

Bubble City: Chapter 10

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Wayne met Samuel, his Google contact, at a San Francisco bar. They were already several drinks in when the conversation turned to business. “Well, I’ve got the Center all up and running,” he said. “That’s great to hear. Congratulations. That’s just fantastic.” “There’s just one problem.” “Oh?” “I don’t know what to do with it.” “Oh, don’t worry. You can do whatever you want. I mean, we’ll have some requests from time to time but it’s your project — feel free to do whatever you want to do.”

“But that’s just what I mean,” Wayne said. “I don’t know what I want to do.” “Come on, surely there must be something?” “Not really. What are you working on these days?” “Oh, all sorts of things. You know, it’s pretty crazy as usual. You’re on the Google NDA right?” “Yeah, and the corporate email system and contracts and everything.” “OK, so then I can tell you a bit. You know how the job is: tracking down people to co-opt or destroy.” “Must be exciting.”

“Not usually. Although one exciting thing happened lately. We’re doing a manhunt on this NNA stuff.” “A what?” “Apparently some kid found out something he wasn’t supposed to and we’re tracking him down.” “Huh? Tracking him down?” “Well, he booked when he found out we were on his tail, so we get to use all our databases to try and figure out where he fled to and how to get him back. He’s a smart kid — MIT grad, hacker, etc. — so it’s actually a really fun puzzle. The guys back at HQ are loving it. It’s like their college puzzle hunts all over again.”

“So what do you do when you find him?” Wayne asked. “The usual,” Samuel said as if it was obvious. “Co-opt or destroy.” “But how do you destroy a kid?” “Oh, that’s actually quite fun, although obviously not ideal for the bottom line. Basically we take him out and then falsify a whole bunch of evidence to make it look like an accident. You wouldn’t believe the quality of the data forgers we have on staff — best guys in the business.”

“Wait? Take him out — you mean you’ll kill him?” “Not usually; bodies are messy to clean up that way. Usually we just expose them to chemicals or shocks or some other brain-rotting substance. They live, but not with an IQ that will be of any worry for us.” “Wow, geez,” Wayne said, a bit taken aback. “I had no idea Google did stuff like that.” “Oh, come on, Wayne, don’t be naive. You of all people should know better than that.” “Oh, I’m not be—” “It’s just the price of doing business,” Samuel continued. “Every company has its little hidden costs. Factories dump harmful chemicals wherever seems convenient.

Pharmaceutical companies cover up their products' harms. Conglomerates bribe foreign governments. Clothing companies engage in human trafficking. Scratch any serious company and you'll find some dark little secret. That's what makes the money go 'round."

"Yes, but well, taking people out. Isn't that a bit extreme?" "Oh, so when [Shell takes out labor activists](#), that's OK. And when [GAP condemns young women to a life of involuntary servitude](#), that's OK. And when [GE dumps tons of PCBs into the Hudson River](#), that's just fine. But Google messes with one or two people and it's suddenly the end of the world? How is that fair?"

"Look, Wayne, Google's [one of the ten biggest US companies](#). If you think we're going to keep acting like some little software shop in Mountain View, you're crazy." "I know, I know, but I thought Google was supposed to be different. What happened to Don't Be Evil?" Samuel laughed. "Don't Be Evil was some hacker's PR ploy that got out of hand. Paul Buchheit, the guy who made Gmail, suggested it in an early meeting and Amit Patel, another early Googler starting writing it on whiteboards everywhere. A journalist saw it and the rest was history — but don't be mistaken, it was never official corporate policy."

"But come on, Samuel, just between us, don't you ever feel a little bit guilty about all this?" "Look Wayne, what good would it do? If I raise complaints about it to my superior they'll mark me as unstable and demote me. If I threaten to go public they've got an ironclad NDA — they'll take away my house and family with their crack team of lawyers and I'll spend the rest of my life at a minimum wage job. And if even that doesn't scare me, then they'll turn the black ops on me too. When they're through with me, I'll be such a gibbering paranoid idiot that nobody will take anything I say seriously. So it's stupid to even think about this stuff."

"But what about your superior? Why not convince him?" "Come on, Wayne, you can't even convince me this is the wrong thing; you think I'm going to be able to convince a guy who does this sort of thing his entire life? And even if I do, then what? He gets fired and ruined right along with me. Why bring another person in on this mess? What good does that do?"

Wayne took a long sigh. "But surely, at some fundamental level, you've got to realize this is wrong? Has Google entirely taken away your humanity?" "Oh come on, Wayne, that's not humanity, that's naivete. Sure, when they're a kid everyone thinks they'll fight for truth and justice and the American way of not torturing people. But you also want to succeed. And success requires compromise; there's no other way. If you don't compromise then they just filter you out. You're labeled 'difficult' or 'uncooperative' or 'insubordinate'. Believe me; I've seen it dozens of times. I've even done it myself when it had to be done. By the time you get to a position like mine, you begin to realize that this is just the way the world works. And what are you supposed to do about that, huh, Wayne?"

“Look Wayne, I’m telling you all this because I know you’re a smart guy. Your heart’s in the right place, but so is your head. Google’s counting on you to be a big success and you can’t do stuff like that if you have to worry about every little kid that needs to be quashed. So here, I’ll pick up the tab. Why don’t you go home and get yourself some rest? And then tomorrow I’ll give you a call and we’ll pick out some fun projects for you to work on? Doesn’t that sound good?”

“Yeah,” Wayne said at last. “I guess so. God, I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I used to be such a hard-head.” “I know, Wayne, I know. That’s what I like about you. You did whatever it took to get ahead. Look, everyone goes thru this the first time they have to cross a line. I certainly had my fair share of sleepless nights. But you come out of it smarter and stronger. I promise you, you wake up tomorrow morning, you’ll be a better man — ready to conquer anything. Now go and get some rest.” “OK, Samuel. And thanks for the drinks.” “Don’t thank me,” Samuel said. “Thank Google.”

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