

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 unsoiled and unclothed, as they came to the physical Earth; as they shall leave it as child 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 obliviously 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? *Aha*,” 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.

“*He*lo, 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.