window. After a moment, a third man crept into view behind me. The most immediately noticeable detail about this man was that he lacked a right hand. Once he was directly behind me, the man whispered “There’s no such thing as a free lunch” quietly into my ear and then juttied his right wrist into my back, at which point I gasped and crumpled on the floor with an extremely stupid-looking expression on my face, made all the more obvious by the camera zooming in for a close-up.

It’s painful to die and realize you did so prematurely with important matters left unattended. In my case, I had left my eyes wide open in shock, betraying my surprise; I had similarly failed to close my mouth, which was scandalously agape, permitting entry to all; and worst of all, there was a very large, conspicuous booger on the left side of my nose begging for a tissue.

“What a terrible death,” I said. “I look like an idiot.”

“I know! Isn’t it great?” the shade of blue exclaimed.

“Who killed me?”

“My records indicate you were stabbed by a card-carrying member of the Eastnorthian Branch of the Collective of Gainfully Employed Economists and Other Soothsayers named Alexi.”

“Oh, one of *those* assholes,” I sighed. “What did he stab me with? He didn’t have a right hand.”

“Are you going to force me to say it?” the blueness asked me pleadingly.

“Uhh, yes?”

The blue sighed. “He killed you with his Invisible Hand, the weapon of choice for most militant economists.”

“That’s...” I started to say.

“...on point?” the shade of blue finished for me. “Radical economists are, by definition, unsubtle.”

I was displeased to discover I had been killed by a dad joke. “So, that’s it, then?” I asked. “I’m really dead?”

“Johnny is dead. You were just... playing Johnny. And now that you have completed your time as Johnny, we need to conduct your exit interview.”

“Life has an *exit interview*?” I asked.

“Developed, ironically enough, with help from Johnny’s former employer, the Mighty Waboosh Consulting Agency.”

“You’re clients of MWCA?” I asked. “Oh my God, you’re *the* color blue, the one who ‘funded most of the current Universe’!”

“Yes, I thought that much was obvious, but I’m just a shade of blue, and not the entire color.”

“I didn’t realize the color blue was a collective,” I said. “But then again, I didn’t seem to understand much of anything.”

“Great, let’s begin then, shall we? Question one, *What prompted you to start considering ending your life as Johnny?*”

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “But I didn’t end my life, nor was I considering it. As we already established, I was stabbed in the back by an economist.”

“Right, right. I guess ‘Market Forces’ really do win out in the end,” it said, with a slight chuckle. “Alright, second question, *Under what circumstances, if any, would you consider returning to your previous life as Johnny?*”

“Is that even possible?” I asked.

“Sure,” the color said. “I’m just curious what hypothetical scenario would allow for your return, so we don’t have to worry about training a new Johnny. Higher pay? Better perks? Flexible scheduling? Oh, greater responsibilities, perhaps? I know how you ex-consultants can be.”

“You’ll have to refamiliarize me with the previous terms of my engagement,” I said. “I didn’t realize I was being paid to be Johnny. I

do, however, strongly value vacation time.”

“Excellent!” said the color blue. “Question three, *Do you think the Universe adequately recognized your contributions as Johnny? If not, how do you think recognition could be improved next time?*”

“I wasn’t expecting to be thanked for a job well done once I died,” I responded. “But if there was any recognition from the Universe while I was alive, I must have missed it.”

“Let me check your record,” he said. “Okay, it looks like there was a time in a bar in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Earth where the song ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ by the band ‘Thin Lizzy’ played on the jukebox despite nobody having requested it. That was for you.”

“Wow, that’s... nice,” I said. “I probably enjoyed that moment.”

“Johnny was actually in Appleton, Wisconsin, Earth at the time, but the hairs on the back of his neck did stand up in appreciation. Now, question four, *Were there any parts of life you found difficult to understand? If so, how can we make them clearer next time?*”

“Oh, boy, where do I begin?” I asked. “Nearly all of it, if I’m being honest. Why did I exist at all? For what purpose? What did it all mean? And maybe the answers were out there all along, but there was just so much damn noise, it was hard to decipher truth from fact, and fact from complete nonsense.”

“What would you have preferred?” the color blue asked. “A book? We tried that, but we couldn’t find a publisher. We had more success with fortune cookies as a delivery mechanism, but the lessons were forgotten almost immediately. We even set up a Twitter account, but it was quickly suspended for suspicious activity.”

“Perhaps MWCA could work with you on a multi-channel marketing campaign,” I suggested. “They’d happily take more of your money.”

“Good idea. Question five, *Did you feel you had the tools, resources, and working conditions to be successful in your life? If not, what could be improved?*”

“As far as the Earth goes, my workplace environment was starting to degrade fairly noticeably with rising temperatures and increasingly dangerous natural disasters,” I replied. “If it’s in your capabilities to mitigate or even reverse the effects of climate change, I think that would go a long way toward improving worker productivity in the long run.”

“I’ll make sure your complaint is captured in the formal record,” the shade of blue said. “Question six, *What was the best part of your*

life as Johnny?”

“Shooting the shit with my friends, without a doubt. And also pizza.”

“Brilliant. Question seven, *What can the Universe improve on?*”

“There seems to be little to no transparency,” I said. “I mean, who is at the top making decisions, and how are those decisions being made? Actually, what’s so special about the color blue, anyway, and why haven’t I thought to ask that until now? No offense, of course.”

“Your supervisor should have helped clear up some of your confusion, which is why the chain of command is in place. But let me just add that we, the color blue, are not in charge of the Universe, we just have access to the tank.”

“The tank?” I asked. “The time tank full of unstretched time curds?”

“That’s an odd bit of phrasing,” the shade of the color blue said, “but yes, we have access to time.”

“And who was my supervisor?”

“The particular shade of light blue typically reflected by the leaves of Forget-me-not plants.”

“We had a patch of those growing up,” I said, “but they never revealed anything to me.”

“Yes, well, that shade of blue does have a bad case of dementia. Moving on, *Do you have any suggestions for improving morale?*”

“Whose morale?” I asked.

“Everyone’s. Every living organism.”

“Well, team spirit was lacking at times. We weren’t exactly all in it together, were we?”

“More icebreaker activities perhaps?”

“No!” I yelled. “I definitely had enough of those for a lifetime. And while I can’t speak for other species, I suspect the dodos came to regret their icebreaker activities with humans as well.”

“I’ll just jot down a suggestion of more pizza, then?” the color blue asked hopefully.

“Sure,” I said. “At the very least, that ought to please the grade-school boy and subway rat demographics.”

“Excellent. Question nine, *What would you most look forward to in your new avatar, should you choose not to reoccupy your old one?*”

“A new life?” I asked. “I didn’t know that was an option either.”

"And now that you do, what would you most look forward to?" the shade of blue asked.

"I guess I would look forward to having a new chance to decide for myself what to do. I think I'd like to pursue writing professionally."

"Interesting. You're no longer Johnny and yet you still dream of labor. What makes you think your next avatar would be a writer, let alone a better one?"

"To become a writer, I had to learn how to do a lot of other things unsuccessfully. And to find what I wanted to do, I had to explore a lot of things that made me miserable. Since the best writing is informed by one's own experiences, now that I've experienced death firsthand, I finally have something interesting I can write about."

"When, precisely, did you plan on writing about Johnny's death, considering Johnny has, in fact, already died, with the additional wrinkle that you, as it so happens, were the Johnny in question?"

"When the muse strikes, I suppose."

"I'm afraid you waited too long," said the shade of blue, in a consoling manner. "Next question, *How would you describe the perfect candidate to replace you as Johnny?*"

"To replace me?" I asked.

"To relive Johnny's life, yes."

"Well, they should probably be similar to me, but more self-assured. A little bit more confidence could have gone a long way in my life. I had the personal qualities and skill sets needed to be a good Johnny, I think, I just underutilized them."

"Thank you, that will help tremendously with the job listing. Second-to-last question, *Would you recommend life to a friend, and why or why not?*"

"Life strikes me as type 2 fun," I said. "It started with the best intentions, got a bit carried away, and then I was really roughing it in the end, but now that I'm dead, it seems rather fun in retrospect. So, I'll answer with an emphatic 'Yes.'"

"Jolly good," replied the shade of blue. "Final question, *Is there anything else you'd like to add?*"

"I'm not sure if you're the right shade of blue to ask," I said tentatively, "but I, as Johnny, was tasked with saving the Universe. Do you know if I might have unwittingly succeeded before I died?"

"Were you? How interesting," replied the shade of blue. "I'm afraid the end of the Universe would be under the Department of

Comedy's purview."

"The end of the Universe is a comedy?" I asked.

"As was the beginning, believe me."

"And what Department do you represent?"

"The Department of Tragedy."

"Is there a different shade of blue from the Department of Comedy I can speak with, please?" I asked.

"Hi there," said a different shade of blue that suddenly appeared next to the first shade. This shade was less 1996 Dodge Grand Caravan cerulean blue and more 1400 BC Egyptian blue, a mixed drink made with silica, lime, copper, and alkali, usually served upon the rocks and later stolen by European museums.

"Hello," I said. "Do you two happen to have names other than 'blue'?"

"I'm Rosencrantz, the Minister of Comedy," said the Egyptian blue.

"And I'm Guildenstern, the Minister of Tragedy," said the cerulean blue.

"We changed our names to characters from a play we like," Rosencrantz added.

"*Hamlet*?" I asked.

"No, the other one," Guildenstern said.

"Has he decided on what type of story he'd like for himself—a comedy or a tragedy?" Rosencrantz asked.

"I get to choose?" I asked.

"Most people don't consider that much of a choice," it replied.

"All of our high-end clients choose tragedies," said Guildenstern, quite proudly. "They're so much more interesting. Tragedies offer the best in high art."

"Why don't people choose comedies?" I asked.

"I suppose they don't want to be the joke," Rosencrantz said, thoughtfully.

"And what kind of life did Johnny have? A tragedy I assume? ...or was it a comedy all along?"

"Well, according to our records," said Rosencrantz, "Johnny didn't have much of a life at all."

Woof. "Was that really necessary?" I asked, the hurt apparent in my voice.

"We just mean, there were so many more interesting time strings

available,” said Guildenstern. “We couldn’t figure out why you chose Johnny to begin with.”

“I don’t remember choosing my life,” I said. “Nor do I know who I am, if I’m not Johnny.”

“Yes, well, your memory gets wiped before you begin, of course,” it explained.

“But why wouldn’t I choose to be Johnny?” I asked, defensively. “From my perspective, he actually played a large part in a variety of happenings.”

“Well, Johnny had no life at all until it became necessary for us to mess with his time string in order to prevent the end of the Universe. Then we had to come up with some cockamamie scheme to pull Johnny away from Earth so the Universe could be saved,” Rosencrantz explained.

“So, I really *did* save the Universe?” I asked, very much in shock.

“Hardly,” replied Rosencrantz. “In fact, Johnny’s continued presence on Earth would have *prevented* the Universe from being saved. We needed to get him far away so the *real* savior could do their work.”

“We were, however, nice enough to give you an adventure instead of just killing you,” Guildenstern said.

“Yes, you lured me into space to kill me there instead,” I reflected.

“Yes, well, we still think that was a lot more interesting than what the original time string had in place for Johnny,” Rosencrantz said.

“Johnny would have been unemployed for a month or so, drifting in and out of depression, his life force slowly oozing out, before deciding to find a different job in tech support and dying of a heart attack at age thirty-eight,” Guildenstern said.

“Oof,” I muttered. “You’re right, that’s brutal. I guess I should be thankful you took the time to write an adventure for me.”

“Oh, we didn’t,” said the Minister of Tragedy. “That type of work is beneath us.”

“But I put one of my best interns on it,” said the Minister of Comedy. “I believe you met them. Their name is Destiny.”

“That explains a lot,” I said. “But what I still don’t understand is how my remaining on Earth would have prevented the Universe from being saved.”

“Well, the Universe was actually created on Earth, and by the least likely of candidates,” said Rosencrantz. “It happened mere

moments before Johnny quit his job, and before his very eyes. In fact, Johnny was the only eyewitness to the birth of the Universe.”

“The birth of the *first draft* of the Universe,” Guildenstern corrected.

“Right, well there was a critical error that had gone unnoticed that prevented parts of the code from loading properly that would have swiftly led to the degradation of the time tank,” replied Rosencrantz.

“An error?” I asked.

“A missing curly close bracket of all things almost doomed us all,” Rosencrantz explained, chuckling good-naturedly.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “If I had seen the birth of the Universe, I would remember, wouldn’t I?”

“It wasn’t Johnny’s fault the error went undetected, but once we learned of it, we needed his cat to fix it, which I’m sure you already figured out for yourself.”

“My cat?” I asked. “*Magrarius X?*?”

“To jump on a keyboard and add the missing curly close bracket in the correct spot, yes,” replied Rosencrantz.

“Doesn’t a curly bracket require the use of the Shift key?” I asked, my mind blown. “How did Magrarius X manage that?”

“It was an incredibly lucky jump.”

“For us all,” Guildenstern added.

“We were a whisker away from certain doom.”

“God!” I exclaimed. “He’ll be even more insufferable to live with now.”

“So you see, Johnny didn’t play much of a part in saving the Universe,” Rosencrantz said.

“But he *did* help get Gee Whiskas elected to the position of God,” I replied.

“An interesting wrinkle, for sure, but not one that changed things very much,” Guildenstern replied.

“And it’s not like Johnny can take much of the credit for it,” Rosencrantz added. “He might have had the original idea, but only because we changed his time string to take him away from Earth, and he didn’t even do much of the actual campaign work, as he was stuck in the Ditch or in a coma for most of the time before the election took place.”

Despite being dead and having been told I wasn’t actually Johnny, these words still stung to hear. “But in changing Johnny’s time string,

other time strings must have changed too,” I replied. “Like my friends. Would Duncan have finished his life’s work of developing String Cheese Theory without my help?”

“You think *String Cheese Theory* was the Dread Pirate Duncan’s life’s work?” Guildenstern scoffed.

“*Dread Pirate Duncan?*” I repeated, aghast.

“Yes, after Johnny’s death, Duncan convinced Captain Waboosh to join the War Against Free Lunch, on the side that was *for* free lunch. Duncan later married the first mate, Lucca, and once Captain Waboosh fell in battle, Duncan took command.”

“He turned into an absolute savage fighter and one of the damn finest space pirates the Universe ever saw,” Rosencrantz added, the awe apparent in his voice.

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

“It all started with Johnny’s death,” Guildenstern replied. “Watch for yourself.”

A projection started playing again, irritatingly starting with the close-up of my surprised, stupid-looking, booger-laden death face. The camera then panned out to show Duncan stomp on the assailant’s left foot before breaking a plate of free spaghetti over his head, dropping the economist like it was March 2000 and he was a .com tech stock. He then took the knife out of his pocket and stabbed Alexi in the heart.

“Wow,” I said. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“No one ever sees a free lunch coming,” Rosencrantz said.

“There was a dramatic, albeit brief, rise in intelligent beings doing fucking awesome things across the Universe immediately after your lunch was distributed. Duncan was merely the first,” Guildenstern said.

“He always said the foot stomp was an underrated move,” I said. “If Duncan became a pirate captain, what happened to Chet after my death?”

“Chet eventually created a version of the Thinking Box capable of curing people of their pain and ailments, including cancer, and was even capable of restoring someone’s life so long as they were only recently dead,” Guildenstern said. “He commemorated it in memory of his dead friend Johnny.”

“I believe it was the 7 Plus model,” Rosencrantz clarified.

“Holy shit,” I said. “Good for him. And what about Olivia?”

“She took the next step on the evolutionary path of mankind,

evolving into a being of great spiritual and psychokinetic power,” Guildenstern said. “Amortal, unaffected by disease or aging, and even capable of surviving in physical and nonphysical realities alike, she transcended her identity, gender, and genetics to become something altogether divergent.”

“She became the mother of all future *homo gaia*,” Rosencrantz added.

“Goddammit, Evo,” I muttered to myself.

“So you see, Johnny’s main purpose in life was serving as a foil for the great accomplishments of those around him,” Guildenstern said, “including Duncan, Chet, Olivia, and his cat.”

“Not to mention the literal creator of the Universe,” Rosencrantz added.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed. “It didn’t even dawn on me. You’re telling me Beauregard Q. Hundschlager *created the Universe*?”

“Indeed.”

“But he *hates* the Universe,” I said. “And he doesn’t even know how to program!”

“Exactly why it had to be him,” Rosencrantz responded. “Otherwise, he’d have meddled with it.”

“This is a lot to take in,” I said, wishing I had a body and something to lean on.

“Don’t worry, you’ll forget all of this soon enough,” Guildenstern said in a reassuring tone. “So, what’ll it be, a comedy or a tragedy?”

“I’d like my old life back,” I said.

“You’re positive this is what you want, despite all the many compelling reasons not to, and the fact you could choose any of the other infinitely more interesting time strings we just told you about?” Rosencrantz asked.

“Yes,” I said, defiantly. “Despite all the many compelling reasons not to.”

“Okay, we’ll put you down for a bit of both then,” Guildenstern said.

“Both of what?” I asked.

“Comedy and tragedy.”

“Ahh,” I replied, hoping I wasn’t making a mistake.

“And which end of Johnny’s time string would you like to begin from?”

“Come again?”

"Would you like to be cut out of your mom again and grow up to be stabbed by a militant space economist or be born out of the free market and grow down until you eventually crawl into a woman's stomach?"

"Are you telling me String Cheese Theory is real?" I asked.

"We just refer to it as time," Rosencrantz said.

"And time is shaped like a sphere?"

"Not like a sphere at all," it replied, laughing at my absurd suggestion. "More like a northern white rhinoceros with a single lima bean on its back swishing its tail back and forth as flies buzz around."

"Obviously," Guildenstern added. "So, which will it be?"

"I'd like to skip birth altogether and start somewhere in the middle," I said, "before my life was interfered with."

"Only a serial killer wants to start in the middle of a time string," Rosencrantz said.

"I'd like to restart from the last moment in Johnny's life when I remember being in control," I repeated. "Before the time string was altered."

"The morning Johnny quit his job at Mooseport LLC?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"And would you like to consume the time string in the direction toward, or away from, the stabbing?" Rosencrantz asked.

"Toward," I said.

"Well, aren't *you* full of surprises?" he asked, with a tssk tssk thrown in for good measure.

"There's something I still don't understand," I said. "Why did Johnny have to die?"

"Ahh," replied the Minister of Tragedy. "The anti-matter bomb dropped on Byblya was commissioned in what you would have considered to be the future by a group of artists looking to create vast amounts of new life, culture, and beauty. You see, they were consuming their respective time strings in the opposite direction you were consuming yours, so from their perspective, the War Against Free Lunch was a beautiful and necessary act of creation."

"In your perception of time, they killed you, and you were the first death in a long and brutal war," added the Minister of Comedy. "But in their perception of time, they *created* you, and you were the final birth in a long and beautiful period of creation. Thus, they killed you so you could live. More ironic yet, was that in the War Against

Free Lunches, they were on your side and thought free lunches were a pretty swell idea.”

“This is why the larger War Against Sanity rages on forever,” Guildenstern added. “Each lifeform is experiencing time completely dissimilarly, in opposite directions and in different orders. Everything begins to make more sense once you understand that.”

“No it doesn’t,” I muttered. “It’s so confusing.”

“You’re still feeling the side effects of having recently been alive.”

“Anyway, it’s been lovely chatting with you, but we have a serious backlog of death to attend to,” Guildenstern said.

“We look forward to your inevitable return,” Rosencrantz added. And then I fell off the platform into a deep abyss of nothingness.

Epilogue

Beauregard Q. Hundschlager was waiting for me as I stepped out of the elevator, in much the same way a toaster might wait for a slice of bread. I can't say for certain that he had been lingering there for me specifically, nor can I be sure he was aware of his own actions, but my arrival seemed to rekindle inside of him a sense of purpose.

"Good morning," I said, instinctively.

"Hmm... good. Yes, good morning," he replied with his mysterious accent that sounded like every Bond villain coalesced into one grandiose super-scoundrel. "Truthful, it seems to be shit morning, but I do not blame the morning for this."

Unperturbed by his response, I walked past him toward my desk. Beauregard followed.

We worked together at Mooseport LLC, a technology firm representing external clients throughout northern Michigan. I constituted part of the company's tech support team, while Beauregard was tasked with software development. He didn't actually have much programming experience, and I secretly doubted he had *ever* completed any useful work for the company, but he had always been there, even before Mooseport was Mooseport.

According to a legend I may or may not have been responsible for starting, years ago Beauregard had been standing in a field, and then a building had slowly risen up around him. Unperturbed by this development, Beauregard had obstinately stood his ground until that building one day hosted Mooseport LLC. Unable to remove him, management had offered Beauregard a job instead.

Luckily for Beauregard's bank account, his job security seemed to depend on appealing to people's senses of tradition rather than fulfilling any set job description. It simply wouldn't have been Mooseport without him.

“My friend, I wasn’t declaring the morning ‘good’ as much as I was simply trying to be pleasant,” I explained. “But I think you already knew this.”

“Ahh, forgive me. I momentarily experience lapse and forget correct human response to your rhetorical pleasantry.”

I placed my messenger bag on my desk and removed my laptop. “Beauregard, please don’t tell me you’re turning into a machine on me!”

“Aha! I worry the same thing with you!” he said, quite seriously. “Good morning!” you say. Heh! We will see if morning is good or not soon enough!”

I chuckled. “I always figured that you would prefer it if I and the rest of humanity were replaced by machines.”

“It matters not,” he said, shrugging. “You are already machines, just soft and virulent, like Trojan horse for ecological network.”

My soft and virulent finger pressed my laptop’s power button, setting an invisible stack of processes into motion. His words didn’t bother me; making disparaging remarks about humanity was Beauregard’s version of discussing the weather. Every day was regrettable with a ninety-nine percent chance of human error. He often said that the worst creation had been man, with Billy Joel’s discography a close and highly correlated second.

Frankly, it was odd that we were so palatable; we were a lesson in contrasts. I was in my mid-twenties; he was in his late thirties. I was taller, but he walked more quickly. I had something resembling a beard, but his looked like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx’s faces had bonked and had a child. Less superficially, I enjoyed humans while Beauregard did not, rare exceptions aside.

For this particular exception, it was time to begin the daily grind. I sighed an exorbitant sigh—an auditory signal to my brain to prepare for further degradation.

Beauregard understood this signal. “Enough of chit chat,” he said. “Have fun helping meatbrains with their metalbrain problems.”

He turned and left me to my work, but my meatbrain quickly wandered in a desperate attempt at data, or, rather, protein preservation.

I recollected how the “Q.” in “Beauregard Q. Hundschlager” wasn’t actually short for anything. Beauregard’s complete middle name was “Q.”, period included. I had never had the pleasure of meeting or even hearing about Mr. and Mrs. Hundschlager, but I

imagined they were lovely people who simply prided themselves on their punctuality.

I shuddered as I found myself briefly struck by the possibility that there may have never even been a Mr. or Mrs. Hundschlager, but I found comfort in the reminder that even eccentric people had parents. Nothing miraculously came into being without lots of planning, foreshadowing, and/or preventable accidents. Well, except for the Universe itself, apparently, and all the matter within it. Come to think of it, everything had once miraculously come into being, including the matter that currently constituted Beauregard. Clearly God hadn't grown up in an Evangelical "purity culture" household.

I was suddenly wrenched away from my "Leaky Condom and the Birth of the Universe" theory by the sound of the phone ringing at my desk. Somewhere, someone was in desperate need of help. Tragically, I picked up the phone.

"Hello, Mooseport technical support; this is Johnny. How may I assist you?" I asked.

Twenty minutes and two mind-numbing calls later, I kicked my feet up and shoved my hands in my pockets, at which time I noticed a piece of paper pinned above my desk, presumably left there for me by my manager. Containing a W. Clement Stone quote, it read, "Aim for the moon. If you miss, you may hit a star."

While I normally would have begun overanalyzing the quote, including my manager's intentions for putting it there, I was distracted instead by an object in my pocket. It was a thin, rectangular piece of cardstock that my brain couldn't immediately identify.

I slowly withdrew my hand with the mysterious object and was surprised to discover a creased and lightly scorched 1989 Upper Deck Dickie Thon baseball card with the words "Johnny, you're a WRITER!!" written on it.

"Where on Earth did you come from?" I asked the baseball card. I didn't recognize the handwriting, so I couldn't rule out the possibility it had been written by Mr. Thon himself. *But who slipped it into my pocket? And when?*

*And what does it mean, I'm a writer? I write knowledge base articles for people who lack basic knowledge—that hardly seems to qualify me as a writer. Although, I *have* always harbored an inner desire to write a novel... I just don't know how Dickie Thon could possibly know that.*

As a textbook millennial, I'd been burdened my entire life with

the ever-present feeling that I could accomplish or become anything I set my mind to. As vague as that feeling may have been, tech support had never been what my superego had in mind. Realistic or not, I thought there really had to be something more out there for the world to offer me, and hopefully something more that I could offer the world... *and maybe writing can be that thing*, I thought.

And thus, with a brief feeling of courage, I decided my time dealing with the technological repercussions of thawing vegetables had come to an end. So too, I resolved, had my mildly sweaty career at Mooseport LLC. The decision to quit my job may seem sudden and out-of-the-blue to you, but honestly, it was about damn time.

I wished I could have called Dickie Thon to tell him the good news, but I settled for unpinning the W. Clement Stone quote from the wall and taping it to my work laptop instead.

My good mojo was quickly interrupted, however, by the phone ringing. Having just decided to quit, I decided not to pick it up, which meant I had to endure the clamor. Within ten seconds of the user being redirected to the voicemail, however, they called back again. Clearly, this was urgent. Feeling both pity and pain, I picked up the phone.

"Hello, this is Johnny," I said, abandoning protocol.

"Hello, Johnny. Is this tech support?" asked the caller, uncertainly.

"As of a minute ago, yes, but as of this moment, I think my answer is no."

"Okay," said the female voice on the other end, "If you aren't tech support, then what are you?"

"I'm starting to come to grips with the idea that I may be a writer."

"Oh, have you written anything I may have read?" she asked.

"My best-read work thus far are my articles on 'How to Reseat Your Hard Drive,' 'How to Upgrade Your Audio/Video Drivers,' and 'How to Squeeze More Life Out of Your Computer.' Not a very extensive bibliography, I'm afraid, but I have it on good authority that I'm secretly a writer."

"Your own authority?" she asked, nonjudgmentally.

"No, actually. Former Major League shortstop Dickie Thon."

"Yes, well he should know. So, if I asked for assistance with a tech issue, would you be able to help me?"

"I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you," I said, feeling guilty. "The truth is that I've just decided to quit, and I feel I need to fully

commit or risk being stuck in this soul-crushing vocational roundabout forever.”

“I see,” said the lady. “Good for you.”

I was caught off guard by how understanding she was, especially considering how dramatic I had just been. “Out of curiosity, who are you?” I asked, not entirely sure why.

“Oh, that’s not what you asked me last time,” the lady said, surprised.

“Last time?” I asked. “Who are you?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” she said. “But we’ll meet again someday.”

“That’s cryptic and mildly unsettling,” I said. “Nevertheless, thank you for being understanding.”

“You have no idea, Johnny. Good luck out there.”

“You too!”

I hung up the phone and subsequently disconnected it for good measure. I wasn’t going to waste this opportunity to end on a high note. Next, I shut down my laptop and cleared out my desk, putting my various action figures, company pens, and multi-colored Post-it notes into my messenger bag, which I slung around my shoulder. Carrying my laptop, I pushed in my chair and began casually strolling to my manager’s office to deliver the good news.

Halfway there, however, Beauregard popped out from behind a wall holding two cups of coffee. “I buy one for you,” he said.

“Jesus!” I replied, startled. “Dammit, man... I was just on my way to quit my job.”

“Ahh, see? I tell you would be shitty morning,” he replied, handing me a cup. “But I need you to be witness first.”

“Witness to what?” I asked, slightly alarmed.

“It is surprise!” he said.

Now I was definitely concerned, but I ignored my hard-wired survival instincts, took a big gulp of coffee, and followed him into his office. Beauregard was one of the only employees to have his own, but I assumed it was given to him in an attempt to hide him, not as a reward. I had never heard a single whisper of protest about it, either.

Beauregard sat down at his desk and beckoned for me to look at the monitor. He very quickly scrolled through hundreds, maybe thousands of lines of code, all of which resembled technical gobbledygook to me.

"I work on it all month," Beauregard said, proudly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Truthful, I do not know. But I think it is ready."

"You've been working on it for a month and you don't even know what it's for?"

Beauregard shrugged. "We often do not know for why we do things. Like ants in colony or spleen in body, we just do."

He had a weird way of explaining nonsensical things in a rational way. It was strangely comforting.

"Ready?" Beauregard asked anxiously. "I am too nervous to watch. Please, watch for me and let me know when finish."

"Okay, ready," I replied.

He typed "start bb", instructed me to press Enter, and turned away. As I pressed the Enter key, the only thought going through my mind was *This feels oddly familiar*.

The cursor blinked as I waited to see if anything would happen. Suddenly, the console window stated "bb initializing..." before thousands of lines of code scrolled down the screen faster than my human eyes could comprehend. I had no idea what the program was doing, but it was seemingly doing it very, very quickly. Finally, everything disappeared and it simply read, "bb successful, with 0 error(s)."

I took another sip of coffee and eyed the monitor suspiciously. Nothing in particular seemed to have happened, but I felt like something was off. Like something was *different*. And I found this feeling to be even more confusing than Beauregard's program.

"I think it's done," I informed Beauregard, who turned around. "What did it do?"

"I know not the answer to your question," he solemnly replied.

"Then how could it know there were no errors?"

"I know not the answer to your question," he replied again.

"Are you satisfied?"

"I... I know not the answer to your question," he replied, this time with a note of exhaustion in his voice.

"I feel you," I said, literally resting my hand on his shoulder. "I'm not sure what my work has amounted to either. If you ever find out, let me know."

Beauregard turned and smiled at me. "Farewell, Johnny. May destiny find you by the beard and pull."

“Only after pulling yours first,” I said, shaking the hand he had presented. “Take care, old friend.”

I disposed of my coffee cup and walked out of Beauregard’s office, immediately running into my manager, Dave. While not particularly important for you to know, Dave’s broad shoulders and perfectly coiffed blond hair reminded me of Fred from *Scooby-Doo*. Never in my life had my hair been coiffed even half as successfully as Dave’s, a fact I frequently stewed over during team meetings.

This time, however, Dave had the look of a perfectly coiffed air conditioner, with sweat running down his face due to leaks in his ductwork. He was holding a wireless phone.

“Johnny,” he said, slightly out of breath, “where have you been? The tech support line is redirecting to my desk. Is your phone disconnected?”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “I was actually looking for *you*, Dave. I quit.”

Dave dropped the phone in shock. “You’re quitting!? Why?”

“It’s not you, it’s me,” I said, taking pleasure at using a line that would have been used on me by countless girls over the years if, in fact, girls talked to me at all. “I need to rediscover myself.”

“Well, that just freezes my coils. What will we do without you?” he stammered.

I showed him the quote taped to my laptop. “Aim for the moon, Dave.”

He and his perfectly-coiffed, condensating head considered that for a moment. “Well, what will you do?”

“I’m going to follow my dreams of becoming a writer,” I said. With that line, I handed him my equipment and ID badge and, despite being indoors, put on my sunglasses and walked away without looking back. The nice lady’s voice could faintly be heard speaking into the office floor.

I rode the elevator down to the lobby, kicked the crash bar on the front door open, and met the sunny day with my arms raised triumphantly à la Sylvester Stallone in a training montage. Luck chose that moment to pull me by the beard; I was just in time to witness a black sedan reverse into my gray Toyota Corolla hatchback before speeding off. Like Venice sinking slowly into the sea, my arms slumped back down to my sides.

Frankly, I felt I might have deserved having my car hit for acting like such a complete tool. As I stopped to ponder the significance of the timing, I momentarily wondered whether I had just made a huge

mistake quitting my job. But after surveying the damage, I determined that the new dent in my rear fender was perfectly camouflaged by all the existing dings and scratches. It was past its prime, but still a contender—the Rocky Balboa of 1986 compact cars.

Having brushed my premonition aside, I allowed myself, in a quintessential example of something one should never do, to shrug and think, *What else can go wrong?*²⁷

And then a funny thing happened. A series of images appeared in my head, beginning with a rotten piece of bologna sitting on a counter, followed by a strange, naked man in a sauna holding a whip, concluding with a tiny, solitary fly buzzing around a pile of dog crap.

I had often joked that I had a habit of asking rhetorical questions and then answering my own questions in surprising ways, but this had clearly taken that phenomenon to a concerning new extreme.

After entering my car, I surprised myself by starting the engine without any of my usual hesitation. “I Got A Name” was playing on the radio. Unexpectedly, I began to cry fat, ugly tears of relief.

Jim Croce, you son of a bitch.

I put the car into drive and departed the Mooseport LLC parking lot, carrying my name just like my daddy did in pursuit of a dream I had been hiding from myself. And while I didn’t know where this path would ultimately take me, I did have a good feeling I knew where I could find a free lunch at that time of day.

I passed away on April 19th, 2016, one day before my 26th birthday, and came to on September 4th, 2015, over seven months earlier. Of course, as time travelers like to say, it’s always September 4th, 2015 *somewhere*.²⁷

²⁷ As opposed to seventh-dimensional beings, who smirkingly say that it’s *always* September 4th, 2015 before trying to impress women by bench pressing the multiverse.