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BLIMP'S BURDEN

by

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CHAPTER I

Gruel never yielded anything to a single soul, but most of the apartment's occasional guests – when they'd pay her any mind at all – mistook her resistance for the indifference of morbid obesity, or the pervading detachment from life and reality resulting from prolonged suffering from the same. Barney had loved her in *precisely* the same cheesily-affectionate manner with which he did in their kittenhood, uninterrupted for nearly a decade, and thought he knew for certain how she felt about his touch – he assumed that when she fled in a sudden, fluid, ground-covering saunter to her corner's solitude, it was only an unfortunate, but inevitable involuntary reflex to his stocky presence, when in fact his volume failed one hundred percent of his hundreds of attempts to command any whatsoever. In the midst of female and/or unfamiliar company, he'd make a point to bend his bulbous puckering down to search for her eyes with his own, rubbing lightly together the pads of his thumb and index finger as he very deliberately

extended the whole of the grubby device toward her snout, as if to point *at* her *with* the foul racket. For her ears, it was sautéed nails in a chamber pot; for her tastes, it was the sound of death.

In actuality, she had never once experienced even a wee grain of fear of the imbecile. As it happens, no living being – thinking and not – ever had or ever would, for the extent of his existence. If Gruel had been bestowed with the most boundless, ever-giving gift of complex linguistics, she wouldn't have batted an eye before loudly protesting her sentiments about his life, his noise, and his rank-ass hands as they approached her, sitting static in her green bowelled-out faux leather recliner, attempting to murder him with her eyes. Unfortunately, gray Tabbies are quite unlucky – or perhaps just out of all favor in the eyes of Chance, because they are the least equipped mammals by far when it comes to domestic dialog, though Gruel had learned to tolerate her companion's pervasively meek nature. She was allowed to languish about for the last few years of her life, eating just a bit more than she should every day, warming herself in the windowsills bathing among welcome patches of crisp mountain sun – on especially frisky occasions, even explicitly expressing her disgust by knocking one or two of Barney's collectible anime figurines off their wall shelf and onto the creaky, disused air hockey table in the corner.

It's fairly widely-accepted in the scientific community that she, being feline, 1) could not possibly understand her own mortality in any substantial way, 2) could not maintain any sort of concept of *the future*, and 3) was extremely metacognitively limited, generally – without the ability to self-reflect. And yet, Gruel's day-to-day demeanor – were you able to translate the thoughts occupying the space between her two (especially soft) ears into an English internal dialogue – was full of easily recognizable human utterances.

"I wish you were dead," in response to Barney's more especially foul habits (like the horrendous rubbing.) "Though I am *actually* going to die before you, you know. I see you there, poking your grotesque digits at me, cooing your fucking jowls, and it makes me sick," she'd continue. "If we truly *are* creations of the omniscient judeochristian God, and he chose to keep you, he is no 'sadist,' but a nano-brained sky idiot intent on utterly wasting his limitless time."

If domesticated pet conventions were a bit different, and the course of evolutionary feline anatomy altered – if Gruel *were* able to verbalize and audibilize these sentiments to Barney Blimp from the first moment they came to be together, there's no telling which of them would still be alive, or if he'd have turned out a bit sharper. At thirty years old, Mr. Blimp was single, white, and *frumpy*. He'd moved them in to their downtown Denver apartment on his new boss's

abrasive recommendation after landing a *Senior Software Engineer* position at MapQuest's then-new, 17,000 square foot headquarters just two blocks North; the company, itself a continually less-relevant navigation service and mobile application. For Barney, achieving a real *tech industry job* to which he could show up in pajamas and drink cheap beer had been a point of substantial pride, though the most he'd ever mustered would be considered minimal by any self-respecting individual. It was his privilege to watch over *The Server Room*, with its gray, winking racks, and arid, coppertone heat – where the data of millions of users was stored and exchanged securely. Granted, most of them were elderly – those few not quite old enough to stop driving (according to them, not their children,) but not fresh enough to detach themselves entirely from physically printed digital directions. The gap was narrowing by the week, but Barney didn't mind much – it kept his job consistently low-stress, sparing him daily energy he'd need in the after-five dash home to log in and take over for his Mountain Time afternoon shift, watching over the virtual skies through a simulated radar scope on the Virtual Air Traffic Simulation network (VATSIM). From around the world, commercial pilots-in-training would log in using complex home built addons to form a cohesive virtual world – the dullest Massively Multiplayer Online Game ever spawned – in which they'd simulate every monotonous detail involved in captaining a

passenger flight – the flight plan, the kneeboard checklist, and – if the locale was chosen correctly, where a supervisor was present – the communication with air traffic control, including clearance requests, readbacks, handoffs, and approvals – *every one* of the most irritating bureaucracies involved in contemporary flight. Even the longest-aging simulator titles could be Frankensteined to subject a user with realtime-updated weather, delays, traffic redirection, etc, necessitating a student to use all of the real-world weather monitoring services as they'd be required – as well as the judgments which would depend on the data – throughout the rest of their long, hateful, empty careers. After they'd earned their certifications to fly real aircraft, the vast majority would be glad to leave VATSIM behind forever. (Not even jet pilots want to digitally recreate the tedium of their day job during off hours.) However, a select few *ultra-dorky* aviation nerds like Blimp participated for no reason at all except for an especially quaint masochism spending thousands of their living hours engaged in absurdly-realistic simulations of one of two notoriously high-stress jobs – Captain or air traffic controller – without any expectation of compensation. It is in these extremist communities that you'll find *the* most rule-following, law-abiding, legislation-jerking twerps in existence today. General Aviation Dads are the grunts – the muscle of petty, aggravating adherence to their everpresent FARAIM manuals –

a glossy, ten-pound, yearly-updated collection of *every single* regulation enforced by the Federal Aviation Administration – but most have legitimate careers, wives, and moderately healthy children. *Hardcore Simmers*, however, are an inexplicably dedicated bunch – bile of the least-socialized sort – not for the sake of competition, fun, nor even mastery. When asked, Blimp spoke of his dedication as if it was an (unsolicited,) diehard *duty*-bound slavery – he was *needed* by the community. In the context of their continued function, it was true – he *was* Ultimate Air Boss of the Denver Area Digital ARTCC – but his sudden, permanent, unannounced absence would debatably result in little more than a minor inconvenience; a few broken, too-Germanic hearts.

Regardless of the reality of his role, Barney Blimp *needed to be needed*, as one says. Over the course of his half-decade participation in the organization, he had somehow amassed over 20,000 online forum posts, communicating with the membership – which maintained a populace of fifty or so – and logged some 4,500 hours as a virtual air traffic controller. He'd flown a little high-winged Cessna as an adolescent for an hour with an instructor – his mother's gift for his fifteenth birthday – and had savored every one of the handful of opportunities his working life allowed him to fly commercially, an elderly laptop balanced on his knees and a massive headset

strapped to his skull, streaming and scrutinizing every monotonous exchange between the relevant parties of his flight. Friends and co-workers tended to catch on to the *Blimpisms* quickly – and knew they necessitated consideration as *charming sensibilities* – or they would be unsuccessful in forming or maintaining any sort of relationship with the man – he zealously held his obsessions in indefatigable First Priority, which was undeniably the only respectable thing about him, for Barney Blimp was in adulthood a zealot of indifference, above all.

The computer fan whined into another of its labored peaks and the bottommost of the four blue lights in the tower's inner lip began to pulse quickly for a few moments before its blinking returned with the wind to their intermittent normality – an endless, untiring oscillation that Gruel had more or less concluded to be the thing's unholy breath. A voice – preadolescent, muffled, and rurally earnest pushed its way through a three-figure headset and three days' worth of dandruff from above.

"Tacoma ground, Southwest six one seven... mic check."

"Southwest six one seven, Tacoma ground hears you," Barney breathed. The sudden nostril whistle from his inhale had started her from her waking dream in the everlasting twilight of hypnosis that defined his room. Never day or night – the displays over which his eyes were

perpetually rolling were always the primary, unsatisfactory source of light. This abominable furniture ruled the cat's life by proxy, as her companion was totally bewitched by its relentless, all-hour religion.

He shifted forward, clicking and dragging more rapidly, his feet clawing dumbly at the rubber to creep him as he cleared his throat. His eyes did two laps of the bottom left screen before he settled them on its bezel and raised their brows, expecting a request.

Just he began to inhale again, it came through, hesitant and crackling. "Tacoma ground, hello. Southwest... six one seven requests IFR clearance to Phoenix."

At once, Blimp straightened his back and faced his left screen as he queued the keyboard, inhaling deep to begin "Southwest six... one seven, you are cleared to Phoenix viaaa... Correction, as filed. Maintain 5000. Expect flight level three five zero ten minutes after departure. Departure frequency one two zero point four. Squawk 7500."

He leaned back in his chair for the retort, taking his can of energy drink with him. "Cleared to Phoenix as filed. We'll stay at 5000, expecting three five zero in ten, over to departure on one two zero point four. We're squawking seven five zero zero for Southwest six one seven."

“Southwest six one seven, readback correct. Expect runway one six left via...”

And it went on. All of Gruel sat spread over her paws, wearing into the same spot of the musky white carpet – a few inches behind the office chair’s serrated, coffee-stained rubber mat, her ancient girth holding the white globules, bent. A crater would be her legacy – the final record of her thousands... *millions* of hours spent watching hairy white feet idly shift in ambient electric gloom, while her deranged, dysfunctional guardian looked at the wall, mumbling numbers to himself in spurts.

CHAPTER II

All-nighters had not-so-gradually become a habit. Perhaps if you'd even rudimentarily charted his sleep over time, he'd have startled (assuming he wouldn't be able to distract himself away,) but he'd continued to successfully grow his vices exponentially, under his own conscious threshold. It's not as if he were *actually* unaware of what it meant for a human body to constantly consume so much caffeine and sugar in order to force it through so many nights, but his inhibitions had shrunk within him as his ability to conceptualize his own future had faded – by now, into virtually nothing.

He was arriving, this morning – as to the increasingly-frequent others – without having slept a wink through a particularly lively Wednesday night as the primary Boss of all airspace in and around the greater (digital) Seattle-Tacoma maze. The more sustained traffic there was – *operations*, as they're called – the greater the test was of Barney's ability to shepherd – or, *vector* –

and delegate incoming & outgoing flights. He'd truly entered a brainstate of primal gluttony for occupation of his mental bandwidth – the vast majority of his life decisions across the board could be explained by servitude to his especially tedious preference in stimuli. After the indulgence of the night-long deluge, he'd hand off his post as the sun came up to reflect in relative stillness amidst his rapidly-hushing beta waves.

This morning – as on the increasingly-frequent others – he planned to dither about for precisely long enough to make him seven minutes late to work, which involved the mindless, protracted consumption of two bowls of bland instant oatmeal over the course of ninety minutes while a progressive loop of the television program *M*A*S*H** played, mirrored on both his computer screens at near-whisper volume.¹ Whatever was left of his attention was dedicated in its entirety to his smartphone's display as he methodically sifted his favorite internet message boards for the most current available Joke Images of a popular, but universally-crude, de-intellectual type. When he happened upon an especially effective example in private, he would involuntarily produce a brisk, mild whooshing nearly identical to that of a muted sneeze – when

¹ As of the time of publication, Barney Blimp owed \$438,658 to a collections agency employed by 20th Century Fox Television after he repeatedly ignored warnings to cease his incessant and illegal re-torrenting of the *entire* 11 seasons of the *M*A*S*H** series in multiple digital video formats throughout a span of nearly 10 years, beginning with his first reliable internet connection in 1996.

among casual friends or twice-found acquaintances, the discovery would cause him to steadily,

nasally chuckle for an empty tenth of a second or so longer than was generally appropriate.

Continuing to self-administer the necessary beverage to sustain his function

simultaneously with so much otherwise-unaccompanied oatmeal meant he would almost always

need the restroom, where he would sit – still scrolling – until precisely nine minutes before his

intended time of arrival to the downtown office on Blake Street. He'd swing out of the bathroom

and tend to the inevitable mess his breakfast would leave in the common area with barely enough

effort to warrant a thin excuse later to his slightly more fastidious roommate, Craig.² This time,

he not only left his dirty, oatmealed bowl in the sink, unrinsed – he failed to place the gallon of

milk back in the refrigerator or even replace its cap. For a moment, he winced at the new

² Craig Footloaf, a 32-year-old man of fair Irishness with dense biceps attached in an unfortunate bottleneck to gangly, narrow shoulders and imbalanced legs, which made him top-heavy and terrible at most anything. He found himself obsessed with his own fitness, but failed to make any progress due to the rampant gullibility of his investments in local bullshit wellness schemes. He loved nothing more than watching curling on television, and talked about it constantly. To his distress, the only friends he has ever made have all universally turned out to be tennis enthusiasts. Such was the ludicrousness of the phenomena's absoluteness that he was tirelessly suspicious of everyone he met in a social context. Since his adolescence – when both of his parents suddenly and inexplicably took up going to the court – the tennis menace had followed the poor fellow everywhere he went. Even after 18 months of cohabitation, he would still occasionally fret, unable to sleep over the possibility that Barney Blimp was actually watching matches in his room with headphones on through those late nights. His inability to comprehend aviation (which was, mind you, not at all unreasonable) was in large part to blame. His "tennis curse" had become the entire extent of his conversation when he was intoxicated, which amused his tyrannical tennis friends to no end.

boundaries he was pushing, but the clock on the stove already read 8:30, and it was ten minutes and forty-one seconds ahead.³ He haphazardly dumped a cup of kibble into Gruel's pan – which she would wait over half an hour to acknowledge for the sake of her pride in front of her constant illusion of an attentive audience – and set out the sticky, offset door unshowered and unshaven in the same dour sweatshirt and lustless, stonewashed jeans he'd been wearing for over two days.

Down the steps, around the only corner convenience store in Colorado that carried Hell-brand energy drinks, and by the hideous Pepsi Center stadium went Blimp, pumping his stocky limbs, inducing his singular facsimile of the phenomenon known as *Runner's High*, which was enhanced by the caffeine in his system and his tired, anxious brain's above-average indulgence in adrenaline. This tendency of the body to react to sleep deprivation by entering an amplified, exponentially gradiented state of charged excitement (or, panic, for some) out of self-preservation was an especially significant one of a few responsible culprits in the reward system that sustained

³ It was nearing ten minutes and forty-two seconds ahead, despite the perceived superiority of the accuracy of digital timekeeping in contemporary culture. In reality, the circuit responsible for keeping time in the stove cost less than eighteen cents to produce, and would gain a second every ninety-two days – which, it should be said, would have been sinful for even a mid-range mechanical wristwatch in the last century – because at the time of Blimp and Footloaf's stove's manufacture, two General Electric Quality Assurance Specialists were of German ancestry, and well-aware of the decline in the general public's knowledge of the grand tradition of timekeeping in the most bigoted, condescending, hateful, German sense.

Barney's new lifestyle. Challenging his body this way manifested an artificial sense of adventure which even the grandest possible pleasures at his imagination's disposal could not.

It undoubtedly didn't help that his employers were not in a position to punish his mediocrity *or* reward any excellence, as their service's usership had been in decline for almost a decade. MapQuest, originators of the convenient format of digital navigation, had been unable to maintain their relevance – operating at a loss since before anyone left in the office could remember when. As per the unfortunate, long-pervasive status quo, Blimp's late arrival – at 8:34 – was not observed by anyone but himself. Through reception without a glance, then the badly-aging, bizarrely-lit, haphazardly-colored habitat of his groggy, destitute coworkers, past the small central “huddle rooms,” each marked by a graphic of a smartphone search bar containing a fantastic destination – *Taj Mahal, Pyramids of Giza, Colossus of Rhodes*, and on – Barney Blimp sought his half-desk in the open mid-rear of the space.

He plopped and slumped in his chair, but stared at the worn neon geometric shape in the carpet by his feet for a brief moment of dissociation before logging in to stare in exactly the same fashion at his work inbox. When asked about his indulgence in sleep deprivation by the few friends who knew him well enough to be concerned, he would cite his responsibility to the

virtual air traffic community as a mentor and sentinel, but the reality was that *he enjoyed it* – most of the results of asking one’s mind to extend its healthy uptime constructed a high for him that no other practice or substance, alone, could. The stress would maintain a state of hyperawareness while in front of his screens, and would help remove him in a critical way from the tedious and mundane of his daily life. Some part of him was reading emails, yes, but it was less conscious than it would’ve been – than it was for his loopy, reductive, hideously-dافت deskmate, Edgar, who was technically Blimp’s subordinate, but had long since realized Barney Blimp’s total lack of interest or finesse in delegation. There was little in the way of other faculties in him, save for an impressive, practiced ability to carry a single-sided conversation for hours.

“So apparently my Grandma managed to fuck up my parents’ new DVR with *Judge Judy* recordings in less than a week – I think they bought it the day before Easter or something.”

Neither man moved from their skimming. Edgar huffed.

"I know I should care about the acquisition thing but uh... as long as the coffee is still good, ya know? Fuckin Thursdays," he said, huffing again. "I think we're gonna try to get a new TV soon so I can have the one in the living room. Hopefully 4K."⁴

Barney looked beyond his display to the fake petrified wood siding on the far wall, idly trying to remember the last film he'd seen for any reason other than the excuse to glutonize liberally-buttered popcorn. *Something Millionaire*, he thought. With Craig and his super-hippie girlfriend, maybe two weeks after he'd first moved in. He'd sipped down four and a half bottles of her homemade pilsner and they had all three more or less simultaneously turned ill. Probably food poisoning – that *rock-in-the-stomach* sensation, but nobody had actually thrown up, if his memory served him. They'd just gone to bed somewhat early and neglected to do anything together since, which didn't bother Barney as far as he could tell – he preferred to socialize through the coy and entirely-controllable context of clearances and vectors.

⁴ Edgar Gout – 39, with a very un-Coloradolike beer gut and a single, hastily-penned Florida State fraternity tattoo on his right shoulder that had miraculously managed to erode into an illegible mess in less than two decades – cared about absolutely nothing in life except his home entertainment system, yet managed to know less than the average ten-year-old about TV and film. At any given time, he was the tackiest individual in all of downtown Denver – a hallmark unfortunately left officially unrecognized.

Fuckin Thursdays. What a foul, meaningless expression to be breaking the beats of his dissociation! *What a foul life*, his head said.⁵ His gaze returned to the unread messages in his inbox, tricking him in a momentary spell of dizziness. The *Thanks*, before his supervisor's boss's signature in her memo from the previous week with the subject line "Further thoughts/heads up on the future" briefly became *Thursdays*, in his periphery. *Fuckin*, he thought. His neck began to cramp, so he shifted his legs, took another putrid gulp of Hell, and again fingered the scroll wheel. "FW: Friday's HUGE BLOWOUT PARKING LOT SALE" from his landlord – who's stimulant prescription, petty, shapeless home life and resulting general aggravation with procrastination led him to carry on the notion that Blimp might one day fix his derelict hatchback, if prodded enough – became "FW: Fuckin HUGE BLOWS." He smirked in insolvent agony.

"...like I could do some A/V on the side or something instead of going out every other night." Edgar's granular drivel had finally managed to cross the threshold of Barney's awareness.

⁵ Neither the abstraction nor the term "existence" had maintained a place in Barney's vocabulary since high school.

"I guess I don't really need the extra cash, but I looked at my savings to pitch in for the TV and it sucks."

Barney Blimp gave him all of an exhaling, cocked head side glance with a vanilla smile.

"Same here," he said.

Fuuuuckin Thurs-days! It was musical now – too quickly mutating in time with the melody of *Rule Britannia*.⁶

My sav-ings real-ly sucks. Bri-tons ne-e-e-e-Ever will be slaves! And it continued...

Without REM sleep, his mind's ability to parse relevant information was in steady decline, which made for him his Hell's Hell; his surrealist heaven. *Fuckin Thursdays*. Enough of his consciousness was left to wonder why so much of mindless contemporary office dialogue orbited around the topic of which day of the week it was, how that came to be – or, if it had always been an inescapable fact of human existence.⁷ *Fuckin Mondays*, in so many words.

⁶ Specifically, a 1988 recording featuring an *extremely* passionate, quite nationalistic vocal performance by Edmund Barham, accompanied by the Leeds Festival Chorus & English String Orchestra that is overly-syndicated as the goto choice for historical dramas and documentaries needing to elicit that *Old Bristol* cliché, including the *Estates of the Dying Aristocracy* program which had played at 3:30AM on the Travel Channel, two night nights prior in the living room, where Craig had fallen asleep in front of the television.

⁷ The sincere answer involves the camaraderie among the corporate, slaving millions and what science now agrees upon to be the reason why human beings complain and seek idle diversions – they're an arguably harmless outlet for all the angst caused by fluorescent light (and many other working things, of course,) that actually works, somewhat.

In the office chat window behind his inbox, the occupants of the whole were doing their

Thursday morning best to professionalize their panic in their responses to an announcement that

had been pinged company-wide just a few minutes before.

“***Correction: he’ll be visiting today at some point.***”

Even if Barney had been sufficiently present in this fuddled reality to take notice, his

inattention was already elderly enough that it wouldn’t have mattered. Telecom companies had

been curiously (but not altogether passionately) circling MapQuest for its liquidatbles like lazy,

non-committal buzzards for so long that it scarcely crossed the minds of any but the remaining

three executives – and even they had considered their tenure too unappetizing to warrant much

worry. It was assumed that their parent company, AOL, would be bought soon in a huge, several

billion dollar merger, and that they would be brought along – if not for any other justification

than sparing the bidder the inevitable inconveniences of a split.

Edgar was again submerged in Blimp’s ether – now on the topic of “vintage” stereo

receivers: how analog units could still be adapted for digital cable boxes, and why they should be

– as he set about writing his first reply of the day cross-department to the head support tech

about an issue with duplicate integrated customer reviews from other services that they had both

agreed to overlook nine times already in Q1 alone. This time, though, a single Yelp! review of a Des Moines brasserie had reportedly been pushed in over 450 duplicates, blanketing the page with broken text for who-knew-how-many users, which was posited to potentially cause a cascading series of bugs across several servers at any moment. Continuing to argue that the issue was not yet worth any resources from the position of a Senior Programmer would have been a truly audacious display of negligence, but Barney was feeling especially lazy, so he began.

As the refusal was pounded into being, a slight commotion stirred in the direction of reception and a young, supremely professional-looking woman dressed from heels to hairpins in bright silver strolled dangerously quickly through the far doorway toward the corner office carrying a black leather document case. Chief Technical Officer Peter Built – its sole occupant – was the first to notice her and look up from his screen, chin still on his palm when he made contact with her eyes. For a second too long, he felt a primal burst of absolute terror, but he managed to push away from his desk, button his blazer, and stick on a smile which she half-returned as they met at the doorway.

“Mr. Built,” she said, reaching for his hand.

“Ms. Tharp.”

From where she'd been moments before, two disheveled young men followed like straggling ducklings, turning around in wonderment with gleeful smiles, taking in their surroundings as if they were just entering a petting zoo for the first time in their newly post-infantile lives. The first was a noticeably superior mess – tripping over his ruthlessly-worn brogues, rapaciously swinging a fringed camera bag with distant, bloodshot eyes. The other looked nearly as maniacal, but his suit was obviously tailored, if composed by a colorblind madman – apparently for none less than a clown. It was primarily salmon wrapped in a banana taffy jacket, and it couldn't possibly have clashed any more vigorously with the pumpkin orange, neon green, and royal purple palette of the whole godforsaken office.

He led the other now, practically rubbing his hands together as he strode between the common area's ping pong table and the bleary-eyed pair – Barney Blimp and neighboring Edgar, who was still obviously babbling – studying them as if he might just stop to bend down for a closer look. Tharp and Built had paused their business to look on as if watching their respective pets sniff each other at the park, free of the leash. The messy one took a place in the corner at the intersection of the two thigh-to-ceiling panes of glass window and their gray, mid-morning

sky as the adorned man leapt atop an unoccupied desk, knocking over an ergonomic keyboard.

He began speaking without prompt or context.

“You wanted to know Theo Pith’s identity. I am the man who has asked that question.”

Only a few yards away, Peter leaned back on the metal frame of his office door, grabbing it for support. Edgar finally shut his mouth and swiveled to look at the commotion, aghast.

“*I am the one who has asked that question!*” shouted Pith, stifling a giggle. He jumped to the floor, satisfied with the handful of gazes he now held, and began pacing.

“Too many of the individuals I encounter have an irrational, often very intense bias or mistrust of any institution that is *selling* them something. To them, the customer is always the priority in business interactions, and I’ve been wondering... why? *Is* the customer ‘always right?’ Should I really assume - as a business owner who’s made my life into a particular product or trade, who’s probably read about regularly for years, likely been forced (if not sought) to examine the quality of my efforts directly and indirectly against vectors of peers of the same profession, and habitually ponders such things several times every day - that an individual who more likely than not has *no other vested entrance* in my industry should be treated as the higher authority? That any old bloke who walks in to my operation – literally or metaphorically – is superior to

myself, even in that space. The idiocy is easily evident, but the mentality is more destructive than you'd think."

Built – still watching, wide-eyed – moved timidly to a worn “chair” (nothing more than an orange semi-solid fabric cylinder) and sat deliberately down, leaning forward to clasp his hands together in front of his knees. Ms. Tharp remained where she was, watching Theo in noticeable boredom atop a morsel of amusement. In the corner, the most distressed of the entourage shifted his weight to the other foot, producing a steno pad & pen from his jacket’s inner pocket and attentively jotting two sentences upon it. The event had finally captured Blimp’s attention and turned his glassy eyes, but his hands still hovered in stasis over his keyboard. Increasing the velocity of his pacing further still, Pith continued, green eyes strafing the scene.

“All of us know somebody who knows how to use their customer privilege to their advantage, consciously or unconsciously. To be fair, I think it's unconscious – not malicious – for the majority. These folks will call a customer service number and scream *dissatisfactions* and threats at all the poor souls in the hierarchy until they get a refund, a lower price, or some other special privilege. And for that, they're often rewarded – they are an insignificant enough fraction

of the base that the industry can afford to give in to them, and so it perpetuates... But what if you had the opportunity to skirt the risks and buck the bitches back? What if you had the opportunity to be proud of your product and not give a damn how it's received? What if you were given a ticket to the ride on that bubble – that security that only the impossibility of failure can enable? What if I told you I wanted to make that happen for MapQuest? What sort of transformations would this office undergo?"

A man and woman turned briskly 'round the far corner of the conference block on their way back from the opposite break room, simultaneously ceasing their chat and their speed upon the spectacle. From the outside street, the dampened sirens and buzzed honking from a passing ambulance could be heard through the soundproofing. The audience of the raving now totaled ten souls, most bewildered.

"I realize that I crash my own wedding – that it's basically both arranged *and* whirlwindish, but research on relationships shows that both sorts are much more successful than you might suppose!"

He paused to show a smile to the whole room. It was left unrequited.

"Perhaps we should proceed as if these are the only two types – perhaps *that* would give us a chance at imagining something truly different. I have always loved your platform, personally – I have myself carried many directions along successfully to many unfamiliar places, and who knows how much I should thank you all for how much resulting calm!"

He paused again to look off – as if daydreaming – to some distance of his imagination beyond the ceiling's dotted tiles. "Ah, the effect of nearly anything printed! A more serene spirit than a screen will ever provide, I think... and that is why I've bought you."

He left a silence – still without expectation of a response – before beginning yet again.

"The last time I slept, I had this dream. There was this couple – a man and woman – living in a sort of Roman/Venetian hybrid future where the Catholic Church had bought Google and begun to use its platforms to sell Indulgences again to billions of users. Like... AdSense, but significantly more aggressive, and soliciting financial reparations for sin. I first met the guy...

looked *exactly* like Paul Walker, told me he raised cattle. I was a consultant or something... working on redesigning an obscenely efficient HVAC system for the Church, for no other reason than... well, they suddenly had *even more* cash, and actually couldn't figure out how to blow it fast enough. One day, I get a call about an explosion on the project and I find out that Paul Walker,

his girlfriend, and their friendly pet panther, Sophie are the prime, on-the-ground triad of an anti-Googlechurch terrorist organization. This whole digipupal monstrosity was just explicitly conspiratorial and hilariously evil with so much sudden, consolidated power and wealth that it actually crippled them – they couldn't organize quickly enough.

“So, I've been thinking – independently of my subconscious, of course... well, as independently of one's subconscious as one can possibly think – I'd like this acquisition to be an opportunity to reimagine ‘longform’ directions, if you will. You guys have spent the past few years building a very competitive and unique mobile navigation experience, and I think you've done an astonishing job with the resources you've had – you've definitely made Google *feel* like idiots among themselves, but it's time we make them *look like fools* to the rest of the world for treating the sacred task of guidance with so little respect. Detailed, precise directions are MapQuest's wheelhouse, and the ways you've figured out to express that philosophy in a mobile app are truly astonishing, but now that you have essentially nothing to lose, I want to take this company back to its roots... its home grass.

“I know... I'm sure you have a bunch of agenda and performance presentations to whip up for me, but I can't be reassuring enough, here... it's really, just fine. Irrespective of what's

coming in and going out, I'm going to commit, here and now, to keeping MapQuest in the black. It's completely fine. Whatever happens – just don't dump budgets directly into Ugandan email scams or anything... try not to topple senselessly, I guess – but whatever happens, you'll all have your jobs for the foreseeable future, but with a lot more freedom to do what you feel like doing. For now, your two directives are simply *nobody leaves or gets fired for any reason*, and *from this day forward, the app will be treated as legacy software.*"

The pacing stayed just in front of the center-desked pair, and Pith locked eyes with the now almost sullen Blimp, clasping his hands behind his back as he curtly bobbed his chin and inhaled for a conclusive followup.

"This is my supreme Head of Operations, Ms. Lily Tharp," he said, gesturing toward her stoic post. "And my friend from the *Wretched Economist*, Mr. Lenny Lather." From the corner, Lenny looked up from his pad scribbling just long enough to nod in reply.

"My name is Theodore Pith, and I have bought this company. It is my sincere hope that none of you go home today with negative feelings toward myself or your future here because I can't emphasize enough how secure it really is. I'll be in touch, and we'll be back in Denver within the month for more professional discussions on where this needs to go. Though I intend

to get to know each and every one of you, I'm afraid my time is tight, today. That said... does anybody have any questions for the moment?"

Nobody and nothing. Barney Blimp had long since left his body behind in the words and Edgar was cartoonishly dumbfounded. The walking pair had sat on the furthest unoccupied desks within line-of-sight. Peter Built conscientiously closed his mouth – which had been open for who-knows-how-long, and Lily stared at the floor. Lather had caught up with his steno padⁱ and leaned against the window that was the wall, sensing within himself the swimming tadpole of insufficiency – he would need more cocaine soon.

Pith looked at his wristwatch. "Ah, well... it's early! *Too* early for this kind of talk, I'm sure. We're gonna jet, but we'll certainly be returning within the week to meet each of you one-on-one. The Q'n'A can wait till then, of course. Enjoy the rest of your Thursday!"

This time, he was in the lead out of the office, his smile gone. Tharp wordlessly slipped a bright matte orange business card to Peter as she passed; he looked into her eyes like a begging leper as he grasped it in his fingers like a secret. Lenny lurched off the wall and stuffed his things in his bag, shuffling to catch up. The following silence was profound – finally broken by Blimp from his distant gaze.

"Fuckin Thursdays," he said.

CHAPTER III

As the trio exited the Baker St. headquarters, five brawny mercenaries in gargantuan cargo shorts silently climbed out of a Volvo SUV 1,200 miles West under a red-swathed, beautifully late-sunrise sky o'er the parking lot of a suburban Oakland Trader Joe's. Instinctively, four promptly fanned out behind the fifth point in a pseudotactical formation as they crossed the rutted asphalt to the sliding automatic door, and instinctively, they formed up once more to enter it, ruthlessly retracting a shopping cart each in perhaps the most efficient manner five human beings have ever done so. With their comically small vehicles (none of the men was shorter than six foot one; none less than 230 lbs.,) they fanned out again – still wordless – in an even distribution across the aisles to the existential astonishment of the three, groggy-eyed cashiers on the opening floor.

Were you to snag the security camera footage – perhaps even just that of the wide-angled unit at the far end of the store – you'd be responsible for a swiftly-Bacterial Internet Video, no doubt. The men each produced a PDA as they infected the empty rows of goods at almost exactly the same, clinical pace – looking to double check a list they unanimously knew by memory, anyway. #1 grabbed 3 gallons of organic, grass-fed whole milk, 2 gallons of high-pulp, fresh-squeezed orange juice, 3 cartons of organic, free-range eggs, 74 ounces of organic, certified-humane goat cheese, 1 16-oz. container of organic *cottage* cheese, and an entire, 7.5 lb. wheel of organic parmigiano reggiano. #2 went for premium, organic canned goods. #3 ordered two each of nine cuts of the best stead available from the bewildered butcher... *and so on.*

Less than ten minutes after they'd arrived, the entire crew descended upon the checkout lanes with nearly a quarter-ton of combined merchandise, but the staff had prepared – a panic over the radio had even drawn out the *General Manager* to occupy a lane, and the lot – usually annoyingly friendly (they were paid very well to be so) – were almost completely silent, reflecting the curt intensity of their massive, intimidating customers throughout the ordeal. It turned out to be mostly unnecessary – the last hulk out turned his crew-cut head and forty-pound neck to smile and wave.

"Have a good one," he said.

The fivesome pushed their carts to the car, the plastic bags crackling a cacophony. The tailgate was lifted and the rear stuffed full – the last man piled the remainder in the laps of the other three passengers as they sat, chuckling at the vehicle's visible, squat burden as he aggregated the empty carts and jogged them back to the stack. The driver followed shortly after to pick him up and the whole, fully-loaded operation proceeded to the freeway, chariot slogging under the load.



Lenny snorted a healthy bump from the tip of his knife in the back of the Mulsanne as Pith diced the blow with a Kroger Discount card atop an original Guttenberg Bible⁸ in the next seat.

"Jesus wept," he said.

The job was less than arduous – it was the good stuff.

⁸ Stolen from the Hohenberg family library in Northern Illinois in Theodore's adolescence – a crime for which he had yet to be convicted. The fore and end pages were plentiful and had been used – as was tradition for many old German families – as a neue-Chronicles to maintain a record of genealogy through births, deaths, etc. Pith had found it particularly edgy and blasphemous to simply continue his own intermittent diary on the ancient pages following. It'd been a good while since he found this practice entertaining, however – his equivalent adulthood purpose for the volume was a surface for cutting drugs.

"This has the potential to become your first *good joke*," noted Tharp from the driver's seat.

"Have – had you ever done this before?" asked Lather, sniffing and swallowing with his

drip, at once impressed and surprised that he'd retained his ability to speak in correct tenses.

"Technically, yeah, but it's been a helluva while." Pith arranged himself two gluttonous

parallel lines before retrieving a bespoke sterling silver straw from his breast pocket.

"It used to be small-town newspapers – two years ago, if memory serves."⁹

"A *bad* joke," said Lily.

"*Not* a joke, by the way – some would call it philanthropy."

"Uh huh... Wack."

"I think they're all a lot better off now, and don't tell anyone, but my faith in local journalism is one hundred percent sincere, hand on heart." He pointed the straw at the first line

and proceeded to lap it up, thumb on opposite nostril. Reeling, he then carefully passed the

⁹ In a maniacal frenzy in late-2015, Pith had purchased eight struggling little newsrooms in various states of neglect: *The Lupus Ledger*, *The Columbus (Alabama) Chronicle*, *The Cadence*, *Maryville*, and *Elk Mountain Times*, *The Kaycee Daily*, *The Lyman Register*, and *The Superior Sun*. One of his favorite pastimes was drafting & mailing one or two of them an occasional brutally, obviously-plagiarius op-ed under an assumed (and utterly ridiculous) name, before separately demanding through the bureaucracy that they be published in order to launch the staff into an editorial, ethically-trying nightmare. If they gave in, he won the game – if not, they'd be (sometimes literally) backslapped and congratulated to no end.

Lord's Word & silver hoover to Lenny, stifling the fiend's temptation to once again attack his steno pad.

"Uh." Tharp turned in want for alarm to watch two police interceptors in full, angry blues 'n' twos speed by the hastily-arrested traffic in the oncoming lane to slide and haltingly screech in front of 1555 Baker St., from whence the three had just come. "That's overreacting."

"Great for the scrapbook though!" Pith smiled and looked at the camera bag by Lenny's feet, then to his eyes, then to the bag, and back again, but it was no use – he was fucking slammed, eyes lost in Theo's salmon and yellow reflection in his window, and their light was green. The scene of the crime was soon out of sight.

"You know, federal prison would be *fascinating*," he added, slapping his thigh.

Lily scoffed.

"You'd be fucked."

"You could come with, I'm sure! It'd be a riot! You could infiltrate the guards... Or, hey! You could apply for a wardenship. That's real you."

"You don't want to know how much that'd cost you."

"*Actually...*"

XXX

The Volvo exited the swiftly-congesting freeway and its haggard multitude of late-week commuters for Nob Hill, the San Franciscan angles seriously testing its overloaded suspension and the precarious arrangement of its occupancy. The driver took 6th St. South, descending through cafes and theaters to video stores and payday loan offices before parking adjacent Market St. Hazards on, he fished his mobile phone from the center console and made a call.

"We're standing by," he said, but a tremendous turbodiesel whistle interrupted him from the other end.

...

"We're waiting."

...

"I *said*... WE ARE HERE."

...

"... HERE."

A pause. *More* whistling and the trailing end of a garbled scream.

"..AAT?!"

Exasperated, the driver removed the phone from his ear and began melodramatically pounding out a text message with his ginormous thumbs – backspacing, mostly – clicking and popping over the steady ticking of the hazards. From behind the huge artisanal cheese wheel, a passenger loudly cleared his throat. After a few extraordinarily difficult minutes, the brute in the front seat finally decided to turn with his lap-bound bundle of full egg cartons and share the crude joke he'd been sitting on with the three abreast behind him, but was interrupted by the sight of a rogue city garbage truck turning through the intersection of the prior block. He tapped the driver's shoulder and gestured generally rear before slumping back (as much as was possible for a man of his size) in the seat, frowning.

Staying the ticking, he pulled out, garbage truck now in tow, and began the descent to the Tenderloin District and its bleak spectacle of waking homeless. Up and down the lines of them they went, stubby necks craning – tracing a search pattern in the dilapidated, pothole-ridden grid. After fifteen minutes, the driver's eyes began to flirt more and more worryingly with the alarming display of the fuel gauge, but then he spied his prey, finally, across from where they waited at a red light for nobody – six men in ragged coats; two sitting on the ledge of a concrete retaining wall bordering a pitiful garden containing nothing but a handful of weeds at its

epicenter, one prone in a sleeping bag at their feet, and the rest forming a semicircle around a black steel trashcan with a wide, well-ashed rim.

"Alrighty then," he sighed, running the red. The garbage truck didn't hesitate to follow and the convoy parked directly and evenly in front of the bin. In an almost ballet-like unified coordination, the occupants of both vehicles egressed – the four Big Men holding the handles of the bulging grocery bags they'd cradled in their laps, the fifth headed rearward for his own handful; the two high visibility jacket-swaddled waste disposal crew, one carried a roll of standard black trash liners, the other stuffed both hands in his pockets – to the undivided attention of their audience, including the occupant of the sleeping bag, who'd rolled over at the noise as if to say *do you mind*, but remained silent. The two groups formed lines, facing one another – seven on six. The two men on the ledge descended to their feet without thinking, expecting *some* kind of trouble from this lot.

"Hey!" one shouted, but there was no response save for the rustling of the plastic bags held still. They stood that way, searching each other's eyes for a full minute – an eternity, but not a one of the street's original, rightful six had formed any theories. Finally, the driver stepped forward and with his left hand swung a bag full of smaller, limper bags full of fresh vegetables so

that it rested on the lip of the trashcan. He fixed his eyes on those of the sleeping bag man – by now sitting up with his gloved palms flat on the ground behind him, wearing an explicitly puzzled set of eyebrows – and began deliberately pulling the produce out with his right hand, one by one, only to throw them straight into the can's opening with building aggression. A beet, two carrots between two fingers, a series of onions... All surrendered immediately to the black, fetid abyss. He went on like this – eyes unwavering – until his bag was empty and he turned, wadding it up to toss it in the gutter, where it began immediately to open again and travel away in the breeze.

The next two stepped up with their load and began upon the same. Bananas, individually peeled off the bundle, then Granny Smiths – faster and faster – Red - then Golden Delicious, lemons, oranges, half a dozen grape vines, handfuls of kiwi, a whole bag of cauliflower heads. Theirs filled it to the brim and they stepped aside for the second trash man to remove the lid, coax the drawstring of the bag off the inner container's lip, and hoist the whole up and out of the basket to the ground, where he quickly tied the top into a knot and set off with it for the truck as the first tore a new liner from his roll to replace it. He held the bag with both hands, whipping

its expansion with the wind, then shoving his right hand into it and down the basket, wrapping

the end around the outside, replacing the heavy lid, stepping away for the next two.

"Hey... what the fuck man?" The sleeping bag man's voice – unused for the better part of a day – was mostly lost to the wind, but it would have been futile, regardless. With purpose, the process was repeated – three trashcans full of the freshest high-dollar groceries, coldly... hatefully deposited – until the lot was depleted and both mercenaries and disposal men returned wordlessly to their respective vehicles and sped off in opposite directions, leaving nothing but horrid offense and a small storm of crinkled plastic bags bearing the words *THANK YOU* in dark, Trader Joe's green.

CHAPTER IV

The ruckus they had left took a few minutes to build, but those clouds in the glass were beginning to make way for the Spring sun and the implications of what had just occurred filled the office with it, albeit less warmly. They reflected coldly between the spheres of colored furniture and Peter Built noticed for the first time how much iridescence they'd lost since his and his company's Last Chance, six years ago. In a single 2012 push, they'd completely redesigned themselves – both their space and their service, pushing further into mobile for salvation, despite the fact that every one of their competitors would completely outclass them, there, from the get-go – as yet fruitlessly – and he still abhorred with his whole being the tryhard quirk of both opposing languages, just as he had then. They'd hired a San Francisco firm that specialized in offbeat interior architecture, and the whole project had taken just five months, but it was now hard to believe that it had not been obvious how poorly the space would age, and yet – anything

more tasteful than the inelegance of the out-of-style-for-several-years factor would have been dishonest.

He started the float back to his own vulgar partition and desk – now beginning to bake in the high sun – where his phone was indicating all signs of being paged. Now was not the time. He hovered over the receiver and was stricken with a fantasy: surely, he could make it out the door to the adjacent parking lot with a minimal chance of interception – and even if he was intercepted, he could simply *push the interceptee into oblivion* – to his car, which he could drive in *triple digits* to I-25 – he'd never been pulled over for speeding, so surely some form of roadway Karma would serve him – then North for only *what, fifteen? sixteen hours?* and he'd be freed by the mythical lakes of North Dakota... or Minnesota, perhaps, where he could drop off the grid and fish from a the simple serenity of an eleven foot john boat with his own homemade tackle for *how many years?* before his savings ran out. Correction: *their* savings – his wife, Ingrid's and his. *She could come too!* She would agree to it, with enough pleading, he thought. But by that time, the

"heat" would surely be "on" them.¹⁰ *No*, he refuted, defeating himself as he picked up the warm receiver and put it to his ear.

...

"Peter?"

...

"Mr. Built... the police are here," said Madge, at the front desk, spooling up his excitement once again.

"What?..."

"The police are here. I called the police."

...

¹⁰ Were Peter to act on this fantasy, Ingrid would have agreed to leave everything ninety-two minutes into his argument, but – ironically – the couple would've been pulled over ninety-two miles into their Northbound trip by a rare Wyoming State Trooper named Dennis Churd for doing ninety-two miles per hour, who would discover in running his license number that Peter was not legally allowed to drive in the State of Wyoming because of an accident with a Cheyenne school bus on a trip to see his college girlfriend before he thought he could afford auto insurance in 1992. He hadn't shown up for his court date, but a rainstorm had crept into the far-Southern Wyoming sky in the wait, and booking the two would've meant missing The Big Game on his home television – scheduled in ninety-two minutes – for Dennis, so he would have briefly scolded them, making them well-aware of what he *could* do with Peter for driving twelve miles an hour over the speed limit on a suspended license (but certainly not of why he didn't intend to) before doing nothing but suggest that they *slow down*. This would've further encouraged Peter's faith in his stock of Driving Karma, which would nevertheless fail to provide any more confidence in his immunity for the rest of the trip, traveled firmly at or below the speed limit.

"Those people threatened me! I called 9-1-1!"

... and he was defeated again, fantasizing now about ripping open the top-right drawer of his desk to grab a boxy Glock handgun (that was *not* actually contained within,) and blowing his brains onto the detestable colors of the inner wall so that Madge (and presumably, the police she had summoned) would hear the blunt blast through both her headset and the open office.

...

"Mr. Built?"

...

"I'll be right up."

He threw down the phone and miserably flummoxed his attempt to half-leap over the desk, funneling the intensity of his resulting shame into a furious beeline march past Barney and Edgar, who had resumed discussing the timetable of his new television purchase in *even further* detail, oblivious to the volcanic upswell of his deskmate's internal peril. Blimp was writhing visibly in the Genesis of hyperventilation, cold sweating through goosebumps, rocking to and fro in his \$2000 chair. A part of him, removed, was now fully aware of – and supremely alarmed by – the hot, raging toil that was rapidly occupying the controlling faculties of his system to a

soundtrack of distorted, infinitely multiplicative instances of that same, spirited performance of

Rule Britannia.

After remaining unnoticed in the same position for the better part of an hour, he suddenly shot violently to his feet, flinging the chair against Edgar's to stand rigidly with his hands at his sides. The whole present MapQuest population had by now stuffed the space full – most feeling mostly helpless, looking down at their hands, leaning against tables, walls, or chairbacks while the rest traded in hushed hypothesis. Barney surveyed them, moving only his head, slowly – a crazed turret atop his inelastic form.

Arg-o-ro-ro-ose from out the a-a-a-zure main.

His breathing still quickening, he clenched his fists in the overwhelming noise.

Loud blast above us, Loud blast that tears the skies.

“...arndog! Barney!”

In his ignorance, Edgar thought of his behavior as nothing more than a subject to tease – yelling for Blimp, *The Corporate Playmate* as he returned the chair, back-first with both unwashed hands.

More dre-e-e-e-leadful from each foreign stroke!

"Hey BARN-dog, what's the *deal?*"

Barney whirled around in a lightening fashion, stealing the chair from his hands and hoisting it – in no mild frenzy – above his head, howling.

Still more maje-e-estic' shalt thou rise,

Edgar's smirk was still in the process of disappearing as Barney brought – with the fullest potential intertia – the whole mass of the thing down upon his nose, castor-first.

More-dreadful, d'readful fr̄om each foreig'n stroke,

"FUCK," he squealed from under the disjointed heap, toppling to the floor. Barney let go of the lot and set about kicking it with extremely vigorous fury. Edgar's cry had definitively captured the attention of the crowd; the previously positing of the bunch turned instead to gasping. Both computer displays were lifted high, torn from their cables, and pounded into him with the same veracity and degenerative shrieking.

Serves but to ro-o-o-at thy native oak!

Not lost enough in that oh-so-intolerable carpeting, Barney's screaming intermittently dipped into feral, unnatural cackling as he turned away from Edgar's squirms and began devouring all of their shared workspace's contents that could possibly be manipulated into his

furious maw. First, all three thumbdrives – one from his own tower; two from the corner dust behind the rings of dried cola where the bases of the displays had been. Still swallowing repeatedly to ingest the lump of the last, he started on his own aluminum computer tower, punching its plastic front over and over again until its compact disc tray opened obediently to reveal an ancient bootleg driver installation CD sporting a stick-on label in Comic Sans,¹¹ which he violently plucked up and folded, cracking it into 3, then 12, then 36 pieces before proceeding to devour the dusty, glassy mess in handfuls. Complacent with his consumption, he moved on to the next row of used workstations, kicking over anything that stood, gurgling through the blood that now flowed from his mouth.

At reception, Peter Built was absently addressing two rotundly uniformed, absently present officers – the taller of whom looked to be no more than ten years old (so absolutely that it was by far the most alarming issue present in all four minds, including his.) The young Madge Teeth made it plain that concern for her own safety had prompted her call, above all else, and

¹¹ The disc contained the installation drivers for an Intel CS-630 “Pocket PC Camera,” which Blimp had mistakenly torrented instead of Seasons 4-6 of *M*A*S*H**, eight months prior. As such, the label incorrectly read “Season 4.”

was yet the only party who had paid any mind to the menacing noises coming from the deeper office.

"You need to understand, this visit was just routine."

"Routine?"

"Yeah, routine."

...

"It wasn't scheduled – I had no–"

"That was my own failing – I assumed an office-wide Slack message would be enough.

Obviously, I assumed incorrectly."

Despite the placement of his right hand on his chest and a forward tilt of his receded hairline, Peter's self-criticism didn't seem to take, so he continued.

"Truthfully, it's all my fault. This is all just a misunderstanding – I should've taken steps to keep everyone better informed – especially Ms. Teeth, of course – but no crime has been committed here."

Madge stood behind her five hundred dollar swiveling bar stool, hands clasped together on her skirt front where they awkwardly remained as she craned her neck around the wall divide

to ogle Barney Blimp – now profusely bleeding from his mouth and hands, coughing up shingles of plastic and glass – setting his delirium upon the “City Park” common area and its center stack of business literature.¹² Her eyes widened as he rolled up a two week old issue of *Fortune* in order to semi-successfully scarf it down like a chili dog. Elsewhere, two exposed cables from a power supply had shorted, igniting a section of drywall and the surrounding outmoded carpet. Squeals penetrated the swift spawn of black smoke as the sprinkler system abruptly drenched the entire populace. Madge languidly returned her attention – still wide-eyed, now soaking – to the preposterous scene in reception.

Neither officer had moved nor spoken – their four, dull eyes had remained, unblinking, on Chief Technical Officer Peter Built as he continued to rephrase his apologetic explanation in a futile haste for some action from his audience at increasing volume over the rapid beeping of the fire alarm, lips dripping and spitting.

¹² Part of Madge Teeth’s job – as the last remaining unofficial minder of the state of the office environment – was to maintain a small selection of bi- and triweekly business magazines for a long nonexistent visitorship to browse while waiting for an audience with management. Of course, due to the nonexistence of it all, the actual selection – once populated with the most current copies of *Wired, Inc., Fast Company, The Harvard Business Review*, etc. – had grown quite dated, and would have – were it not for the building’s stellar industrial HEPA-grade air-filtration system – surely acquired a healthy topping of dust.

"We were acquired last week rather suddenly, you see, and our new owner is a bit eccentric."

...

"I wasn't told he was going to visit this morning until thirty minutes after my arrival."

...

Peter – no veteran of law enforcement interaction from his societal and social position – thought he would try altering his language a bit to sound as close as possible to that of their inter-cop dialogue to bridge whatever obstacle there was between them. He considered the terms he knew from crime television: *suspect, pursuit, informant...* But none fit, and his recollection was expeditiously exhausted.

"Communication with his people has been sparse, hectic, and frankly *rude*, you know," he said, chuckling emptily through the downpour. The buildup of water in his eyelashes was becoming critical but he could still see the officers well enough to perceive their apparent lack of all perception, to his exasperation. Over the discord of the alarm and the shower from the depths of the office came another especially aggressive war cry followed sequentially by a distressed chorus of both male and female shrieks.

"My sincere apologies for wasting your time, gentlemen. Naturally, the company can take care of any fines you'd normally collect for this sort of thing." He gave in to the urge to rub empty his stinging eyes as a group from sales filed between Peter and the officers holding laptops and binders over their faces, bound for the door. Madge gathered her bag and her shoes and followed the herd to the stairwell.

"No, you know what?" Peter fished out his wallet from his jacket and thumbed out a few pasty, sogging fifties.

"I can just take care of it myself, right now. How about that?"

He stepped forward – cash and hand outstretched and dribbling in alms to the two, whose eyes followed it vaguely in thirst – their first significant expression. The three stood unmoving in that way for a moment as more fleeing employees shuffled around them, eyeing the exchange in progress without any remaining care or registration.

"Look, it doesn't matter. Just take it!"

...

"Just take it and *go! Please!*"

...

Hesitantly, the preteen-looking one obliged, pinching the wad between stubby forefinger and thumb before waddling in tow of the refugees, partner just behind, waddling in tow of him.

Two programmers dragged a battered, bleating Edgar by his armpits over the floor in front of Peter Built, who watched on with an insubstantial frown, wet wallet still in hand. Distractedly, he turned against the steady current of evacuating employees to his office, where he sat in front of his ruinous desktopⁱⁱ and began constructing another revised off-grid fishing fantasy, still oblivious to the torrent and the pungency of the burned plastic smell which had circulated throughout.

Also unaffected by the same – but nevertheless losing momentum – Barney Blimp's rampage had grown in creativity despite having lost its entire spectatorship. He'd managed to entangle a giant, sparking chain of printers, monitors, towers, and peripherals which he dragged with great effort across the feces he had uniformly deposited over both conference tables in the presentation room. If there was any Final Vision which his new, out-of-control self was trying to achieve with all of its trouble, it was not evident to any of the conscious parts of him, nor to any of the three Great Big Firemen who arrived to the odorous corporate apocalypse just as the sprinkler system's reserve had been finally depleted.

There are still two left in the building, the crowd downstairs had said. But immediately, there was only the one – the drenched Chief Technical Officer Peter Built, who found the intervention of his fantasies by the Great Big Man sent to retrieve him rather obtuse, but he complied with his request to be accompanied out of the building, smothering his irritation in a most British way¹³ – a prefaced apology for the behavior he was *about* to exhibit.

“Sorry if I come across rather annoyed – I was just distracted you know,” he explained as he was led firmly by the elbow down the steps.

“I really do appreciate the service.”

The remaining Great Big pair in black t-shirts with identically-cracking Denver Fire Department crests¹⁴ and identically-patterned sweat stains spread out carefully – as their discipline dictated – to search the ghostly ruin of MapQuest’s remaining (and yet defiantly ghastly) crown jewel for the hopeful survivor of... this act of *domestic terrorism*. Each Great Big independently noted the particularly off-putting color palette of the space but – neither quite

¹³ The genealogy of Mr. Built is not particularly relevant, but for the sake of thoroughness, it could be summed as “overwhelmingly Liverpool.”

¹⁴ The design of the Denver Fire Department logo is not particularly relevant, but for the sake of thoroughness, it could be summed as almost deliberately confusing. The acronym F-D-D clearly proved a difficult one to aggrandize and brand as the result looks more or less like someone large (a fireman, perhaps) had smashed a harp over the medieval initials “F | D” before wrapping and shucking its strings around the whole bit to make the vandalism as menacing as possible.

secure in their own respective aesthetic authority – no such criticism was verbally expressed.

Neither, however, shared the same failing confidence regarding their comprehension of mobile software design.

“Hey, MapQuest!” noted Great Big 1.

“Hey, yeah, I think I got this app,” replied Great Big 2, stepping over the disturbing spectacle of a flickering display lying against the spider web-shattered safety glass of a smaller collaborative “Huddle Room,” valiantly attempting to reproduce the color-inverted playback of a lewd elementary stick figure animation.

“Man, I haven’t thought about MapQuest in forever. There’s an app?”

“Yeah, it’s great – I still use it when we help move Barb’s clients. Lot better than Google Maps, man,” said Great Big 2, and – were the office itself a perceptive, thinking organism, it would’ve suffered in that moment, observing the perfection of this *organic, freewheeled, unleashed, reconceptualized* marketing opportunity that was flinging, *unharnessed* into the ether – but it was not sentient (fortunately in just about any other conceivable context,) so the organic ad copy genius of the Great Bigs would go forever unappreciated, though their courageous and *seriously juiced* demeanor would serve each well in their chosen, infamously-underpaid profession, even (or

especially) then, as they discovered the trailing end of a great incomprehensible train of decimated computer equipment weaving around the door jamb of the dark Server Room. Great Big 2 fished his Great Big flashlight from his Great Big belt, but its Great Big batteries appeared to be exhausted completely – shaking it repeatedly didn't seem to do the trick – so he produced his Great Big smartphone and – after a Great Big wait of more screen tapping with his Great Big fingers than could've *possibly* been necessary – the Light-Emitting Diode came to and revealed at the end of the mass in its gaze the nude, blood-soaked husk of the unconscious MapQuest Senior Programmer, Barney Blimp.

"Jesus," said the Great Bigs.

CHAPTER V

In the definitively matriarchal, mostly Germanic travel hub of Limon, Colorado, Barney, Barry, and Betty-Anne Blimp had begun the 1990s in a position to thrive. Barry, a Vietnam veteran with a chipped canine, an inherited family hog farm, and “crazy eyes” was headed down a new life avenue at forty-two in partial convenience store ownership with his best high school bud Tommy and a few of Tommy’s less-than-virtuous associates, which was – in such a prospective intersection of byways: the Kyle Railroad, Interstate 70, and proximity to the State’s two dominant metropolises – the *bee’s knees*. Marriage to his third wife, Betty-Anne had cemented his newfound potential satisfactorily enough to be granted a business loan from the lone regional banking chain the same week their first and only child was birthed, snipped, and dunked in Lutheran from-concentrate Holy Water.

Barney's mother was an embodiment of this Brisk American Process – never doing anything without haste; denouncing even in middleage the necessity (or existence) of *The Long Game*. Despite her pace, she had found in Librarianism a place of belonging on her first go – graduating from the University of Denver with a Masters in Library Science at just 19 after testing in before she could legally drive thanks to the diligence (and yes, the speed) of her homeschooling. If the Limon Memorial Library could even remotely afford a memorial statue, a towering Betty-Anne would surely grace its grounds now, brass-in-motion with her youthful black curls as near as feasibly perpendicular in a trail behind her form, as the institution owed its entire existence to her ruthless wit and otherworldly, naturally-amphetaminated energy.¹⁵ If one took it upon themselves to speculate, they might suggest that it was indeed her speed that grayed, then bleached her curls white within a single year; that the circumstances surrounding Barney's creation were from most planes of analysis quite tardy, and that Barry – while perhaps the most appropriately quick match she could've made – was a bad decision; that mothering a child after one's hair has entirely silvered was uncouth and unnatural – much less after it had

¹⁵ Were it a more reasonably celebrated trade – or the competition more tangibly quantifiable – Betty-Anne Blimp's local title of *Fastest Librarian Who Ever Lived* would've brought her certain global infamy.

wholly *whitened*. One is free to indulge these speculations, but Betty-Anne never traveled in an even remotely slow enough velocity to hear or ponder or engage with them, right up to her Judgment Day before her Maker, in fact, whom she no doubt found aggravatingly dull.

It's largely forgotten by those who've traversed the class divide in the 21st century that childhood in Barney's era had changed little since that of his parents' in diet: afternoon cartoons, ketchup, macaroni, hotdogs, and the lot – albeit a bit more processed. There were still Marvel superheroes, arcades, billion-piece, tediously-assembled model cars & aeros, and Little League. The difference – according to the retrospective ponderings of the architectural Boomers themselves – was in the way Merit & Achievement were processed. They say it was the cushion of encouragement and their own elimination of Loss – as factor, variable, and fact of the reality which they crafted for their kin – that fucked up entirely their children's potential ability to climb above it. In Barney Blimp's case, however, the fucking was certainly of more nuanced origin, as "losing" was defined differently, with an even greater weight in his mind than his parents' generation could have possibly imagined.

Barney never lost in track, baseball, football, or basketball because he never lowered himself to compete in such worldly things. He found most of his 200-odd graduating classmates

lacking in luster, but in the blossoming neo-puritanical world of online gaming, Blimp had the pick of the globe, and from preadolescence onward he spent his time virtually among all manner of millennial punks learning how to challenge himself – in fact, learning *above all* to be competitive. The ideal gamer in the early days was a brotherly roughhouser who competed even in cooperation, regardless of their success, and the glorified *Shithead* persona sat well with the jaded group of five highschool friends who adopted and eventually socialized him.

East by any substantial distance from the geological consequences of the Rockies, the meat of Colorado is – as its nearest Easterly neighbor is so notoriously – *fucking flat*. In daylight, one's field of vision – one's entire world – is constricted by the limitations of Earth's curvature, which dooms their horizon to fall away after just three miles, at eye level, confining the maximum possible diameter of Barney's home planet to approximately six miles, in ideal conditions. Over years and decades of existing in such a small place throughout such a formative time, human beings like Blimp and his peers live with a profoundly specific spatial psyche, boundaried absolutely. In a town like Limon, it can be tempting – for a visitor – to sift through the longtime occupants according to how they choose (or – depending on one's choice position

within the nature/nurture argument¹⁶ – are *predisposed*) to respond to these boundaries. It is not unreasonable to say – timidly, anyway – that *most* find comfort within them, and – much less timidly – to say that they lead overwhelmingly more satisfied lives. Others – like Barney's *Limon Six* – end up classically claustrophobic and tend to spend significant time and energy in their formation of abrasive relationships with both physical and psychological bounds. An integral compounding effect on this aspirational affliction could perhaps be attributed to their Boomer parents and their intermittent, vague insistences like *you can be anything you want, you can do anything you set your mind to*, and their infinite variations.¹⁷

The Blimps traveled phenomenally often for a Limon family but never incurred the notion – as long as travel was within their wants and means – to leave North America. Nevertheless, young Barney's primary preferences for any given road trip were simply for the exploration of altitude; by distant or traversed mountains – by far the most bewitching – and

¹⁶ An ancient debate within academics of too many sorts which is still too often explored in proximal relevance to child-rearing and diluted ponderings on general crime amongst purposely easy-to-digest media. If the reader has so far escaped the discourse, they should henceforth feel advised to avoid it in the most reasonable self-interest, *especially* the conceivable temptation to wade in for the sake of understanding a small town in Eastern Colorado.

¹⁷ Perhaps the most succinct assessment of said insistencies' effects can allegedly (and ironically) be found in the general target demographic notes of an unnamed Big Tobacco Company: "less-educated, with nothing to look forward to."

commercial flight, when it was afforded. Whether by backseat or Boeing, the perception of distance enabled by proximity to more diverse typography was nothing less than a treat and his own continent's allotment seemed plenty. It was these higher experiences that provided him a penetrating catalyst of the sort of ethereal meditation comprehensible only by those who've yet to develop past a certain age; the sort which many seek in a plethora of desperations until they're able to accept its loss. The edged flirtation of Earth with sky were the elemental constants he'd be forever doomed to seek. For the lucky Most, however, the altitudes are not so relentlessly haunting and the six-mile planet is rarely insufficient, but the curioser of them are universally bound with the whole by their want for understanding that Other aspirational itch as the occupants of each pole are with one another, inevitably, regardless of how fervently they happen to reflect upon the decider.

The inevitable binding was also for the others of the *Six* – Leona, Leo, Liam, Lazarus, and Lexie – out of their collectively loosening grip on the special Magic in each, as many or most friendships are, and together they observed in themselves and one another the development of their internal compulsion to find a suitable replacement, and – when at their best – maintained an audit of its power. Most of the instances of need did not come when it felt feasible to fill them

with literal wandering as they do not for all but those few with unlimited resources. Farming or service-funded families raise children who must smoke weed and/or drink cheap beer in bulk as their world darkens and squishes, and so *The Limon Six* of Limon Junior-Senior High School entered their stoner stage shortly after their original congregation, when Barney was fifteen and so wholeheartedly, insularly elitist that his preferred external self-projection was of generalized insanity – though of the least manageably interesting variety – in order to discourage any and all contact with as broad a portion of his peers as possible.

The fallibility of young Barney Blimp's plan was his own innate desire for companionship, which 1) prevented the scheme from ever being *truly* wholehearted and 2) necessitated input from other perspectives, as the execution of any human intention will, thereby contradictorily arranging himself to fail. Lazarus, the Junior – the eldest of the lot – was predisposed to target Barney's person at lunch hour as a thoroughly weird, but nevertheless compulsively social young man.¹⁸ It was only September when he one Wednesday sat down

¹⁸ Lazarus Leeds would go on to become a highly-decorated expert inspector for the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment's Division of Oil and Public Safety's Weights and Measures Division – as per the recommendation of rookie gas station Lorde Barry Blimp – but would lose his job and his position in more and more circumspect cycles throughout his life to an extremely nasty, unfortunately-incurable Tupperware-buying addiction.

across from Blimp and immediately began discussing amateur radio operation and its untapped potential among American secret societies, unprompted.

"So if the Masons are *not* a secret society," he began, "why is it that they specifically developed secret methods of identifying one another in public and – really – what even *defines* a 'secret society' if not its investment in the development of secret methodologies for its participants' intra-identification, anyway?"

Barney stopped chewing with a mouthful of his daily one-dollar ham sandwich and bored his eyes into Lazarus' resting thumbs. In response, they began vigorously twiddling straightaway.

"Of course, they made sure to place their symbology everywhere, which I would imagine is probably pretty fun. I wonder if they just screen *National Treasure* on repeat for regular meetings, these days. I would for sure put in for that."

Cheeks still bulging, Barney Blimp conceded to full, unabridged eye contact with the weariness of ten millennia.

"Dude, I'm definitely going to become a Free Fucking Mason, but I'm going to modernize their whole shit. Ham radio, you know – probably the most equally-obsured

community for the general populace, equally obsessed with ciphers, and *certainly* the only

respective equals in socially anti-social activity for old white men with Asperger's."

A Freshman eyebrow was raised; the Freshman chewing, resumed, and the genius of The

Junior Lazarus thought it would have a go at a bit of baity ignorance.

"I mean, if we all really wanted walkie talkies for our treehouse clubs in Elementary

school, then it would only make sense to launch the Masons onto the UHF band, right?"

"VHF," said Barney through two-day-old pork and peeled-away cheddar. "UHF is for

TVs, radar, and cellular phones; *vee h eff* is ham radio."

Lazarus bowed his head, smiled, and faced forward his palms, and thus – in the

chemically vomit-scented lunchroom of Limon Junior-Senior High School – the socialization of

Barney Blimp began with a bid to modernize the American Freemasons which – if pursued –

would've proved to be in vain, for by then, in 2003, almost all of the membership had Hotmail

accounts. Liam Libel – a Freshman that year, like Barney and by a wide berth the dirtiest of the

Six – did not, but he *did* proudly maintain a subscription to *Reason Magazine* and communicated

exclusively in savagely relentless Libertarian shouts. After his particularly-troubled World

History teacher developed a gasoline drinking habit¹⁹ and fell tremendously ill over Winter break, Liam's class was absorbed into Blimp's, which was not much trouble logically for such a moderately-sized student body, but *was* from day 1 significant trouble for Barney and his surrounding peers.

The new, consolidated 10:33AM World History block totaled thirty-three students, who were doing their best to *physically* and *spatially* consolidate as the last remaining teacher of World History employed at Limon Junior-Senior High School introduced himself.

"Hello hello hello, welcome welcome," cooed the diminutive man in that manner which only secondary educators do.

"New folks, I'm Mr. Drake – hello hello hello and *welcome back...* Yes, sorry about the space... It looks like everybody's doing a great job... Good job managing... This is only for a few weeks, don't worry... Yes, please do your best to settle in... Yes, hello hello hello, you're in the right place! Welcome welcome welcome *back...* I'm Mr. Drake.

¹⁹ Without great reasoning effort, one would surmise that Libel, himself, was probably the singular culprit in driving who was – I'm sure – a reasonable and professional educator to suddenly take up such a self-abusive practice. The precise side-effects of consuming petroleum orally are not particularly relevant, but for the sake of thoroughness: it generally causes one to vomit uncontrollably for several hours – not from the liquid, itself (for an even minimally functional human body will perform many beautifully intricate methods of expulsion,) but from the inescapable, overwhelming odor.

"Before we get started with the curriculum for this semester... It won't be all that different from what it would've been if... And I promise you it won't be further complicated if and when we move to new rooms, of course, so don't worry about that... I just wanted to talk about a few policies specific to *my* class for the new folks... A brush up for the rest of you, of course, he he..."

Mr. Drake hobbled all around his desk, the projector, then to the door, which he unpropped with his right moccasin and began to close but reconsidered with an audible *hm* and shuffled awkwardly to open and prop again with a kick of his *left* moccasin, mumming *hm* again, hobbling his way to the thermostat, which he dramatically leaned back, then forwards, then back again to examine, adjusting his glasses and wedging his right hand flat against his kidney to form a tea kettle handle. He looked that way at it for a few seconds before he attempted to begin another thought, aloud.

"*Aaaaaand* we're just going ta... mmhmm, so it looks like... It looks like... I'm going to keep this turned down just so ah... We're going to keep the thermostat turned down for now... I think there are enough of us to keep it quite warm in here... Of co-... Ah... Of course, if anybody starts to get especially chilly... Chilly, just let me know."

"So!" he said, turning to the squirming, now mildly claustrophobic class for the first time, folding his glasses again.

"I want to begin by talking about the *future* a little bit, if that's okay with everybody... Our terrible future! In which we will all be *ruled* by these little things!" He produced a scuffed silver flipphone from the black leather holster on his belt.

"Even now, the common man is surrounded by so many things he just cannot understand. His cellular telephone, his car, his home computer... It's hard not to wonder what exactly goes through mom and dad's minds when they see them operate, huh? It must be reduced down to... Almost superstition, you know? Nothing Voodoo, mind you, but – in some way, deep in the mind of the average schmuck, his cellular telephone is quickly becoming his god."

Mr. Drake returned the phone to its holster and looked behind him to retreat enough to sit on his rough, pockmarked, and splintery cherrywood desk as Mr. Libel himself huffed through the door with a pronounced, angsty furrow in his brow, his right arm holding the sling of his ratty tote over the right shoulder of his even rattier creamy brown leather jacket. Even faced with the density of desks and flustered teens, he did not pause even though one would assume it was surely necessary.

"Hello hello hello... Welcome, welcome," said Mr. Drake more quickly, his head tracking Liam's ungainly slotting upon a free, deskless chair against the farthest wall between twin spectacled boys with matching curly blonde afros, just behind Barney, followed by the careless thudding of his bag on the foot-worn carpet in front.

"Right!" continued Mr. Drake from his perch. "And for you, it will become a god also, but one of a different sort... Many Godly persons desire their particular deity to do the work; to only interact with what's on the surface, but you! You hold our newfound technological god as one to be known! And that is exactly how it should be... Not just for the sake of the knowledge, itself, but for the betterment of our lives... Now..."

He placed both palms on his desk and leaned forward.

"Before we again begin with our *history*, I want to tell you something very important... There's a war on. And... You wanna know a secret?"

Speaking in a more whispery projection, he leaned his bald patch forward a bit more.

"There's a war on... There's a war on you!" He thrusted his pointer finger at the class – who maintained a collective stoicism – as he hopped again to his feet and began pacing, hands together behind him.

"It's on everyone who thinks... Everyone young who learns! It's on everyone with progress on their minds... It's a war waged even on knowledge, itself... A war of ignorance."

Mr. Drake paused, swiveling his gaze on his heels, gray eyes wide. In the rear, Liam scoffed loudly over the disinterested silence, slouched all the way back in his rigid chair and hoisting his legs to cross them on Barney's left shoulder.

"Ay, YO TEECH," he yelled in Mr. Drake's general direction, glancing left and right.
"YO TEECH, you blaze tron?"²⁰

Mr. Drake, frozen in the forward stoop he'd been glaring from, offered no reply. Barney brushed briskly at Liam's Converses against his head as if they were a lost lunar moth.

"Yo teechn, you just tell me if you want a little somun somun, you know what I mean," Liam said, *Ha Haing* with his right hand eclipsed over his smile.
"Dude," Barney complained. Libel sat up again and returned his feet to the floor, but didn't otherwise acknowledge the protest. He threw his right arm into an arc over his head and made his hand into a vague pistol shape, pointed at Mr. Drake.

²⁰ It should be noted that Liam Libel was wholly, thoroughly, obviously, unquestionably white.

"Ay, YO TEECH... BET YOU NEVA HEARDA GOVENA RON PAUL... Ha ha!

YOU AND THIS WHOLE COUNTRY... THIS COUNTRY GOIN TO SHIT, *MAN.*"

Mr. Drake self-consciously returned to standing upright, but his eyes looked miles beyond the far wall and his students – thirty-one of whom had yet to react at all.

"Why is it ALWAYS BOXES, *man?* What's with the FUCKIN BOXES? YO TEECH,
THIS SOME BULLSHIT."

Barney set about gathering his things to escape the tirade, but Liam had begun to violently writhe about in his chair and appeared to be quickly descending into a fit, which exponentially slowed Blimp's organization.

"DON'T DO THIS, TEECH. DON'T LABEL ME!"

His whole body was convulsing now and his magazines were bounding and bouncing toward serious altitudes on top of him like wheat chaff as it's shaken free of the grain.

"AY YO TEECH... WHY YOU GOTTA PUT THESE CAGES ON US? LEMME
BLOW YOUR MIND RIGHT QUICK."

And with that, his chair failed him as he shook to the ground on his hands and knees – still hollering in bodily tumult.

"COME ONNNNNNNN TEECH, YOU KNOW I CAN'T FIT IN YOUR REPUBLICRAT BOX," he spat at the rug. Neither Mr. Drake nor his pupils had moved or expressed anything, save for Barney Blimp, who stepped over Liam Libel with his backpack and threaded his way strenuously through the desks and static legs, feet, and empty faces through the door. A hundred yards down the hallway, as he leaned against the exit, a final croaking throw came from behind him.

"Ron Pal!"

The creaking of the exit door – hinges wanting for a greasing – and the *swooshing* of its bottom seal against the muddy black shoemat yielded not for Barney Blimp the fresh Colorado air and lucid sunshine, but instead – through a haze of drug-numbed internal retching and destruction – the stagnantly sterile, ammonia'd atmosphere and lifeless colors of a meager hospital room. From the open hallway to his left came an ambiently echoing broadcast of unexpected contextual quality.

"Welcome, Frances Fujica Chamberlain, eleven pounds, six ounces," said a theatrically raspy woman's voice, followed by a pleasantly rhythmic rock sample.²¹

"BLINDED by the light / revved up like a deuce / another roller in the night!"

Yet, it was the tiny wall-mounted television that captured Barney's newly-awoken, moderately-medicated attention. From diagonally across his tall bed with its faded floral sheets and itchy medium blue comforter, the minuscule CRT blared a top-of-the-hour *Good Morning America* graphic.

"Good morning, America. Breaking news, the FBI takes on Apple demanding the tech giant help with a terror investigation. Are critical clues to more plots hidden on the phone of the San Bernardino shooters? Why Apple's CEO is refusing to help this morning. A battle that could affect everyone with a smartphone," said the voice of the aging anchor from under a dyed black combover to whom the introduction transitioned along with a lower third graphic that said "JAKE JINGLES, ABC NEWS." *Apparently, it is the morning*, thought Barney Blimp.

²¹ Specifically, from the slightly-altered chorus of a 1976 cover by Mannfred Mann's Earth Band of Bruce Springsteen's 1972 original that found significantly more success – reaching number 1 on *Billboard's* "Hot 100" in the U.S.

"Good morning," he whispered. Jake Jingles and his co-host Jaime Jangles then went on about the idiosyncrasies of the G.O.P., quoted and played back a clip of the current President saying *I believe so and so will never be President*, then a shorter clip of "BJ, a German Shorthaired Pointer" – clearly somewhere else in the studio, sitting obediently, cocking his head at the approaching camera lens – before finally returning to a wide-shot of Jingles and Jangles sitting abreast, smiling off screen at the dog.

"All right, and good morning, America. There he is, BJ, the winner of the Eastminster Kennel Club's Best in Show Award. He's just arriving here in Times Square. He took a walk there on our green carpet in case you missed it. We cannot wait to meet the top dog coming up. Hear what he has to say about his win. The biggest bone of all."

"A great-looking dog."

"He walks like a winner."

"He is."

"Absolutely."

"Amazing," said Barney Blimp, all at once noticing how uncomfortable his entire physical being had been left in its current, awfully-upright position against a mountain of pillows that

looked promising, but disappointingly lacked fulfilling qualities one tends to hope for and enjoy in promising-looking pillows. He lifted his rear to scoot it down and felt an unsettling tremor of his out of kilter equilibrium atop faint whole-body pins and needles from – no doubt – remaining more or less stationary for hours?...days?

“...have more on that later. But right now lots of reaction coming in overnight to that emotional appearance in the White House briefing room from Chief of Staff Eggs White. The former general raw and red-eyed as he defended the President, attacked his critics, and remembered the death of his own son on the battlefield. Chief White House correspondent Geoffrey Gouge starts us off. Good morning, Geoff...”

Realizing the excess of the television’s current volume was insistently coercing the entirety of his attention, Barney looked about him – despite the dizziness – searching for the remote control. To his left, there was only empty space and the burst of brief, sickly draft from a cycle of the neighboring Intensive Care Unit airlock; to his right, a substantially loaded IV pole holding both black and translucent liquid bags, and a hang-over eating tray on castors which was – quite strangely – surfaced in a bright, neon-green neoprene, and contained a small-book-sized touch tablet. He reached for it, tapping the black screen with his right index finger’s plastic

heart-rate monitor in an attempt to illicit life. After a few clumsy tries, he achieved a sort of success: an awkward, large-print menu faded into view with five haphazardly off-center options next to hopelessly-scaled stock graphics: *DRUGS*, *MEDIA*, *BILLING*, *SCHEDULING*, and *SUPPORT*. Barney tried *MEDIA*, but the subsequently displayed controls were muted somehow – left transparent. No amount of tapping yielded any change in the program, which had turned to a montage of B-roll: red-faced parents talking on mobile phones on the black asphalt – crowded to the point of insanity by neutral-colored SUVs outside a sprawling red brick building sprouting the tiniest trickle of gray smoke from the far wing.

“The driver, look at this, pulled over after he smelled smoke, and that’s when flames erupted. More than a dozen students from the Jacksonville area high school had to evacuate. One person was treated for smoke inhalation. The children were picked up by a different bus and taken home. No word on what caused this in the first place, but certainly glad everyone is okay this morning, Jake.”

“Thank goodness for that. And now to that big win overnight for the Los Angeles Dodgers, heading to their first World Series since 1988,” continued Jake Jingles as the slightest electronic pseudodance percussion was subtly faded behind his voice in the background – its 140

beat-per-minute high hats abnormally flattered by the bias of the pitiful speakers within the wall-mounted unit, furthering Blimp's aggravation with the situation. He amplified his aggression toward the tablet, holding it just inches from his nose as he pounded his fingers on the glass. The original menu came briefly back into view before the *DRUGS* option was selected, swapping the theme entirely for microscopic, illegible text and alarmingly primary reds. The unassuming white plastic pump suspended in the middle of his IV pole suddenly clicked and began a drawling, whirred chugging. Panicking at the sound and the new movements of fluids he perceived, Barney vigorously attacked the big red *X* in the top-right corner with every ounce of available effort left in the stumps of his thumbs, and was – to his gracious relief – rewarded with the cessation of the horrors.

“...guy behind looked so concerned until the last second. Also right now a lot of reaction coming to that emotional moment in the White House press briefing room. Chief of Staff General White, defending the President's calls to the families of fallen soldiers. Also took on the President's critics and opened up about the loss of his own son on the battlefield...”

Barney Blimp sighed in extreme exasperation and threw the tablet down on the tray, sinking under the sheets until his feet felt the footboard and hung over it, both hands desperately

gripping the comforter, pulling it over his nose so that only his eyes-up were exposed. A new wave of drowsiness gushed from his numb belly and washed over him like sleepy molasses, tinging his vision light blue as he tilted it with his head on the flat bed below the pillow mountain to focus on a single one of the ceiling tile's dark red polka-dots. *Spackled blood*, he thought – the removed Observer of his consciousness noting how much less anxious he was in the moment than he should've rationally been, while knowing, of course, that his state was entirely the result of whatever drugs they had him on.

"Welcome, Leslie Désirée Lund, eight pounds four ounces... *BLINDed by the light...*"

Barney Blimp's eyes drooped heavy as his Observer ceased short its attempt to recollect the sequence of events which led him there – wherever *there* was – it was a bed... a less-than-moderately comfortable bed... and instead considered the definition of "roller" in "*another roller in the night.*" Not *roller* as in "high *roller*," no. Not "*roller blades*," though it... he... *they* had always wanted to learn how to inline skate... *Aggressive* inlines. Speed skating was such an elegant, lost art. Why weren't there more speed skaters swooping and sliding around, bent over with their hands behind their backs to cut through the air oh-so-beautifully... in all State and National parks... in cardigans... and purple sweatbands? *What happened to them all?*

“...and after the break, Jaime and I sit down with Theodore Pith, the young artificial intelligence pioneer and mogul, now author of a new book about cheese and the end of the world...”

R-o-l-l-e-r, *roller*. A flour-dusted light wood cylinder with matching old style handles, loose... Loose, but that's how they were supposed to be... how they had to be or else it would not roll separately of them... Except it was *huge*, and growing! Gargantuan! And the hands! Covered in dark black hairs of a simply *vulgar* length and nearly as big... Bringing the overwhelming girth of the surface – the *much* too *solid* and *threatening* surface – to flatten his body! Rhythmically rolling and squishing and flattening Barney Blimp and his organs against this awful, foreign bed like *fucking dough!* He was more conscious now, but still unable to move – completely paralyzed... And the hellish utensil was on its way back again! *Revved up like a deuce...* *The toes*, he remembered! He and his Observer concentrated everything they had on wiggling their toes... *really* wiggling... and finally... they wiggled alive!

Liberated from his dream and waking paralysis, Barney shot up – sheets, comforter, tubes, cables, and all – inhaling massively only to see on the tiny wall television the pale, smiling face, flashing green eyes, and blood-red hair of his new boss sitting cross-legged in a purple chair

astride the *GMA* watermark as the show returned from a commercial break. Opposite a table packed with granite-looking half-pipes full of steaming brown beans were the smooth faces of Jake Jingles and Jaime Jangles.

"Here with us in the studio this morning is Theodore Pith, author of the new, quite controversial but hot-selling book – especially here in New York, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse Are Varieties of Cheese: How Your Foodism Will End Everything*," said Jake Jingles with occasion.

Fuck, mouthed Barney Blimp.

"...and the new owner of the renamed Manhattan barbecue joints, Pith's Chili Trough and Pith's Chili Playpen. We've got what looks to be a... Ha ha, well... a miniature *trough* of chili right here in front of us. Wow! A lot to dive into, for sure, but first, Mr. Pith... Your book seems well... It seems to be in direct opposition to what I see and smell in front of me. That is cheese on that chili, right?"

"SON OF A FUCKING BITCH!" screamed Barney, hoarsely. His hands moved to fumble with the tablet again, mouth agape as Jake Jingles fumbled similarly in propping an obnoxiously-covered volume upright for the camera, on screen, struggling to obscure an

apparently-obscene illustration of a nude woman covered in cheese – his right hand

accomplishing the censorship of all but her cheese-strung feet behind the title text.

"Yes, that's an understandable contrast to make, Jack," Pith answered as the broadcast

switched to his full-shot angle. He himself was deeply contrasted with the formal wear of

everyone present – save for some of the studio audience, perhaps – with his pale, freckled arms

sticking out of a plain white t-shirt which said on its front in a loud, large, simple sans-serif

typeface *TODAY IS SATURDAY, MARCH 10TH.*

"First, I'd like to say how wonderful it is to be here above the beautiful Time Squared...

Wow! You guys have a great audience. Hiya, folks! Love you guys! Don't be shy – get your hands

dirty! It's Chili Day!"

Theodore Pith waved wildly and dumbly, gyrating both palms at the present audience,

off screen, who whooped and cheered in response. Their audience camera was clumsily cut to a

bit later than it should've been. Jake Jingles forced a chuckle.

"Well, there it is... You've got to love that humor! Was it part of promoting the book,

buying these restaurants or was the timing just a coincidence?"

Jaime Jangles chimed in with an addendum, first two right fingers drumming on her chin.

"And has the tour got you jetlagged, or was your shirt part of the promotion, too? What kind of a shirt is that?" She gestured toward his torso, emptily smiling.
"First of all, yes that is true, free-range American cheese grated into your chili, there... I'm actually going to start digging in, if you don't mind," Theodore Pith said, shoving the provided logo-adorned bib under his right thigh.

"No, of course... I think I'll join right in with ya," replied Jake, who sat forward and looked helplessly at the massive task before him.

"I, myself, really don't find the book's argument in conflict with my love of- and affection for chili, particularly." He threaded the provided (and also logo-adorned) garden trowel under a great yellow-brownish gop of beans and scooped it toward his maw, spilling a few ounces on the oversaturated rug. Jake Jingles was having one hell of a time shoving his own logo-adorned bib into the front of his shirt without rubbing his live lapel microphone unnecessarily.

"That argument being – as I understand having read as much as I could last night – that our obsession with food is... Well, sort of rampant and infecting our culture–"

"...and stealing attention from important efforts in humanitarian policy, charity, et cetera, yes, but when you *do* finish the book – and I really hope you do, George, really... – you'll have been taken through my conclusion, which is, essentially, that it is by now our delicious, gluttonous, organic Rome's time to fall, if you're catching my drift."

Barney Blimp was now a reddening, rigid live wire – his fury crossing a threshold in his heart monitor, setting off its alarm in triads. *Beepbeepbeep.*

Jake Jingles – now equipped properly with logo-adorned bib – looked across the table in building agitation at Theodore Pith, twirling his clean trowel. From beside him, Jaime Jangles – yet to be misnamed, and thus slightly less huffy – offered her intermediation.

"I have to say... I haven't gotten to read the book yet, but I really love my Me Food – I happen to know that Jake, here, loves his *even more*, and it's hurtful, the suggestion that my interest in good food is somehow wrong or dangerous–"

"...oh, James! Don't look so bashful! Please, do eat your chili!"

There was a great, gaping, deadly live television pause filled with the swishing and swashing of the pale Pith's rhythmic chewing over the 140 beat-per-minute electro beat, his

otherwise quiet person in frame, t-shirt now covered in brown, eyes cast downward to the half-empty trough before him.

Jaime Jangles cleared her throat.

"I'm Jaime, actually..."

The eyes came up with a full mouth, from which hung a six-inch-long string of cheese.

"...oh shit, I'm so sorry! That's really embarrassing..."

Theodore Pith looked to her, then to the camera and back. Behind the camera, the audience conveyed together both amused applause and inverbal admonishment.

"Jaime, please let me make it up to you... have some of *my* chili!"

Jingles and Jangles cringed, smiled, and managed chuckles with all the restraint in the world.

"Hey, now! There are families watching this live, Mr.- "

"...gosh, I am so sorry."

Theodore looked to the camera covered in chili as the shot cycled back to him.

"Kids, you should know that profanity is nothing by the byproduct of laziness. True eloquence is-"

“...let’s just try and get back to the book, alright?”

“Sure, sure... It’s really exciting to see it finally going off the shelves after all these weeks, you know. Writing something like this is grueling stuff.”

The triplets of the Barney Blimp alarm had finally summoned a disheveled young orderly, who bussed immediately around the dismal bed to cease it in a blur of dark purple and Chanel No. 5.

“Good, good! It’s good to see you up... Barney—“

“Please turn off the television,” he said.

“... I’m sorry?”

“TURN OFF... the television. Turn off the TV, please.”

The orderly looked up from the tablet on her forearm to the screen, where Jaime Jangles was hesitantly playing with her little shovel.

“Wow, yes, I can’t even visualize... How long did the process take, do you know?”

“At least three... Yeah, three weeks or so, last November I think it was,” to *wows* from Jangles, Jingles, and the audience.

“For God’s sake, turn... it... OFF!”

"That's actually... really no time at all," said Jake.

"Really quick," nodded Jaime.

"OFF!" screamed Barney Blimp, in a single, swift motion picking up the tablet and hurling it – inches from the nurse's nose – to a perfectly placed impact on the little TV, cracking its screen and inducing a brief blip of white noise blinds, yet neither the horrid appliance nor his visitor flinched a bit. The later calmly returned her attention to her own tablet, then to the IV pole's machinery.

"Mr. Blimp, please try to control yourself."

Jake Jingles again stiffly manipulated the bright-orange volume, turning it in profile and then over, very deliberately assuring that the cheesy woman be excluded from the shot.

"It's nearly five-hundred pages, right? And this is your first book?"

"First *published* book under my own name, you know. I've written a few other things, here and there, but that's a subject for another time."

Aw, said the audience.

"Sure, we've got to have you back some time," said Jake Jingles with visible grit in his smile.

"Jesus," said Barney Blimp.

"But, this apocalypse... Is it happening now? Soon? A hundred years in the future? Or...?"

"All three, really. We are here eating scrumptious, fifty-dollar chili while unprecedented numbers of people are starving, all over the world..."

"Motherfucker."

"...in Haiti, Namibia, North Korea, Zimbabwe, Detroit... And yet, we demand only the cleanest last few decimals of a percentage from the food on our own tables."

Up went the young woman's eyebrows as she tapped her tablet, unpainted fingernails clacking.

"Look, I'm sorry about the TV, but could you *please* just turn it off for me?"

"A striking thought," said Jake Jingles.

"I'm sorry," she replied, making eye contact for the first time, eyebrows erect with no minimum of patronization. "I can't do that, Barney, but I *can* have something to eat brought up for you, if you'd like."

"...*another roller in the night?*"

"Quite. And that was the idea, but it's also important to note - not to give too much away, I hope – that Rome's decline is inevitable, despite what hope we all love to swaddle ourselves in, and thus we might as well enjoy what we have so far achieved, yes?"

"Well, I'm glad you brought this chili with you... It *is* quite an achievement," said Jaime Jangles, having eaten half a trowel's worth.

"How does that sound, huh...? It's Chili Day!"

Barney Blimp gripped the handles straddling his bed-bound prison so ferociously that he soon blacked out.

XXX

Dr. Gravel, it is with great haste and discretion that I write you regarding a patient who was received in the care of St. Nicholas' ICU on Thursday afternoon (the 8th) – Barney Barry Blimp, age 30 – with a few requests in the interest of his particular and quite consequential needs on behalf of his very long-time friend and employer, Mr. Theodore Pith, who is deeply distraught and regrets that he is unable contact you personally at this time. He is, however, willing, wanting, and able to allocate any and all necessary resources to ensure the fulfillment of these needs, including a prospective donation to the Kare 4 Kids fund and/or support of other/equivalent programs at St. Nicholas. Please contact me directly

as soon as you are able so that we may further the discussion (the numbers for both my cell and personal extension at the Institute can be found at the end of this message.) Until then, it would be to Mr. Pith's tremendous satisfaction and appreciation if you were to promptly act in your best ability to ensure the alterations to Mr. Blimp's stay as follows...

CHAPTER VI

In the right hour, the woodland springtime metamorphic processes of the neighboring Lake Geneva suburb's in-betweens were in a paused state – the toads again hushed; the crickets tired, and the human populace, too. In the right hour, the fickle wind and the social owls were the only sound, and nothing moved but the sparse, light-footed doe in careful segments with her fawn. From the main gated lane of *The Nice, Huge Estate*,²² Lenny Lather slid through the muddy barrier and started bouncing West on the blacktop, brogues squeaking every third step.

²² The old white mansion had been the first “investment” of Theodore’s fortune, five years before. *The Folger House*, as it was originally named, was built in the 1860s as the summer home of Fudley Folger – the esteemed Chicago surgeon – and sold to the State in 1959 to be lightly renovated into a historical monument and keystone of Lake Geneva tourism. Unofficially, it was Wisconsin’s second most haunted location: it was said that the ghost of old Fudley’s illegitimate son could be heard wailing from the attic rooms and occasionally seen from outside wandering around behind their half-circular floor windows in his demonically white nighty. According to Pith, he had not only acquired the house for its beautiful grounds and proximity to his favorite lake, but also for the company of the spirit, insisting that “a ghost is nothing but another potential customer.” How, exactly, he had wrangled the private purchase of such a property was known only to him and a Senator or two, but his decision to legally rechristen it *The Nice, Big Estate* brought substantial upheaval upon him from civically-active locals, to his unending amusement.

The overcasted clouds were having trouble deciding whether or not to let down their rain – as they had been all day – and the old, heavy early-March mist softened the yellow glow of the tall, buzzing streetlamps so much that he couldn't help but intermittently wipe his eyes, for the spreading light convinced his mind that his eyelashes must've been wetted.

Theodore Pith's big old house was now burrowed between two mismatched neighborhoods – the bleaker Easterly, which was too new for its alien trees to have recovered from the brutality of its development's clear-cutting and contained within one of its central featureless backyards an unidentifiable creature which made all through the night the most unimaginably ghastly, disturbingly human child-like shrieking; the opposing Westerly's trees further enough along in their regrowth – ten or twenty years perhaps – to appear more of the planet Earth to Manhattan-bred Lenny Lather, who still found the colorless destruction of suburbia unendingly upsetting, especially when coming down. In the interest of his regular withdrawal's mitigation, he had already established two short, repeatable tracks and a longer, several mile-long loop which skirted him sufficiently around the East's center to avoid hearing the shrieks in all but the stillest nights. Never in his years – on these walks he was *especially* reminded of just how many there were – had he been able to feel such absolute ownership of his

surroundings. The eroding Earth slipping away from the hem of the warped, stained wood fences; the sidewalks, cracked, bent, sloped helter-skelter, often muddied in the troughs and joints – generally laying haphazardly in layers after having been steadily tossed about by the glacial forces of their intermixture with clay, precipitation, and the tumultuous temperature-dependent torture of the two – these were his, entirely, in the right hour. Between two and five in the morning when the earliest risers would blearily revive their dewy automobiles from long, silent hibernation, the whole world – everything in his sight and more at any moment – it was all *his*, without a single worthy challenger.

In the right hour, the roads were completely and totally abandoned – for the New Yorker, an unfathomable absolute – and all humanity was at rest. In the right hour, Lenny Lather was the appointed guardian of the worn domesticity of a small nation, though the lonely occupation was astoundingly lax, for in the miles and miles of empty streets he had already traversed in his nightly holidays from the World of Pith, he had yet to encounter a single unexpected factor or minutely threatening presence. Since shortly after his December arrival, he'd walked through even the most frigid mornings. Of course, the stillness had then been *even more* otherworldly, and Lenny was curious to see how his new most private domain would change with the seasons.

Though the auxiliary guest room which he now called home was no smaller or less hospitable than the master bedroom of his late Hudson Yards flat shared with his late Wife, it proved to be a poor respite from Theodore Pith, who treated him – when they were “home” at *Nice, Huge* – as the puppy he never had, and expected his participation to remain entirely vulnerable to his any whim. Granted – in their shared abuse of amphetamines, cocaine, and assorted other stimulants – Lenny Lather was vastly more prepared for the games than any circadian guest could’ve possibly been. At first, the ten-foot door of his dawn-facing room had closed without latching, but with the warmth and moisture brought with the Midwestern Spring, the most secure state in which the engorged wood could be forcibly arranged still left a half-inch crack, and Lather’s last chance of privacy was lost.

The latest favorite pastime of *Nice, Big*’s Master necessitated a willing, capable driver, and – as keeping a single Butler (much less an entire household staff) was proving extremely difficult for him²³ – Lenny Lather was the sole pick of the draft. In the earliest hours of one Tuesday

²³ The first butler *The Nice, Big Estate* saw in the modern era as it was again repurposed to be a private residence after 50 years of public tours was a well-traveled and spirited veteran of the Royal British Army Special Forces and thus relatively equipped with the staunch resilience and discipline one needed to willingly endure the bizarre, often childish, and occasionally dangerous requirements of Theodore Pith’s employment for a number of years, until he discovered in early 2015 that he and two of the cooking staff under his management had been subjected to hypnosis as per their Master’s direction when he (unsuccessfully) challenged a visiting celebrity hypnotist out of the suggestion that

morning in February, he'd been pleasantly dosing and drooling on his laptop after an evening of obsessive, incoherent notetaking when the huge door had been kicked ajar by a deep black, blindingly shiny oxford with excessively violent force. Attached to the shoe in an equally blinding penguin tuxedo, towering bowler hat, and cartoonish fake mustache was the Great, Blown Pith.

"Hope you're not busy," he'd said quite loudly to the lolling Lather, leaning and tilting his head into the lamp light, which had dislodged his monocle and briefly occupied him with untangling its chain.

...

"You're not *busy*, are ya?!" he'd shouted, tapping the shiny brass lion's head of his shiny black cane against the vanity... then swatting it with a flicking wrist... then clubbing it with a full, two-handed homerun swing – taking huge, vaguely cat nose-shaped gouges from the surface of the wood. The splintery wood chips had rained down upon the hunched Lenny; he'd stirred

the entire practice was nothing but a complex farce. To the discomfort of all involved, it was not until several months after the fellow's stay that Pith inadvertently induced a simultaneous standing sleep state in all three (apparently still bewitched) house employees after uttering the trigger phrase *by-golly, what if flat-Earthers are actually right, chemtrails are real, and 9/11 truthers have been telling the real truth this whole time* within earshot. Naturally – after most of an afternoon spent standing stiffly upright, unmoving as Theodore tracked down the offending figure – the very sore, embarrassed, offended, and terrified three quit on the spot, as did their replacements – including four new graduates of the highly-esteemed *International Academy of Service* straight from Copenhagen, who collectively resigned after just half a week spent under Pith and all abandoned entirely the profession to which they had just dedicated two entire years of their lives, according to rumor.

with one found its way in his open mouth – he'd chewed it slowly and swallowed it, but he still had not awoken. Nevertheless, Theodore Pith's coked-up enthusiasm couldn't possibly have yielded to common decencies like his guest's nighttime peace.

...

"SHOOT, LENNY," he'd screamed in his companion's ear, having traversed the room to his bedside.

"I SURE HOPE YOU'RE NOT BUSY RIGHT NOW!"

...

Finally, he'd resorted to tickling Lenny's nose with the ornament, which had reeked with the urinal smell of metal polish – the sudden, overwhelming delivery of which to the writer's olfactory nerves finally causing ample alarm in his nervous system to justify bringing him abruptly back to his life and deluded host.

"I need a favor. The Duesie's warming up. We're going for a ride."

Unable to form a linguistic response, Lenny Lather had obeyed Theo's frenzied, repeating instructions and stumbled into the matching suit he'd brought over his arm – wondering with marginal, arrested clarity at how well-tailored it was for him. He had not the

soundness of perception to protest when Pith had whipped a deep black, blindingly shiny bowtie around his already-congested esophagus, nor when he'd adheased the huge, itchy matching fake moustache to his upper lip and nearly pulled the matching Tower of Bowler all the way down over his ears. He had been unresponsive when he'd been sat on the bench under the agonizing fluorescent lights of the laundry room, affixed with deep black, blindingly shiny matching oxfords, and asked if he smoked and how well he could say *guffaw*.

...

"Just wait... you have no idea... you have no idea how much fun this is going to be."

Lenny Lather had not... *could not* have made a sound through the confusing nonsense of his waking pre-Great Depression dream, but when the old servant's door had been opened before him and set the heartless, single-digit Winter wind upon his very soul, he had all at once arrived in the world, laughing and whooping together with Theodore Pith.

"Jesus *Christ!*" he'd screamed as they'd hobbled to the stable, where a devilishly dark red Model J Duesenberg had sat shivering in a rough idle, staring out the retrofitted garage door with its basketball-sized lights as if it was, indeed, a flesh-and-blood steed that had just been frightened awake by a thunderstorm, but the sky had been as clear as it would've been from an

asteroid – as it is only on the coldest nights – and almost comically dominated by the setting, gluttonously luminescent moon. Theodore had then grabbed a screwdriver from the workbench and bent down to remove the license plate – which had said *BLOOD* in big black bold block letters – and its containing frame. By the time he had settled into the frigid red leather of the exposed, roofless driver's seat, Lenny Lather was full-to-bursting with adrenaline and laughing out huge streams of breathy steam. From behind him in the cabin, Pith had been *guffawing* plumes, too, as he'd briefly ignited his cocaine-sprinkled mustache instead of the bratwurst-sized cigar between his teeth. The smell of burning human hair had accented his explanation of the old car's transmission and its direct path from source-to-nose for Pith had required a brief, unplanned intermission as it induced without warning his violent heaving – still part-*guffawing* – hanging half out of his beautifully-upholstered suicide door.

As he had spewed – expertly sparing the swoop of the gleaming waxy fender – Lenny had found a pair of deep black, blindingly shiny gloves and – after less grinding than you would imagine, to his credit – first gear, setting the whole dastardly circus in motion.

"Where to, Sire?" Lenny had asked, nose lifted to an untenable altitude in a pitiful approximation of an accent that'd never actually been used before by any person or persons in all of history, struggling for breath.

"Left at the gates, Barnsward, old chap," Theodore had replied in a contrasting fashion after again sitting upright from his heaves and taking a breath, ironing out – if anything – the flatness of his perforating Ohio Ds and Ps, resulting in such a culturally destructive racket that it had set both of them in uncontrollable, cloudy fits lasting long after Lather had swerved the great length of the car from the gravel to his abandoned asphalt retreat. The two had continued their banter down that soul-suckingly flat vector, one-upping each other's etymologic barbarity against the savage thievery of the heatless wind.

"Now to star-board, Budleigh, my good fellow!"

...

"Right-o, as you say, sir!"

...

"Down to the *pu-hb* for a *spahb* of *brahn-dee* with me *mae-its!*"

...

“*Oncemo-ar* right, pip pip!”

...

“By *jah-lee*, there we are!”

...

After the entirety of Northern European history had been decimated and subsequently forgotten, the Duesenberg named *BLOOD* had turned its orange, googley-eyed stare and narrow whitewalled hooves up the reflective, freshly-painted access of the new 24-hour grocery in the no-man’s-land between the cookie-cutter stares of the neatly-rowed Easterly neighborhood and the droning respiration of Interstate 43, two miles distant. It was 2:12 in the morning and most of the greasy-haired night stocking shift had been halfway through their third smoke break, circled around a store-used picnic table 50 yards from the far sliding airlock doors.²⁴ The first to spot *BLOOD* had been the second shortest of the lot, whose weary scrutiny along the truest radian to the West from under his sweaty beanie in her entrance she had crossed, and the depth of her red as he first spied it had caused him vertigo – as if he would fall in – and cast upon the

²⁴ The specifics of Walworth County Health Codes are not particularly relevant, but it should be noted that the designated employee smoking area was over 10 times further from the closest customer entrance than was required (12.6 feet.)

shorter-than-average length of his being an all-consuming existential doubt. The tallest and loudest of them had faced squarest the white faux-brick wall of the box building and was at that moment engaged upon a spirited rant about where and where'nt and when a vapist ought to buy his Suck juice between long, gasping Sucks from his super-shiny Suck box. Of course, the arrival of a customer even at such a late hour did not warrant notice at a huge, broadly-servicing operation like theirs, but as *BLOOD* had crept through all four reflective yellow-checkered pedestrian crossings, closing without a flinch, and the details of her occupying caricatures had become more and more numerous, she had stolen the attention of the huddle, one-by-one, and elicited from each the rarest under-breath profanity of true, unmolested wonder.

"*Jesus Christ,*" had said the shortest.

"*Holy fuck,*" had said the youngest.

"*Gee whiz,*" had said the oldest.

And the Sucking tallest, having realized he'd lost his audience, had been the last to turn and follow their eyes *BLOOD*'s way as she had halted coolly in front of the purely white glowing concrete leading into the closest customer entrance, and had – without the gradual exposure over

the length of her approach that his peers had been afforded – dropped his Suck box and

exclaimed at the sudden, undiluted immensity of the spectacle, simply, “*FUCK!*”

The Sucking’s *FUCK* and the splitting shatter of his Suck against the glass of their smoking table had reached the two arrivees – albeit in a muted way – and through the onset of their frostbite’s early stages even further stoked their already-uncontrollable boyish giggling.

Theodore Pith had paused briefly to affix his monocle as firmly as possible in his eye socket and stuff down his spasmodic *guffaws* with a few lip-smacking puffs of his then successfully-lit cigar before swinging his right door open.

“Stay here and wait at the ready, my good... my *best* Bagsy! I shan’t be a twinkle,” he had declared, clicking it lightly shut again and turning on his heels toward the pale light of the store, twirling his cane in dramatically shortened strides so as to reproduce the oversped effect of a silent motion picture, puff-puffing away. As the doors had sensed him and indiscriminately whirred aside, he had turned to the smokers – most of whom had still been reeling, grabbing for their hair – and bobbed the bulk of his big black bowler toward their communion with his gloved black fingers by the brim.

"Tally-*ho*, my boys!" he had shouted, sending Lenny Lather's wide open face toward the floor of the idling car as he doubled over himself in the first spontaneously asphyxiating, tear-lubbing laughter he'd yet to experience in the 21st century. As Theodore had entered the masterpiece of the boxed store's bleakness in his cane twirling, head swinging, cigar puffing shuffle, he had made sure to stay his instinct to *sneak* for a swift, full-chat *dart*, instead, and the on-duty leather-faced embodiment of tedium's wrath beneath his lone lit lane light had looked up from his *People Magazine* just in time to see the heel of a deeply black oxford and the last shiny inches of flowing black coattails disappear behind the potato sack endcap of the far Aisle 1.

He'd hesitated, chin against palm, holding his next glossed page perpendicularly erect between his tightened thumb and index finger for a long few seconds of fantastic stillness – had hastily attempted a diagnostic of his present senses – before a locomotive-like segmented tube of cigar smoke had risen from against the light tiles and unsoled trimming to intersect his line-of-sight where it met the darkened deli, recessed in the far wall from his hunch, the motion startling him into his own throat-clearing, counter-rounding, key-jingling, *excuse me*-shouting march toward the lumpy potato sacks and the climbing dissipation of the most unbelievable violation. As he had jingled, he had reflected on the few occasions in which he'd ever smelled tobacco smoke in

his store: all incidental, most very brief, and many followed by a lengthy, unreasonably self-deprecating apology. To just walk in his Temple of Domestic Fulfilment during this most Serene Time of Silent Service, spewing orange nicotine on his premium, Food & Drug Administration-blessed body and blood offering to the middle class was surely in ignorance, but could have even been *in spite*. Regardless, the transgression was worthy of the most merciless wrath, and he had been selected as its willing, capable vessel. In just the fifteen seconds it'd taken him to jingle his way to Aisle 1, he'd thought himself and his leather into flash-broiling, fast-rising fury.

Perhaps the least expected sight that could have possibly greeted this Apostle of Appraisal on the far side of Aisle 1 – as he rounded the potato sack endcap and filled his *excuse me* lungs in preparation through his nose – was the labored lifting of the 125-pound eldest child of the new, Parisian-trained, full-time, certified cheese artisan – whom the store had just won out of 175 competitors in a region-wide raffle of her pilot program – by the dashing, swinging, and smoking real-life manifestation of a young Rich Uncle Pennybags, yet shock did not long halt the Keys & Leather.

“Sir! Excuse me!”

...

"Excuse me! Sir!"

...

Theodore Pith – having reevaluated the girth of his intended booty – had propped his shiny black cane against the sill of the refrigerator and popped each slack bottom up off his oxfords from his shins before squatting over the massive Holy Wheel of the Artisan where it lay displayed on a sturdy bespoke plinth.

...

"Sir! You need to put out that cigar... the cigar – put it out immediately!"

Keys & Leather had the odd inability to both shout and shuffle at the same time, so he'd only made it to the pomegranate juice by the time Pith had mustered enough momentum to swing the cheese child into a high enough pendulum to carry it stably facing forward under his chin with his two hands spaced evenly on the Great Wheel's bottom.

...

"Sir! I'm going to have to ask you to put that down... That is a four thousand dollar item... If you want to buy it, we need to go about–"

“...now, see here!” Pith had replied with great effort, in the midst of weighing in his mind the worth of the cane as a casualty, then of the monocle, too, which had fallen out while he was weighing, and of his own physical intelligence, and whether or not it was capable of retrieving the cane by its brass lion’s head handle via the top of a flicking foot without losing his balance. Keys & Leather, meanwhile, had been tortured at great length witnessing – in Theodore’s gravitational struggle – the Cuban’s ashes knocked all over the precious round Immanuel; the artisan’s Beloved, Chosen son of cheese – a nauseating sensation of loss overwhelming all hope of his store’s defense. The Terrible Theodore had at once noticed his hesitation *and* arrived upon a plan to leave no prop behind. He had leaned forward with the girth of the wheel and closed the remaining few feet between them, advancing with the huge mass of Nazarethian dairy to bear it all down upon the unsuspecting Leather, who in his grief for the prized wheel was far too slow to deflect its incoming mass.

“Now, see here, chum!” Pith had forced from the furthest possible extremis of his best mob mouth as he transferred his burden all at once to its most concerned party, who collapsed against the multilayered tables that made up the fresh cookie display, with the weight of the wheel on his belly. As the stunned Leather struggled to separate himself without further soiling

the only item in his store that sold for double a month's paycheck, Theodore had replaced his monocle and returned for his cane in a single stride, which he'd then used after a return step to the pile of chocolate chip, almond nut, and fuming night manager to rap loose with the snout of the terrible brass cat Leather's white knuckle-tight grip on the wheel with a lampoonish *haha!* before rolling the freed cheese toward the door in a villainous cackle.

"Man, *come on*," the defeated Leather had yelled halfheartedly from his pile of sweets, struggling against the awkward, slippery boxes for enough footing to stand. His efforts, though, were interrupted after a time by the abrupt mute of Pith's cackling in the second swooshing of the front sliding doors – he had missed his last chance of pursuit. It had all been in vain – he'd failed to guard the crown jewel of the whole suburb. As he had given up the chase and the cheese and slumped once more against the ruined pile, the ridiculousness of the crime against him nearly cracked a smile, but soon was deterred by the very real thought of explaining what had happened to his General Manager when she arrived in just five hours. After a moment, there, covered in cookies, dust, ashes, and shame, he had quietly begun to sob.

After he had regained control of his diaphragm, Lenny Lather had been amused, outside, by the varying velocities in which the smokers of the night shift gave in to their curiosities about

the presence of the seven-figure collectible and its purpose in waiting at its now healthier idle in front of their grocery store in the loneliest time of a Tuesday morning. The first and the bravest had been the one who first spotted their intrusion – the shortest – if only because he had remained entirely convinced for the duration that *BLOOD* and its two, period-dressed occupants were nothing but an apparition of his dead Grandfather and Great Uncle like others he'd thought he'd seen before, and – though he'd been terrified by the clarity of this realest visit yet, he'd been irritated more than anything, and wanted to know "why the hell can't you just leave me *alone?*!" The others behind him had been staggered in the proximity to the waiting car they had achieved – the lesser and most cowardly being the largest – the Sucking evangelist – who had been waiting for the great automobile to leave so he could forge the exchange of his broken Suck box for a new one from the back. In the delirium of his exhaustion and progressing frostbite, Lenny Lather had thought the image of the men where they were would make for an interesting, organic graph on the nature of courage – their positions simply representing their unaltered datapoints, and had been considering how best to deal with or respond to the nearer, deluded one, who had by then come close enough to the elegant, professionally polished front-right fender to reach out and touch it with his unwashed hands, and appeared to be taking the matter

under serious consideration. He'd been seconds away from finally deciding between his idiotic ideas for a joke response when by far the largest wheel of cheese he'd ever seen had come rolling out of the opening doors onto the concrete, followed closely behind by Theodore Pith who'd still had three-quarters or more of his cigar left to smoke and apparently switched to cheap mob clichés in his brief absence.

"Haste, Don Lenny!" he'd yelled, re-opening his closest cabin door to chuck his cane in first. He'd then straddled the great wheel to position it against the step before making a scene of grunting and huffing against its side with his full weight. Again, the bewildered smokers had fallen silent – they did not recognize the ridiculous delicacy because it was special inventory and could only be handled by the Holy Artisan herself. Lather had started revving the huge old straight-8 to answer Pith's urgency, who had found himself fresh out of phrases after the wheel had finally succumbed to its capture and rolled into the footwell.

"Make haste, make haste, my boy!" he'd shouted, diving theatrically into the covered back seat, head-first, to which his icing chauffeur had responded by revving the behemoth and briskly popping her clutch, which had lurched the pair into the last, getaway stage of their late grocery heist. As *BLOOD*'s razor-edged hood ornament had sliced through the night by the dumbstruck

smokers, Theodore Pith was unable to think of anything to shout at them as he passed but for “bada-bing, bada-*BOOM!*”

Though the Lake Geneva Police Department was shown the security footage of that first theft by management, the theatricality of their matching getup had inadvertently obscured their identities, and the organization’s extreme deficit of imagination had left them stumped by the lack of license plates on the car, despite the free and effortless ability of just about any casual enthusiast of early American luxury automobiles and/or lackadaisical disciple of the Concours religion to immediately identify *BLOOD* by *name* from the grainiest image, if consulted. If anything, their incompetence rewarded Pith and Lather’s continued focus on the products of the same store’s cheese artisan, as intelligence on the state of her latest flagship incubation was freely available with no more effort than it took to simply stop by her display amid regular shopping trips. Twice in two weeks, they stole both of her replacements for the biggest child without any significant alteration of their method, which frustrated her and the management nearly to the point of crises, and quickly lost all potential for fun in a third attempt – their kicks were in their absurdity, not their *effectiveness*, and neither of them cared much for the cheese.

Two days after they'd taken the third wheel, Theodore mailed to the store's main address an anonymous bundle of cash totaling almost three times the sum value of the cheese "in interest," which included a long, sappy letter addressed personally to the Artisan and went on and on about how he – the mastermind – had discovered in his crime the magic of her art, stating and restating in outpouring artisanal prose why she should never be afraid to put so much of herself in her perfect medium of expression – titanic wheels of five-figure cheese.

"It's not as if getting caught wouldn't have been the absolute pinnacle of the thing," he had suggested to Lenny that night over an uncharacteristically serene scotch in front of an uncharacteristically cozy wood and what had seemed to be – under all reasonable scrutiny – an uncharacteristically reflective and relatively sober Theodore Pith compared to the impressively consistent inconsistencies he'd been so far growing to expect.

"Imagine being tried and convicted for *stealing cheese* and furthermore knowing you could choose to introduce yourself with the story of your brief, prolific success in a most 18th-century crime, and back it up with transcripts, newspaper clippings – even TV news stories, if you can pull it off... or, making for yourself the temporary obligation to explain in a job interview that

yes, you did indeed have a recent criminal conviction on your record... for running out with *three wheels of cheese* from the same place in the same store within the same month."

The noise of his own sobriety had been like a beehive with a tide in the back of his head, pulsing, ebbing, spiking, then fading – a buzzing multitude of footprints were the withdrawals left there by a diverse nature of substances. Some were more tangibly linked to physical sensations of vocally-specific need, as nicotine so quickly becomes and as alcohol shall be, one day, if you explicitly and repeatedly overdo it. Others left equally unpleasant sensations that could be – to the body – of an unknown cause entirely, like the sharpness of certain amphetamines, which we one can only miss consciously.

"So, yes, incrimination and money are both more or less inconsequential, but why the apology?" he had asked through a dip in the amplitude of the tide. The scotch had seemed to be treating something. He had felt most of it in his toes.

"And such an *extensive* apology... Was it guilt? Or do you just get off on your raw insincerity so blissfully that those hours of your time couldn't have been spent on a single more pleasurable activity than writing a bullshit apology to a woman you've never met in which you

expertly validate a worldview and a set of preferences that couldn't possibly differ any more from your own?"

"Both and neither," Theodore had replied, pouring the last quarter of the bottle between them.

"Guilt is nothing but regretful incompetence, which – depending on the perspective from which you classify – I may or may not experience or act from. From my own, I would argue that mitigating the possible damage done collaterally by a stunt like this is effort owed to *my own vanity* irrespective of the wellbeing of however many cheese-obsessive people may have been affected or not. Inadvertently harming some person or persons seriously – in spirit, mind, body, or all three – while spinning around a brass-headed cane and playing with a slippery monocle is just embarrassingly sloppy, primarily – and by its nature dull, unoriginal, and unnecessary.

"My ability to balance out unforeseen consequences of my exploits is satisfying if only in its reinforcement of my control over my own impact on my environment. Theft as an abstract is always going to make the thief look weak in the end, no matter how much he may or may not be aggrandized in popular culture. Violence is vulgar, brutish, and uncivilized. Anybody can

demoralize, steal from, or beat up anyone who happens to have less power at that moment – the power to alter perception, though, is the ultimate entertainment device."

It had then occurred to Lenny through the noise of his extreme sobriety from all that was not scotch that he should've *definitely* been taking notes; that the chances of hearing Theodore so explicitly explain his truths ever again were virtually nill, and that he had been altogether *horrendous* at his profession since the World Trade Center had last towered over Manhattan, but before he had found the necessary bearings to further formulate any sort of rectifying action, he'd lost consciousness there in front of that supremely cozy fire.

And now, as he walked with a certain glee through his nocturnal space by the more concentrated softened yellow of the "Nature Observatory"²⁵ with a leather-bound journal and a golden-nibbed pen in the big front pocket of his beige utility jacket – despite enduring the downward slope of the amphetamine and laudanum concentration in his blood – he was yet unprepared by what there was of these in him, still, to comprehend his own incompetence. Though he could recall that brief, noisy consumption of his truth by his own sober measure, he

²⁵ The Four-Oaks Nature Observatory was – by any reasonable observation – nothing more than a large parking lot where a grand, fantastical forest had stood just a few years before, inevitably leading visitors or passers-by with any remaining cognitive function to reflect, briefly, on the true complexity of the definitions of "nature" and "observation," respectively.

was spared the obligation of understanding it, or worse – *using* the pen and the journal to articulate it in a way he would not be able to forget. Nevertheless, the cheese heists were definitively the most fun he could remember having, for reasons which he did not find important enough to justify disturbing his deserved respite from the burden of words.

Often, Pith would blast both sides of two or three early-90s, edgy sample-speckled Australian rave cassettes at deafening volume from the parlor while he stomped around reading real-estate trade journals until he'd pass out and fall face-first into the polished oaken floor, the towering wall shelves of collectible classics, or – if his luck happened to be severely deficient – some piece of dark, dense, hundred-year-old furniture, where he would remain for twenty or thirty hours in deep recovery sleep. Lenny Lather did his best to take advantage of these lapses in his supervision by wandering the great old house, sifting through what of Theodore Pith's possessions that could be considered personal or intimate – the great Guttenberg, where it lay spread open on a pulpit in the corner of the library most of the time when the Master was at home – and the numerous lesser instances of Theodore's blasphemy, which he'd originally supposed to have gone forgotten as the toys belonging to a child of plenty often do, but the few tests to which Lenny Lather had subjected his memory so far had been unsuccessful in shaking

loose any neglected ends. It seemed that he had not forgotten even his most petty, minuscule acts of obtuse indiscretion, chaotic disruption, or perplexing inconvenience, due in no small part to the odds and ends contained within the expanses and crannies of *Nice, Big's* nearer and further quarters, most now repurposed (although not all permanently) into personal galleries.

Nothing so unseemly as Holy shrines, their walls were covered by and large with great photographic prints themed as you'd expect within the rooms of the manor of an elderly aristocratic globetrotter with a penchant for civic engineering and local media. There was *The Obits Room*, covered in magnified prints of southern Wyoming newspaper clippingsⁱⁱⁱ in minimal black matte frames over floor-to-ceiling pink identical to the color of a popular antacid, which unsettled Lenny Lather's core to no end – the gastrointestinality of the matching furniture and linens made him feel as if he was being digested in the huge stomach of a heinous mutant with an appetite for sentimental rural memoriam. Closer scrutiny of the text – as was encouraged upon the first stop of his first tour of the estate, being a newsman himself – would reveal that it was less than legitimate, at best.

"Every business quarter," Theodore Pith had explained with a certain glee, "I require a staffer from a sequentially-chosen one of my papers to write and publish their own obituary. It helps keep one's perspective fresh, don't you think?"

Naturally, as a quite recent acquaintance and grateful guest in his home, Lenny Lather had politely and absentmindedly agreed, while internally, he had entertained the all-too-resonant thought that he had been writing his own obituary for years, yet – to whatever extent he was himself aware of it – he was the only individual for which Theodore Pith was inexplicably tempted by sincerity, and thus eager to sate his resulting curiosity. It was not clear whether or not he enjoyed the innkeeper role, or – especially at the origin of their meeting – anything which could be substantially shared at all, really.

CHAPTER VII

Barney Blimp had already scratched and felt for the back of his neckline several times, assuming it was the tag of this – his favorite navy blue t-shirt – that was causing the irritation, but as he wiggled to reach it again, he felt prickling and motion. Startled and sweaty, he swung his shoulders wide and propped himself against the rim of the bathtub with his right elbow, turning his body, head, and eyes toward their extremes to see that it was nothing but a Poinsettia, potted in golden foil-wrapped plastic atop the lid of the toilet tank so that its especially scratchy green, red-spattered leaves protruded well into the space of any occupant who happened to get comfortable enough on the pot to lean at all back.

"This is insane! You are all *actually* insane," came the unusually crass whine of Lazarus' little brother – whom Barney had always struggled to name since they'd yet to have a significant

interaction in the two years he'd been coming over – through the bathroom door from the kitchen.

"Yes, you've got it so hard, don't you? You know, when I was your age, I had to save my own money from the car wash for two summers just so I could pay for my own trip – *bus ticket included* because *my* parents wouldn't set aside the time to take me themselves... to Blackload on the third," replied the booming baritone of Mr. Luger, with whom Barney Blimp and the rest of *The Limon 6* – including his own son, Lazarus – avoided eye contact if at all humanely possible. He'd slid up from the basement over half an hour before and was long finished with his business, but the notion of traipsing right through the middle of the family dispute to get to the basement stairs – which was directly open to their argumentative kitchen – had paralyzed him there, waiting for a resolution or some equivalently appropriate opportunity to return back to the social safety of the *Smash Bros.* game on the downstairs TV. The side effects of his anxiety were then further exacerbated by the stillness of the humid heat in the Luger house, which was never within much of a confined temperature, as suburban houses purposely tend to be. Though theirs was by far the largest, most convenient, and most accommodating gathering place offered by the parents of the 6, it managed in many subtleties – like the nagging placement of the Poinsettia

plant, the air of disuse created by the stubborn geometric perfection of the vacuum rows left in the unblemished white carpet, and the required assistance of an occupant to navigate the particulars of either entrance – to be just uncomfortable enough to discourage one from spending large, unbroken blocks of time within it. It was an especially searing July evening in Limon – outside, the turbulent energy was just beginning to bleed off from the earlier one-hundred degree high, yet throughout Barney Blimp's extended bathroom stay, the wide brown vent before him had yet to offer any cooling pity for the sweatsoaked, red-cheeked teen.

From the kitchen came a huff and an obnoxious tirade of shuffling papers.

"Well I think things have changed, *Dad*," whined the smallest Luger again. "Do you remember the old brochure having a flying saucer with a crucifix insignia? Do you remember it mentioning 'preparing oneself to graduate from the physical to the purely psychospiritual realm?'"

...

"Or saying anything about bringing 'only the most sentimental touchstones and humble garments the child wishes to carry with them to the other side?'"

...

"Or how about the following sentence, which reads 'though the child may choose to bring these for comfort, they may also choose to come to us unsoled and unclothed, as they came to the physical Earth; as they shall leave it as childs and pilgrims of Blackload,' huh? Does that sound right to you, Dad?"

...

"Look, I think they're just tryin' to say in a clever and funny way that'cha cain't bring ya Gameboy, son."

Through his nose to maintain his stealth, Barney Blimp sighed. His thighs were beginning to stick bothersomely to the toilet seat and – in his eavesdropping's intense fixation – he'd been fooled twice again by the unmannerly plant. He reached behind him and moved it to the bathtub, taking great care to set it silently down. From under the floral tiles beneath his Jean-topped sneakers came an unintelligible shout from Liam in the basement along with the easy low frequency *knock knocks* of East coast hip-hop. He leaned forward to slide the slats of the lifeless grate open in time to hear "...without rule of law," and closed it again. Carefully holding the loose steel clasp of his belt to keep it from jingling, he rose, deliberately did up his clothes, and stepped at once to the shag mat in front of the plain white door.

"I don't care... Anything else! *Literally* anything else, Dad!"

Barney grasped the brass doorknob gradually so as not to wiggle it within its execrable bracket and turned smoothly out the bolt so that he could crack it open just enough to see the kitchen counter.

"Look... I'm not trying to be the bad guy here, you know," said the huge Mr. Luger more somberly now from where he was stationed with his coffee mug by the empty sink. "I never had so much fun as I did at Blackload, I don't think, and it's not like I could *ever go again*. Think about that!"

...

"Never! No matter how much I paid or pleaded, and *oh man*, I wish I could... You bet... Sure do... You got no idea."

Sitting on the opposite four-legged stool with only the short spikes of his gelled scalp and the back of his gargantuan *M*A*S*H** t-shirt facing Barney's crack was the befuddled Little Luger.

"Dad... I can't go to this. I will go *anywhere else!* *Vacation bible school*, Dad! I will go to vacation bible school!"

...

"I would rather *waste my whole summer* in the church basement watching *The Lion King* a billion times with braindead toddlers if you want, but you *can't* make me go to Blackload."

...

Barney's observation was abruptly soiled by a broiling spike of agony from his abdomen so consuming and intense that a shrill yelp leapt out of his mouth through his peeping gap directly at the talking two in an extended, dramatic resonance. And yet – as the spike melted as quickly as it had sprung into a dull, wet ache – he noticed that they had not reacted to the cry, nor turned to discover him. *This is odd*, he thought, but the garbled sounds their two mouths now emitted were stranger still – gibberish, indecipherable – yet within the maintained tonality, though, of their respective pouter and soother positions within the summer camp debacle.

Barney Blimp tried to inspect his ears with both probing pinky fingers, but they were much too big to fit.

"Eeg," said Little Luger in protest, gesturing angrily at the pamphlet in front of him.

"Eeg," his father responded, leaning his large belly and mug over the counter, obediently inspecting the literature in apparent confounding thought. Motion in Barney's periphery moved

his attention from the two to the mouth of the stairwell across the kitchen to their left, where – through the gaps between the white support legs of its border railing – a suspended silver cylindrical condenser microphone floated fluidly, slowly upwards, rising up the slope of the stairs, its head and illuminated green power-indicating light facing the pair as they continued arguing obviously in tongues. As it crept, its mount and adjacent black metal pole stand came into his view – steadily on its careful course – then a white hand with red painted nails; the tip top of Lexi's blond bowl cut and elven ears. From the bathroom door, Barney saw her stop just short of peeking above the kitchen floor, her grip for an instant wavering before all sound and motion ceased – at once, father and son stopped speaking and looked fast at the microphone where it hung just below the wood rail, recording them.

The three were trapped as such for an epoch: the father, against the counter, face toward the invading equipment without expression; the son, opposite him and looking also with his chin on his thumbs; Lexi, out of their line-of-sight, held fast, and then retreating down with the contraption at the pace she had come, descending with the device, which the duo followed in unison with only their eyes as it went down beneath the floor again.

"Boop!" said a damp voice from ahead. Cold bone pushed on Barney's nose and it all went black and under, then yellow again. He sniffled and it was rubber – the odor of a high school gym. "*Boop!*" again, and the breath was louder, but he shot open his eyes and grabbed the bone. It was an unhealthily yellowed index finger attached to the strangely-balding man above him and his graph paper collar, grinning gray teeth, and a cleft chin.

"Good morning, Barney, my friend," he said, "it is the time for you to awaken."

"Egch," was all the reply he was obliged, for the abdomen ache had been mortally enlarged and was again returning – with its grimacing victim – to life. Barney involuntarily abandoned his hold on the man's finger to hold with both hands his own tortured middle.

"Fuck. Ow," he groaned.

"There he is, BJ, the winner of the Eastminster Kennel Club's Best in Show Award..."

In front of his clutched stomach and the white floral slopes of his blanketed knees and feet was the hellish appliance – the tiny, cracked television, now strapped on top of a distressed black metallic cart with the wide dirty yellow band of a tow rope, placed so close as to be in apparent contact with the foot of his hospital bed, which had been wheeled into a windowless, much more sinister space. The tiles of the ceiling were stained all over and the faded custard

wallpaper was contemptuously torn in the far corner from the obscured doorway behind a gigantic, crosshatched pile of wooden and blue plastic clipboards that filled most of the unevenly lit floor space – certainly taking up half as much again the space made for Barney Blimp and company.

"A great-looking dog."

"He walks like a winner."

"For God's sake... Who... the hell... are... you people?" he asked with great effort, wincing through his teeth. The yellowed man had turned his daft, gray grin away and flipped through the crisp paper sheets on the clipboard in his forearm's crook, pausing to belch once, twice, and thrice, churning his chin into many again and again with his nodding.

"Barney, wow... It's good to see you up and at'em again, eh?... I'm Dr. Bill, a resident psychiatrist here at St. Nicolas General."

...

"Dr... Bill-"

"...Dr. William Gravel, that is."

...

"Why... have I been moved? What... the *hell* is this room? The pain..."

Dr. Gravel looked his way again with unsettlingly white eyes, belching under his breath, emptily grinning.

"Ah, well, this is Clipboard Locker three, you see... Didn't think these just appeared willy nilly outa thin air, didja? *Aba*," he laughed hollowly and briefly held up his board in displayed emphasis before licking quickly his fingers in that foulest of fingery quick-licking ticks found in far too many of the most off-putting people, returning them then to vile scrunching and rubbing of what was presumably Barney Blimp's medical chart.

"At this point," he said, chin retreating in another emission, "we moved you here, you see... because there seemed to be a problem when we tried to run your insurance, I'm afraid."

"You... what? You... can't... you can't do that?"

...

"Oh jeez, I'm really sorry Barney, buddy... At this point, I'm afraid we can't give you anything more for the pain until you answer a few questions for me... Don't worry, though, we will get it all figured out in no time at all."

"...*The former General raw and red-eyed as he defended the President...*"

"At this point... I'd like to formalize things, if you don't mind," said Dr. Gravel, belching and clicking his ballpoint repeatedly after dismounting it from the board. "Uh... Give me just a moment... uhhuh."

"...*Good morning, Geoff...*"

The doctor marched around the bed, scooting and flattening himself between the TV cart and the decrepit wall, briefly disappearing behind the cover of a filthy old-fashioned hospital screen to produce a rolling chair with matching white leather upholstery.

"...*The driver, look at this...*"

Both the hinges and the cracking cushion creaked as he sat, leaning at once much too far back, then regaining balance with his lifted legs and a loathsome "*whoopsie!*" Barney Blimp, still clutching, set to sucking in a great, to-capacity breath.

"TURN OFF THE FUCKING..." he screamed.

"Hello, aha," said Dr. Gravel, with his chins and his belching.

...

"Good afternoon, Mr. Blimp, I am Dr. William Gravel, resident psychiatrist at St. Nicolas. At this point, I'd like to conduct your initial examination interview, if that's alright with you. How are you feeling today?"

"Hello, Bill. Turn off the fucking TV please."

...

"I'm sorry?"

"For the love of God, turn off the fucking television... Right *there!*" yelled Barney, sitting up with all his effort, indicating with both outstretch hands to the blabbering set at his feet, palms pleading toward the ceiling stains, "RIGHT *THERE*... TURN. IT. OFF."

"Gee, Barney..." said Dr. Gravel, following his patient's desperately distressed eyes, "I can't really do that at this point, I'm afraid... That TV is part of this whole regimen... You need it! You need it to feel better." He and his chins belched on his board and again his fingers performed the quick-licking tick. Barney Blimp – having exhausted the energy he had saved in his rage – flopped back in on his unfulfilling pillows, moaning.

"We've got what looks to be a... Ha ha, well... a miniature trough of chili right here in front of us. Wow!..."

"At this point," belch, licking tick, "I'm going to ask you a few questions that may seem a bit silly, but it's important that you try to answer them honestly and accurately, okay? We can laugh about them, no problem, but the actual answers from you need to be serious ones, if you can, okay?"

"...Yes, that's an understandable contrast to make, Jack..."

"Let's begin with your name. Can you tell me your full name?"

...

"Barney... Barry... Blimp," he answered, clutching his middle again and looking serenely at the front of Theodore Pith's t-shirt on the TV with just his neck.

"Excellent, Barney... Okay, now... Today's date?"

...

"Barney?... The date, buddy."

...

"Saturday... March tenth."

"Perfect," said Dr. Gravel, belching and scribbling with his crude, scratching instrument.

...

“And, can you tell me where we are now?”

...

Amidst a chorus of agony and new epiphany, Barney laid back flat and began shuffling downward in his bed toward the cart by gyrating his hips.

...

“Barney, can you tell me where you are? Maybe what this room is?”

...

Grunting and breathlessly cursing, the shuffling progressed steadily and Barney’s feet soon escaped the floral sheets, exposed toes touching the cold metal cart.

“...Well, *there it is...* You’ve got to love that humor!...”

“Alrighty, then, why don’t we come back to that one? No problem at all, buddy... How about the President? Can you tell me who the President is right now?”

...

Satisfied with his distance from the box and grimacing, Barney dug in his elbows and pushed against the towering black object of his torture with the gowned-above-the-knees might

and unabashed howling of childbirth, tipping it insufficiently at first, then allowing it to swing back against the bed before adding all available gumption to the assisting action of his knees.

“...*What kind of a shirt is that?*...” asked Jaime Jangles in finality as she fell back out of Barney’s sight with the thing, crashing, buzzing, and then entirely quieting, to his short-lived relief.

...

“*Whoopsie!*” belched Dr. Gravel.



On a clear day in the springtime, the United States Air Force Academy just north of Colorado Springs is an unequaled, head-looseningly airy and metallic experience with its acres of flat, entirely rectangular aluminum-covered facilities²⁶ devoid of all but the most nominal distinguishing features, low and wide, but architecturally focused to culminate in its famous chapel – the historic purebred brutalist structure at the geographic center of the Cadet Area designed by architect Walter Netsch, who could not have delivered a single more effective

²⁶ So metallic is the Academy’s campus that it was for a time jestingly referred to as “Aluminum U” by students and faculty of Annapolis and Westpoint.

symbol of traditionalist American values redressed and repurposed into a gargantuan armored war machine. On this early afternoon, two pair and one threesome of seamless khaki-wrapped Cadets walked measuredly around the intensely reflective white rectangular concrete circuit toward which the chapel doors faced inward and its monolithic presence loomed, smiling more than seemed reasonable in their surroundings, reflecting even more of the unencumbered sun off of their perfectly white teeth up the naturally-bordering hill of the West edge, where Lily Tharp and Theodore Pith leaned their folded forearms against the thick concrete wall of the elevated walkway and squinted²⁷ toward the bizarre scene below.

"I do wonder where they get so much of whatever it is they have," said Pith.

"They're just kids," replied Lily.

"Kids with gifted IQs, perfect eyesight, above-average reflexes, and completely neurotypical brain function, yeah."

A breeze shifted and spiraled from the first corner of the path from around the hill's base, 300 yards behind them, buffeting Theodore's Curls and whipping stray strands about Lily's bun.

²⁷ Both had refrained from wearing their sunglasses in a mutually unconscious sense of how tacky it would be for tourists to wear aviators in the Cadet Area.

"I could've done it. Probably still could. I've heard they never stopped requiring fighter pilots to take Adderall, though."

"I believe all'a that. We could go down and ask for a hookup but I think that church must be a complex surveillance apparatus of some kind... I'm surprised they let us roam around this close, unsupervised."

A red-tailed hawk's shadow panned along the bottom edge of their entranced vision and they both looked up – hands to their foreheads for shade – just in time to see its splayed feather wingspan descend behind the far side of the chapel, out of sight.

"Do you actually want to learn to fly? I could pay for it, you know," Pith asked, glancing imprecisely in her more sunlit direction.

"You'd just demand that I fly you everywhere."

...

"That's not true in the slightest, but I would definitely expect a ridealong or two during which you allow me to screw around on the radio."

...

"I don't think I've ever been anywhere like this."

"It's like a future caste of technocatholic elites built an industrial Eden on the top of a mountain above the clouds."

"Yeah, my Uncle said he was an officer, but I don't think he could miss mentioning this place."

"Ya know... it reminds one a lot of—"

"Workin' on it."

"Well, thanks. It's just a really exciting prospect to restore something like that... Open it up to exhibits, even? I would be the God of hams for the rest of time."

"And if, indeed, I am able to actually acquire for you the ownership of what was not-so-long-ago top-secret acreage containing top-secret equipment within a foreign nationally-sealed exclusion zone, *I will be your God.*"

"That's very true."

"Though technically, they've only continued to maintain the zone out that far because it's become a wildlife refuge."

"Which would be even more difficult to swing were it legally classified as such."

"Ah, well... If it happens, it happens."

Four of the walkers had departed the circuit, but the group of three was having another go, one of whom was walking backwards, toe-to-heel in front of them, telling an animated story with his napkincap in his fist. Theodore Pith inhaled deeply and cupped his hands into a cone around his mouth, which he pointed straight at the gaggle and *screeched* at an inhumanly high frequency for just a quarter second before jerking around to look up the hill behind him, enacting bewilderment. He saw the sound had distracted and slowed the Cadets and turned their smiles to mild puzzlement.

"Let's go find a drink somewhere," he said.

XXX

Chief Technical Officer Peter Built had planned to be unreachable for at least an entire workweek – if not eternity – after the fateful Thursday when the billionaire and Barney Blimp had made a joke of his career and shit on his conference table in a single morning, but come noon on Monday, he woke up in his bathtub – pruned and badly chemically burned from the bleach he'd poured in at the end of the previous evening – to a backlog of incoherent emails, texts, and voicemail messages – mostly from Madge Teeth – in which she sounded far more ecstatically surprised than he'd ever actually heard from a human being, though completely and

entirely incoherent, as if she'd taken a humongous dose of Peyote. When he managed to log in to the office chat server on his smartphone with what remained of the dissolving flesh of his thumbs, he was whole-body astonished to find the routine passive aggressive cross-department correspondence and bullshit Associate question volume he'd have expected by this time on every Monday before this one for as long as he could remember.

After a brief and frank internal debate between his extreme exasperation with existence and immense curiosity over how and why the office he'd seen totally annihilated just four days before appeared to have returned to normal work, he resolved that he was much too pruned and uncomfortable to kill himself, so he began upon the task of gathering up the layers of drooping red skin in his arms to escape from the acrid tub, sloshing the terrible fluid about the linoleum as he stepped heroically onto the large pile of smoldering ashes of the self-help books he'd burned on the tile during his strange last-night rituals. Stopping by the master closet, he walked in to find it totally emptied of both his and Ingrid's belongings – including hangers – and containing only in its very center her pet tarantula, Bo, who looked solemn.

He'd even left the gas stovetop on, hoping to leave Earth in a fireball, but the burners had been inexplicably lit without any evidence of combustion, so they'd accomplished nothing but

running up the bill all night. After some seriously effortful nude recollection and a few swigs of isopropyl alcohol from under the kitchen sink, he remembered one hateful diving trip with his in-laws in the summer of 2007 and dashed across the house, dripping to the garage, where his car was still parked in the far space, *thank Gourd*, though heavily vandalized. Ingrid, he assumed, had used the can of John Deere Yellow spraypaint he'd bought years ago (intending to touch up a large scratch on the flank of a riding mower which they no longer owned) to write *S C R U B* across the already-filthy vehicle's left side. This indecency, however, he barely registered. Instead, he approached the space under the high shelf in the far corner and jumped repeatedly into the plywood wall, grabbing for the ratty, disfigured cardboard box resting atop it. It inched forward as he leapt again and again, heaving and sweating naked bleach droplets until the dusty-ass hunk finally fell upon him, breaking open upon its contact with the concrete to reveal a filthy, cobweb-covered wetsuit.

XXX

It was an amalgamation of partial Limon truths, now – images of faces, landmarks in different seasons, and fragments of specific memories colliding with each other in continually-upended attempts to align cohesively: Leona, Lexie, and Leo smoking ditchweed from a one-

hitter on a cloudy Fall evening at the y-lot; confronting Liam after class with Lazarus about the cruelty in shooting his dad's cows with a BB gun for sport; riding a flea-infested queen mattress towed behind Lexi's boyfriend's loud little pickup truck through suburbia like a raft; picking up a free piano from a classified ad only to destroy it in the park with its own legs the same day, screaming in a frenzy for the camcorder; his quaint, speedy mother – either completely understanding his time of need to explore and dissect his selves, or simply... not, but always as present as she could possibly be. In retrospect, it was always much more of the first.

Gradually, sounds somewhere between familiar music and familiar voices joined with the collage to produce an immensely powerful, unexpected ache which Barney Blimp had not experienced in so long he'd all but forgotten its sensation. It was deepening like vertigo, but warm – a sore release. It lapped up his heart and ran down his limbs until his toes buzzed before it all circled back to his nose as its focal point, unleashing huge waves of nostalgia on the rich anomalous presence of his favorite smell: wood-smoked barbecue in the late-evening Fall chill, which he both celebrated and desperately mourned because it could never, ever be recreated as it was supposed to be – *with* those it was supposed to be. He began to grow quickly angry at his subjection to this ache unnecessarily.

And then there was light and the dream's smell was replaced by the imponderous and much less activating odor of diluted disinfectant as Barney caught his bearings enough to realize he was back upstairs in his original room at St. Nicholas, but the television was gone, and his remaining abdominal discomfort was tiny and dull. A thunderstorm was just concluding its business outside his window, and for a moment he felt confident that he would be able to coax the pressure in his throat to the surface and finally get some long-overdue crying out of the way, but he lost his grip and it slipped curtly back into his familiar state of generalized rage.

The Hell Tablet from before had been replaced on the mounted swinging tray by his own smartphone, which had even been plugged into an outlet to charge. For a moment, he considered if *Good Morning America*, Dr. Gravel, and Clipboard Room #3 had been nothing more than a wild fever dream – perhaps even Theodore Pith and his destructive office breakdown! Picking up the handset, though, he realized that it was not his, but in fact an unused example of its successive generation that had been restored from whatever was left of his old device after he pillaged MapQuest. Unlocking it, he was made immediately uneasy noticing that eight whole days had passed since the last time he remembered being conscious, and even more so by the first email in his inbox.

To: barn@mapquest.com
From: t@pi.th
Date: Friday, 03/16/2018 1647
Subject: Get well soon/updates on the future!

Barney!

I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to be introduced formally. It seems you attempted to eat your old phone, so this one's on me! ☺

I hope your recovery is progressing smoothly! I've had an interesting first week here at MapQuest, but from what I'm hearing, it sure sounds like this office just isn't the same without you around! We're pretty close to settling on our OKRs through the end of the year – no rush, of course – but I want to wait on any hard tech decisions until we have your input back.

Know that you are free to reach out to me personally at any time with any questions, suggestions, and/or feedback.

Cheers!

T. Pith

CHAPTER VIII

By the Monday after *The Incident*, MapQuest's new Chief Operating Officer, Lily Tharp had remotely arranged the significantly expedited insurance appraisal, cleanup, refinishing, repainting, refurnishing, remodeling, and re-equipment of the 1555 Baker St. office with modernized server architecture, desktop machines, and state-of-the-art Enterprise-class laser printers from her smartphone on the road. The space's new look was a reimagination of the previous design, drawing from the same color palette, but darkened and shifted, and its

haphazardly speckled light wood deleted in favor of matte black sound-absorbing and soft-touch alcantara. Arriving minutes after sunrise, Lily was the first to experience the results of her work, and the smell of new paint combined with the young day's light to present a rejuvenated MapQuest that wasn't any more hip than the dated old layout, but for her felt significantly less like a graveyard, at least.

Both the already-negligent CEO and CFO had officially vanished with the last scraps of the budget AOL had been throwing the company quarterly, deleting their LinkedIns, locking their other social accounts, and dropping off Tharp's immediate radar, which was – including what they'd legally stolen – so inconsequential that she'd delegated away their severance because she couldn't be bothered to retain any memories of their existence. In less than a week, she had become MapQuest's senior executive *and* completely redesigned its working environment. She had commandeered Peter's corner office and expanded it dramatically so that every employee and guest would be immediately greeted by her steady, deep blue eyes above the immense span of her black desk, full-on upon entering the work floor and know immediately who it belonged to.

XXX

For the first time since the Zuckerberg scandal (as far as he could remember,) Lenny Lather arose, sober, before 10 on Monday morning to an empty *Nice, Big* in complete clarity. Refraining even from the French press, he departed the great house in sneakers and khaki shorts only two minutes after rising, bound for the corner diner a mile and a half down the road toward town. As he walked through the chaff on the sidewalk from yesterday's first mass-mowing of the year, he meticulously turned over each of the major events and decisions in his recent past which had led him to destitution, living off of a young billionaire – financially and energetically – in the middle of Wisconsin, rapidly approaching fifty and his honest-to-goodness *last* last chance to redeem his career on the promise of a good story which his subject made sure he was always too high to write. And this was the *second consecutive* variation on this most unlikely of themes: young billionaires ruining his career.

At the diner, he gulped down eggs, toast, and four glasses of water before setting off over the same sidewalk upon which he came. *All it would take* for him to actually get the story on Theodore Pith – the young man who'd treated him like a stray dog with amusing habits – was the slightest bit of moderation, and he'd have a first-person account in the most intimate detail of how this reckless, absurdist young mogul lived, and he couldn't possibly be more primed for

public distaste – much less for accountability to the law. As he walked past the driveway upon which a round retiree was waxing his cabin cruiser for the new season, Lenny Lather committed to becoming relevant and respected again and made no motion to return the boatist's friendly wave. Now, he had absolutely nothing to lose, and no excuse for hesitation or journalistic piety.

Upon his arrival back at the house, he ignited a hot mid-day inferno in the study's vast fireplace and methodically fed every single jumbled page of his notes from the past year to the flames. When it was all finished and burning, he sat erect in the red leather armchair with the thick curtains drawn over the tall windows in only the light from the blaze. Still in his sneakers and pouring sweat down his legs, he looked deep into the heart of the roar with a Parker between his fingers and a blank steno on his knee.

XXX

Theodore Pith arrived at the Baker St. office swooping in an all-black suit a few minutes after twelve o'clock, as the 20 employees of the new MapQuest who'd mustered the courage to show up on its first day had only then paused their work to partake timidly in the five-star catered Greek lunch which Lily Tharp had insisted upon in the common area. Only Madge Teeth had thought to bring her new laptop to the bar, on which she ruthlessly pounded out

email after email into its very clicky new keys as she munched on quiche. Most of those brave enough to have remained worked in Customer Support, and were therefore most accustomed to static workstations, but upon their arrival throughout the morning – it took many varying amounts of self-soothing to must the courage to return to the office so soon – new desktop machines awaited each on (or in) their assigned spaces, along with new full-sized laptops, still in box. Two of the rigs still needed to be properly set up, and the boss had been expected at lunchtime, so the crowd was understandably antsy and they chewed like starving mules as he and his top-combed bobbing blood curl strut into view, quickly slowing at their obvious fright.

“Now what is *wrong*, bunch?”

He spread his legs wide, rested his hands on his hips and pivoted slowly to look in every downturned face from his own frown before abruptly sliding the two strides to the office’s new big-door stainless steel fridge and produced from the pocket of its yet-to-be-cooling door, a seven-eighths-full bottle of Macallan 18, which he *plunked* down on the wood short-bar, raising his eyebrows.

“Every one of you is going to take a swig of this, right now,” he ordered, looking between them again.

"Uh, I don't drink, and it's like one PM on a Monday," Madge said, returning her attention to her computer.

A few murmured chuckles played through the largely stool-sat crowd.

"Fine – you're the only one that doesn't need it but I'm not kidding... Everybody needs to come up here right now and take at least a single drink of this... I can see it in your faces."

...

"Look, I'm sorry... I know this is the worst possible way to meet your new boss, but there are rare moments in life when all etiquette may be forgone in the face of evident truth, and the truth is.... Evidently, all of you need a goddamned drink!"

Real grins and more voluminous *har har*s, now. Shad Balch – MapQuest's last remaining web developer and the only of the crowd Pith yet knows by name – dismounts his stool and tugs the front of his sweater down, shaking his head lazily, chuckling as he arrives across the bar and is handed the whole bottle, dipping his arm and widening his eyes for a moment.

"Jez," he said, tipping the whole crowd – including Madge, even – into full-on, red-faced, pneumatic hammer-like cackling. Finally, others slowly move to line up behind Shad, who's timidly raising the bottle's attitude, sniffing and face-scrunching, but still giggling enough that

his unsteadiness unfold's Pith's arms to the ready out of instinct as he cringes in view of the pitiful spectacle before him. He's just inhaling to complain when Shad finally goes for two moderate gulps, his entire upper face theatrically squeezed shut with his eyes even still when he drops it and exhales twice as loud as was necessary and sets the bottle hastily down in front of Pith to scurry off like a 7-year-old who's just been made to take his cough medicine.

"Oh come on! That's the best stuff there is!"

Pith rather firmly explains that the communion method is the most efficient for a moderately sized group like theirs to ingest alcohol from a single bottle when the support tech fourth in line twice insists that they "should just pass it around," actually blurting out "you're fired" but catching it quick to laugh it off as a tease.

"She's pregnant and I'm her attorney so square up, bitch," barked Lily upon her arrival from her office, abruptly silencing the bits of chatter that had sprouted up in the line and moving all eyes to follow her as she nonchalantly bent down to grab a vine of purple grapes out of the loose grocery bag under the bar.

"You wanna check in now, T?" she asked, rinsing them off.²⁸

"Absolutely," said Theodore, setting the scotch down gingerly on the touchpad of Madge's laptop.

"No exceptions – even pregnancy," he said.

Theodore shut Lily's office door behind him so they could allow themselves a single, consolidated laugh. He clasped his hands behind his back and faced the framed, skillfully blown-up *Dixie Chicks* poster she'd already managed to have hung in the dead center of the new black paint on the far wall from her desk. She sat and wrestled for a moment with the computer display before freeing its base from an oversized brass hinge buried in the black wood desk. Pith began swaying side-to-side on his hips ever so slightly, still admiring.

"Shad Balch," he said.

...

"Shaaad *Balch*," she replied.

"Shadbalch... *BALCH*."

²⁸ Lilith Tharp is the one human being ever to walk the Earth who can refer to Theodore Pith as "T," "P," or occasionally even "TP," without incurring his terrible wrath in the form of some horrific public embarrassment.

Breaking the spell upon him by the Goddesses on the dark wall, he turned to find the loveseat in the corner was the only seating yet to arrive, so he sat on its armrest, crossing his arms and legs.

"So the post," began Lily, appearing as if tiny, peeping at him from behind her huge desk, a dozen and a half feet away.^{iv}

"... It's just all blatant lies."

"Well not *all* of it."

"Well, yeah."

...

"Not even *most* of it, actually. Something like half."

"Half."

...

"Oh, you are aware that absolutely *no one* reads those, right? Except journalists, really, and we're not doing anything the tech magazines want to hear about, trust me."

...

"It looks like shit just there on its own."

"Yeah, well, there's not going to be anybody around to build any cushions physical *or* digital in the next 20 minutes, so we may as well just call it a fucking devblog for now."

"A devblog."

...

"Yeah, which should also keep anyone and everyone away but the most tedious, maniacal journalist."

"What about art and design?"

"Well... Even *Shad Balch* is sufficient for a *devblog*, but you should never, ever worry about visuals until the very last moment, these days. There are a billion starving, extremely talented young web and graphic designers within inches of you at any time. When we close further in on that point, we'll toss a worm out over the lake and everything will be bid down by the competition and whipped up in no time at all to a quality beyond expectation – even delivered and backed up before it even hits the water."

"Sounds good to me."

"Just make sure to pay them way too much, okay? You could probably multiply their fee by 10 and it wouldn't add up to a quarter of what we'd end up paying a designhouse to do it."

“Alrighty.”

...

Pith leaned back and let his torso fall across the loveseat’s other armrest – head up, feet dangling.

“Speaking of design... you fucking nailed the look of this place.”

“I know.”

After a moment of silence between the two, they felt something dense scrape into metal somewhere below them in the building without warning – Lily could feel a sickening crunch from the floor with her feet, and Theodore noticed the office door shake. They looked at each other and then over the other’s shoulder, each fairly certain they’d correctly identified the sound they’d heard moving away from- and then back toward them, heavily muffled from somewhere outside was that of a tortured compact car’s engine held to its rev limiter. Pith was struggling preposterously to escape the loveseat by violently rocking back and forth in order to build up enough perpetual momentum to propel his heavy end over the armrest when the dreadful noise began approaching again – though *much* more alarmingly rapid than before. Lily hustled out of the office containing her struggling boss and found a street-facing window just in time to see a

flash of dusty metallic maroon disappear into ground level of the building, two floors beneath her as she felt and heard the impact – an almost cartoonish squeak at a deafening volume – before the building's unsettling reeling.

She closed her eyes and waiting in the settling dust to hear screaming, but then recalled the last business to leave that lot – a restaurant called “Chicken Cunts” – had finished clearing out the previous Tuesday, and so was able to find able again to take slow, deep breaths freely. A total of only four other Questers were curious enough to make their way to the window by the time she opened them again, spinning back toward her office for her phone while acknowledging and reassuring their grim murmured expletives. Theodore Pith emerged from the doorframe as she approached.

“*Whuhoh.* What was it?”

“I think it was a car but I’m going to call. There’s nothing down there right now, so I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Sure. I’m gonna pop down ‘n have a look.”

Nodding, they parted, Pith headed for the same window quizzingly, noticing the weary eyes turned his way, seeking an answer.

"I'm sure everything's fine, guys. I'll be right back," he shouted, extending his fingers back at them and once waving them vertically downward as he made his expedite way toward the lobby. He rounded the new, clinical stainless steel desk at reception through the door and the two dormant elevators outside for the stairwell without hearing anything one would generally expect shortly after their building has just been forcibly assaulted by an entire automobile.

Double-down the steps he went through the drafty air of the well and its everpresent chlorine-scented breezes which opened him to the secondary hall – empty, still lit, alarms silent, and appearing not at all out of sorts. Over the navy blue carpet, swiveling his head between both the dark doorways of the maintenance and electrical rooms, around an L-joint, where he began to see indicators of destruction behind the *CHICKEN CUNTS* stickered logo on the plate-glass door at the end: chunks of plaster and a thin green stream slithering down the white tile.

Through the door – which was supposed to be locked by building policy – he saw that the event had been no cataclysm, really – a little red car had simply broken part-way through the West wall, failing even to compromise it enough to bring the section down completely, so it was snugly surrounded by the hole it punched, back wheels remaining in the Great Outdoors against the foundation's edge. The vehicle, however, was a loss, no doubt – its nose badly grizzled,

frothily steaming and ticking. Pith stepped through the crunching debris to better search the far driver's side and was sharply startled by the gigantic hairy brown spider sitting on the roof – sufficiently to hoot and whoop to himself. He noticed the aggravated artistry across the distressed flank and an oblong creature in the left seat, contorted in a position his eyes had extreme difficulty comprehending, despite having a long moment to process the sight as Pith squinted and tilted his head.

"Hey scrub!" he shouted, to no observable response.

...

He crunched forward one step and pounded with his fist on the window between himself and the filthy bulges of the creature, yet it remained unstirring. He reached for the door's black composite handle and lifted it gingerly, releasing the door in a *pop* as it released the pile of post-apocalyptic maritime recreation to roll clumsily onto the floor, where Theodore recognized it as former MapQuest COO Peter Built after a moment.

"Heya! Mr. Built!"

Peter half opened his eyes at the ceiling and exhaled a groan, awkwardly shifting his cruddy hands to his forehead.

"Jesus man..." Pith chuckled, leaning against the wreck and glancing nervously at the unbothered Bo resting atop it.

Peter Built continued his inverbal expressions of discomfort and blinked repeatedly, rolling a few inches right and left, but abruptly halted to inhale sharply and shoot his puffy, reddened eyes at Pith's with great mania.

"*HA!*" he screamed, contact unwavering.

"Are you okay...? Peter?"

...

"PHEWah!" Built roared, at once leaping up and into a squeaky sprint for the former Chicken Cunts rear exit from which Theodore had come, who stood, following the sight as he burst through its glass, stumbled, cackling to one knee, yet continued his apparently unphased forward momentum until he was gone. He looked to the spider and then back again, wondering amusedly aloud under his breath until the big bug caught his instinctive attention when he started to wander about, zigzagging as he tacked down the far slope of the roof and around a building puddle of lime green antifreeze in pursuit of his companion.

Lily Tharp had finally convinced the building manager on her fifth try that she was *not* a robocaller,²⁹ but in fact the top executive in charge of building matters at the Baker St. lot's largest remaining tenant by far after he'd picked up four consecutive calls only to scream "*ROBOCALL ILLEGAL! ROBOCALL ILLEGAL!*" repeatedly, presumably with his phone's receiver at the farthest possible distance from his ear until the other party (whom we know to be Ms. Tharp) would disconnect the call. Only by preparing herself for the fifth so that she bested his volume with her own rapidly repeated bellowing of "*STOP IT! HEY! STOP.*" had she finally persuaded him to listen enough to hear her identify herself moments before she glimpsed a blurred black tube shooting by the doorway from her periphery and heard rapid oscillating *pats* on the new carpet.

"Yes, this is Lily from MapQuest at 1555 Baker St.-"

"Uh huh."

"Yeah! I was calling about something serious you should prob-"

²⁹ The life experiences of the Yellowleaf Group employee who's managerial assignment included the Baker St. building would not be regarded as particularly relevant by Lily Tharp, but for the sake of thoroughness, it should be noted that he had been receiving extremely ominous automated calls for two straight days from his physician's office because their telecom engineer had mistakenly deleted most of its automated script template. When he'd answered the calls, instead of hearing "Hello. This is an appointment reminder notice from the office of Doctor Edward Ngà...," the voice greeted him only with "hello" before waiting in silence until he disconnected.

"Okay, okay... You *need* to tell me... *exactly*... *what's*... *happening*, okay?"

"Ye—"

"...*exactly*."

Lily got on her feet to peer out her doorway both ways, still holding the phone to her ear.

"I understand. I will try... to be as precise as I can, okay?"

She saw no tube, but did notice Maggie at the bar across the way was looking the direction of the restroom hallway, failing to stifle her giggling with her right wrist to her upper lip.

"Going on fifteen minutes ago now, a car—"

"Okay that's great! Because you know people call me *angry* with all these *problems* like 'a pipe burst,' or 'the shower is overflowing and I think the sink's clogged, but you know I just divorced my husband of eight years and shaved the fuckin' thing for the first time since,' or '*help me help mee*, my cat's in the microwave and I just set it to cook for *two hours*,' and always with this *anger* in their *voices* like I have time for that! Like I wanna hear *you*, complaining about ya stupid life in the middle of the goddamn day! Like I don't have nothin' betta to do!"

Maggie made the mistake of glancing over and locking eyes with Lily, who firmly asked her with the extreme altitude to which she raised her eyebrows to take immediate care of whatever the hell *that* was.

"It's just that *a car* has driven into our building!"

"Oh my god! What? A *car*?"

"Yes, a few minutes ago, I saw a car drive through the wall where Chicken Sluts was."

...

"*Into* the side of the building, oh my god!"

Maggie was on the move on the tube's trail, head unnaturally forward, leading the way to the back, her arms unnaturally still as she plodded with a black earbud cable bouncing on her neck. Lily leaned out the opening to watch her round the corner before Theodore Pith startled her from behind with his muffled chuckle as he tried to nudge past, but realized the transgression and mouthed *sorry*, clicking his tongue and making his way back to the loveseat. Lily decided the best course of action in the face of her rambling phone contact was to leave the phone on speaker with him so that she could investigate herself.

"He knows who we are... try and tell him what's going on if he ever stops talkin, or just hang up. It probably doesn't matter."

She looked at him and pointed at the handset as she switched it over, placed it down on the desk, back-first, and whirled out of the office once more, nose in the air.

"Oh my god... How stupid can you be?! Where do all these idiots come from? You drive your car through an *office building*?! In the middle of the damned city? Who the *hell* taught them anything? I swear to god... I just don't know what to say sometimes, you know. I don't know what to say, I don't know what to do... And all these angry people call me and all they really want is somebody to yell at, but it's my job, you know. I've gotta answer the phone and listen to all these every day – can't understand them half the time – gotta listen to all these maniacs scream about lead in the pipes or asbestos in the walls because their allergies get bad when it's *they themselves* who go out every Sunday to pick up *another* dusty-ass wardrobe off the curb so they can blog about *refurbishing* an *antique*, and by that they mean covering it in some \$50 bright peppermint paint from Lowe's they find out later doesn't *dry* on wood, so all they've done is make a piece-a-trash old wardrobe so ugly and *visibly* sticky to the touch that it never even breaks a \$40 bid on eBay, so they sell it to their Mom when she comes up for Easter, who'll end

up dumping it on *her* curb before Jesus is risen even one more time, and the whole damned cycle of wasted money will repeat again some other mother's daughter arrives on a Sunday to bring it home in her Volvo who's allergies it will *also* exacerbate, and *guess who* they're gonna call to threaten with legal action?"

...

Pith recognized the pause and hurriedly inhaled to reply, but was a moment too late.

"I-"

"I just don't know about this. I'm so damned tired of it all... but ya know somebody's gotta do it and it must be way worse out on the coasts..."

ⁱENDNOTES

In fact – from the perspective of a reader in possession of any sanity whatsoever – what Lather had written had nothing even remotely to do with what he could have observed, possibly due to the amount of cocaine, Adderall, and Laudanum he had consumed over his past fifty hours with Pith. It was, in its entirety, as follows:

first thing;

first go

Sealed over the windows

(I'd prefer a lamp to the sun)

[There was a crude doodle of an old door with a brass, vaguely big cat-looking knocker, here.]

The family gave me a property from the onset, cleared it as best they could, and were always keen to lend a hand in the construction of my house. Kind of them, I'm sure. But there were a few mishappers within the idea.

They bolted a Victrola to the Southeast corner of the foundation, for my comfort. They are very common in this part of the world, and most are equipped with some volume of a spoken text. Before everything arrived, of course, I slept out there in the open. But it was in a superb locale, and what rain fell did not perturb me.

For the sake of the gift, I listened, but the words were not of the Earth, and they were not comforting. *Cast away your borders*, the Victrola said. *Do not dwell on what you see, for it is not your concern.*

Do not lock your door, for it should remain open, lest you suffocate.

And it continued on like this. I could not bring myself to destroy it, for it felt ungrateful of the whole property. But its words chafed me, and their design, I knew, was not suitable for my house.

The air, unfiltered, deposited all manner of pollen in me and I sneezed. *If I don't shut the door, I really will suffocate!*

I became familiar with locks.

I decided I would build enough to obscure the sight of the thing from the road, and then

Lenny was in his third month of an assigned year shadowing Pith, by his request – if only to determine “how the fuck” (a quote from the *Wretched Economist’s* Editor-in-Chief) his behavior didn’t

immediately bankrupt every enterprise with his name on it. After a huge, controversial blunder in Lather's profile of Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, nine months before, he'd pitched this assignment to his editors – sans-expense account – because all involved parties assumed that any possible story he could obtain would be 1) impossible to screw up and 2) amusing to an extent that it would be hard to make it appropriate for such a dry, respected business journal, which – it turns out – was exactly what the new leadership from their publisher suggested was needed to draw in a younger audience for the coming decade. *Unfortunately*, he hadn't been much of a reporter since 9/11, and his mind was being rapidly fried by his tastes for Victorian-era recreational substances – as evidenced by his nonsensical, steno-bound prose.

ⁱⁱENDNOTES

Included in the soaked mass of paperwork was a copy of a misogynistic memo Built had tried repeatedly to circulate with little acknowledgement or response since the previous Fall entitled "**MapQuest's Ideological Echo Chamber.**" Included here is a brief snippet from the 11-page document:

Reply to public response and misrepresentation

I value diversity and inclusion, am not denying that sexism exists, and don't endorse using stereotypes. When addressing the gap in representation in the population, we need to look at population level differences in distributions. If we can't have an honest discussion about this, then we can never truly solve the problem.

Psychological safety is built on mutual respect and acceptance, but unfortunately our culture of shaming and misrepresentation is disrespectful and unaccepting of anyone outside its echo chamber. Despite what the public response seems to have been, I've gotten many personal messages from fellow MapQuesters expressing their gratitude for bringing up these very important issues which they agree with but would never have the courage to say or defend because of our shaming culture and the possibility of being fired. This needs to change.

Background

People generally have good intentions, but we all have biases which are invisible to us. Thankfully, open and honest discussion with those who disagree can highlight our blind spots and help us grow, which is why I wrote this document. MapQuest has several biases and honest discussion about these biases is being silenced by the dominant ideology. What follows is by no means the complete story, but it's a perspective that desperately needs to be told at MapQuest...

ⁱⁱⁱENDNOTES

One of such clippings from the October 13th, 2015 edition of *The Superior Sun* is reprinted below in its entirety.

"Percy Hole, Editor at The Sun, Dies Pursuing Rock Springs Story"

By Percy Hole

ROCK SPRINGS, WY - Percy Hole, who in his seven years at The Sun contributed in no small part to its resolute commitment to the Superior community throughout a key period of change and

transition, died nobly on Wednesday in Rock Springs while pursuing a story fraught with sensitive historical currents to which he had committed himself for the better part of the past year. He was 29.

Stuart Stud, the Editor-in-Chief of The Sun, announced the death to the staff Thursday morning. Mr. Hole, who had moved to Superior after being scouted by the paper upon receiving his bachelor's degree in fly fishing from New York University, succumbed to a catastrophic failure of his liver after allegedly "consuming a far greater-than-recreational quantity" of alcohol during an informal interview with an auxiliary source, according to someone familiar with the matter within the Sweetwater County Coroner's Office.

In title, Mr. Hole climbed quickly from Sports Editor to Executive Daily Editor, but colleagues cited several integral, unpaid roles beyond his official functions in the newsroom.

"He was a real winner," said Hilary Hutch, who Hole had groomed personally to replace him as Sports Editor, "by far the sexist human being to grace this pokey office. An impossible talent. We were so lucky to be work alongside him for so long. There was no better wordsmith in the whole industry. He definitely deserved a huge raise. A true legend."

His responsibilities as Executive Daily Editor included arranging the entirety of The Sun's print edition singlehandedly every morning, answering every staffer question with heroic brevity, captaining the paper's infallible ethical prestige, editing all copy with an eye matched by not a one of his contemporaries, lifting and carrying all materials and equipment over 150 lbs. along with the entirety of the office's championship-winning, regionally competitive basketball team as point guard.

"I've never seen anyone move like that," said Ms. Hutch of her experiences playing on the team, "it was like he was some kind of super-evolved proto-human. We were really just baggage, mostly - decoration - but he was generous and humble about it. He never hogged the glory even though he almost always had every right to."

Mr. Hole's colleagues also described his stellar performance and natural talent as generally unappreciated in bolstering The Sun's late entrance into digital publishing and web 2.0.

"Pivot to video," said Mr. Stud.

^{iv}ENDNOTES

"MapQuest is changing guard, launching *The Quest*. Meet the new Owner and acting CEO."

By Theodore Pith

March 12th, 2018
08:30 AM PST

Hello MapQuesters!

On behalf of AOL, myself, Peter Built, friend and our new COO Lily Tharp, as well as those two good-for-nothing leaders who deserted this company and stole all off its leftover cash over the

weekend, I'd like to express my sincere gratitude for your continued reliance on MapQuest to help you get where you're going. I may only be beginning my second week on this side of the screen, but I've been using MapQuest directions my entire adult life! We have quite a bit in common already, then, and I *can* tell you that it's *only* thanks to invested users like yourselves that our jobs are made possible!

As well as our thanks, you also have our undivided attention as MapQuest users, so I've launched this blog to 1) provide a better interface between us to make sure our intercommunication with you is as smooth as available resources allow and 2) build a better context on *where* and *when* we travel, and why we love the *how* of getting there! Before continuing, I *am* now remind you that *The Quest* is intended for mature readers only and note that you'll need to 1) create an account with us and surrender your date of birth or 2) pledged thrice that you are over the age of 21 each and every visit before you'll be allowed past the Stop Page when it goes live next week, after which you can be sure our team will be holding questionnaires, streaming video, and writing about the future of this new property and of MapQuest as a whole.

Now, though, I'd just like to conclude this short update by telling you a bit more about myself. I grew up in Cincinnati with my father who races balloons professionally and never failed to encourage me to *shoot for the clouds* as a tot... except when the ceiling exceeded 14,000 feet, of course. I developed an obsession with civil infrastructure growing up - public transport, public works, urban development, etc. I spent my allowance for a whole year to become a lifetime member of the Ohio State Civic Historical, which was an amazing deal considering the Roundabouts of Ohio calendar I receive, free of charge, every year. Each one contains photographs of the same roundabouts taken from the same angle, corresponding with the same months, but - even after hanging them in my room through 20 editions, now, those roundabouts somehow manage to never disappoint.

I was obsessed with trade journals on electronics hardware as a young man to such an extent that I dropped out of college (having done little to nothing academically for 5 semesters anyway, if I'm honest,) and formed the origins of the research company you know know as Ditto in the basement of my friend's grandparents' old house. And yes, the rumors are true... I did actually pay taxes for a few years under the registered business name Pith, LLC. We saw some *very* compelling stuff go through that place, and I will no doubt be proud of what we were able to accomplish in my nearly 10 years there for the rest of my life, but a time eventually came when I needed to let my baby bird out of the nest.

The decision to invest in MapQuest was a deeply sentimental one - I knew that no other buyer would be willing or able to take this name where it needs to be, and I am inexpressibly thrilled by the opportunity to take it there, especially with the help of such an ace team! Do subscribe to our feed because you'll be hearing from them right here, twice a week.

Until next time!

Theodore Pith

Chief Executive Officer