

"I'm not my social feed"



CLOCK ZERO

A Novel

NAWAR ALSAADI

Clock Zero

I'm not my social feed

Nawar Alsaadi

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“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

Mark Twain

1

She stands at the edge of the cliff. Her gaze sheering off into the abyss.

I'm standing ten feet behind her next to the dirt-smothered bullet-riddled olive black Cherokee. The smooth sphere of an M67 clinched firmly in my hand like a hot baseball in a catcher's glove. I'm eyeing the brass, ring-shaped safety clip like a groom having cold feet under a chuppah, and all I can hear is my own frantic breathing, shallow and loud and unsynchronized.

There's a gentle breeze in the air, the sun's hot and round, and shining clear. The sky is endless blue. Timeless and proud.

"You still got time," I shout.

"Never!" she yells back.

"Listen to me, you don't have to do this. It's all my fault."

"It's ours," she shouts back.

"Damn you, Marty. We're running out of time."

Ivory plumes of tire smoke emerge from the distant sand dunes like giant cobras charmed by God.

"They're onto us! Take my car and get out of here," I yell.

"Just blow the damn thing and let's get on with it!" she fires back.

I pull the safety clip.

And it feels like pulling a plastic lid from a milk carton. The roaring engines of a dozen Toyota pickup trucks shake the ground under my feet.

They're close, very close.

She says, "Tom, it's going to be awesome."

"You're crazy!"

"It's so steep, it'll be like flying."

I say, "Marty, you're thinking of angels. This is no post-punk *Slowdive*. This is *Stairway to Heaven* on impact kind of dive." I tell her, "Marty, you know we're going to die?"

She shrugs. She stands there placid and collected like we're bungee jumping from a paltry viaduct atop a creek. Nerves of steel.

Here goes nothing! And I release the lever.

The spring throws the striker into the percussion cap, igniting a spark that slowly burns the detonator fuse. I slide the armed grenade into the Jeep. Countdown.

An explosion is basically an act of turning a solid or a liquid into gas. Fast. A single M67 grenade is filled with 6.5 ounces of Composition B, a mixture of RDX and TNT, plus a little paraffin wax. When detonated, the RDX and TNT cocktail turns into nitrogen and carbon monoxide at 22,600 feet per second. Mach 20. Supersonic shockwave. BOOM.

Five seconds.

I spring over to Marty's side.

We're towering ten thousand feet above Lake Zargon and its five hundred hectares of shimmering turquoise H2O in the sun. The brain stops processing distance at two thousand feet. It all just looks the same from up here, and death never looked so beautiful.

Four seconds.

She clenches my hand and tilts her head towards me. Now we're transfixed. She's gazing at me, and I'm lost in the indigo blue ocean of her eyes. Everything's in slow motion.

At this height the air is razor thin. You get wasted with a gulp of oxygen free air. This is God's way of giving us one final hangover.

On the house.

Three seconds.

I twist my head backward and see the sun reflecting on their fake Ray Bans from behind the crack running across the windshield. I see the ceramic gray barrel of an AK47. Incensed eyes shooting copper-plated steel jacket bullets between my eyes. My heart muscles flex and wane madly. My quad heart valves on overdrive.

A heart can pump 2.3 ounces of blood per beat. The human heart can beat at over 300 beats per minute. This means your heart can pump over five and a half gallons of blood a minute. This is more than four times the blood in your entire body. That's a shitload of blood to pump in sixty seconds.

I'm turning white.

Two seconds.

Beads of sweat roll down my temple and onto my cheek before dripping into the void, leaving drops of sweat in the dirt. My tongue is mountain rugged and dry. Grand Canyon. I taste iron.

Marty's hair is flapping in the wind and her baby face looks serene and peaceful and beautiful like a newborn baby seeing its mother for the first time.

Marty says those who truly live never truly die.

One second.

Their pickup trucks squeal and doors slam shut and their sweat and smell and cries and dust fill the air. They're so close I can feel the shadows of their guns pierce a hole in my spine.

Marty tugs on my hand. "It's time," she says, and all I want to do is shrink into one of the pebbles I'm standing on and hide and cry, and death never looked so real.

Marty bends her knees slightly. I follow suit and we stand like two Olympian synchronized swimmers primed to swan-dive. No spectators, no judges, no medals, no ESPN. We'll die unknown. Soldiers for the cause. Just like real heroes: Nameless and proud.

And we leap. We leap into the bottomless void and Marty looks at me, her purple and blue hair fluttering and flapping, and says, "We are flying like angels, don't you see?"

Composition B goes BOOM.

Flash of blinding light.

It's pitch dark.

My skin feels damp.

I'm awake now, and drenched in my own sweat.

I cringe. Just a nightmare. What I feel now is disappointment.
Anticlimax. Letdown.

I check my phone and shut my eyes again. It's all gone. A
Snapchat story.

Why do I only live when I die?

2

My name is Tom and I'm here to help you. I tell this to the elderly woman on the other side of the line. I'm the customer support at Travel Go. I'm an all-purpose travel-gone-wrong troubleshooter. Travel-gone-off-the-rails firing squad.

The floor I work on has a plasterboard drop ceiling dotted with these energy efficient recessed troffer LED lights. The light coming from this green miracle of technology is so white we all look like vampires in plywood coffin cubes. Coffins with a phone jack. The floor has airtight tinted floor-to-ceiling windows on both sides. From in here, the outside world looks like a negative roll of film.

My name is Tom and I'm here to help you. This is how I start every call.

Nobody calls us here if their trip is going well. It's always something. They want to change this or that. The beach is too far for their lazy ass. The rental car's too small for their oversized butt. They want to cancel their Alaska cruise last minute and book an African safari instead. Their flight's five minutes late and they want a refund on the spot. The hotel room's toilet bowl isn't exactly as advertised, they want their money back. They forgot to board their train and want me to beam them up to wherever. They got attacked by a shark and they're traumatized. It's always something. It's always fucking something.

My name is Tom and I'm here to help you, I tell Beretta. This is her name. Like the handgun. Beretta's been in the business of dispatching people to Heaven since 1526. Beretta the arms manufacturer, that is. Back in Venice they made barrels for

hook guns. Hook guns are those really old rifles that you load with gunpowder straight into the barrel and tamp with a ramrod or a selfie stick before you light it with a match. Arquebus they also call them. They weighed five kilos and fired fifteen-gram lead balls. 0.66 caliber.

I like learning random facts like this. It makes me look cool at parties. You've got to give it a try. Don't over do it though or you'll come off a pedantic smartass.

See, everything in life comes down to dosing. Drink too much, you're a drunk. Don't drink at all, you're a bore. Go to the gym too much, you're a fitness freak. Go to the gym too little, you're a lazy bum.

Everything in moderation.

The guy at the next cube has a cold. He's been sniffing all morning like a sniffer dog.

From her exotic hotel, in some exotic island, amongst some exotic people, a non-exotic Beretta says, "I've already paid for a premium air-conditioned suite. Why are they making me pay extra?" Beretta has this shrill high-pitched voice, like a screech owl. Her voice irritates me.

I politely say, "Of course Madam. Let me check that for you. What's your reservation number?"

I put her on hold and click on Hotel Express. Express being an oxymoron. Hotel Express is this dinosaur era DOS software that takes like an hour to process anything. It crashes half the time. I punch in the seven digits of her reservation number and go back to my phone to check my social feed.

I always Like everything on my feed. Whatever it is I like it. Jonathan climbs a tree. Like. Emma makes a funny face. Like. Dina eats chips. Like.

It's called feed etiquette. Social media decorum. I don't have to tell you how much it sucks when you post something and nobody gives a shit. It makes you feel like a loser. *A major letdown.* You log in and you keep checking and waiting and hoping, and not a single thumbs up. Not a single comment. Not even a stupid quip from some troll. Who the hell wants to go through that?

When you do what I do, you need the distraction. Otherwise you go insane. Grab an arquebus and shoot everyone in the office insane. Serious stuff. We don't get paid three hundred bucks an hour to hear people complain. This is no fancy shrink office. This is counseling for minimum wage. You need something to take the edge off. Half the floor is on Xanax, the other half on their smartphones.

I'm in the smartphone half.

My neighbor's sniffing and snuffling and sneezing and blowing and seriously getting on my nerves. I can hear this ruckus with pillow-thick headphones covering half my head.

When it comes to my phone, I'm on maximum dosage. No moderation. Can't be done otherwise. I've got a standard to uphold. I need to keep tabs on things. There's just too much going on to check my phone only once in a while. An online persona takes time. Takes commitment. It's hard work. You've got to keep up with everything and share with everyone. You can't just post any selfie you want. You can't just share any quote. Everything must flow. Your social media

feed is who you are. It's your window display. Your brand. You can't mess with that.

It stresses me out sometimes. I'm so busy texting and updating and liking and tweeting and gramming and snapping that at times I can't think. I don't have time to think.

Hotel Express pings. There it is. Beretta's reservation. Her customer file pops up too. Travel Go buys customer data from third parties. Data aggregators. Travel Go buys data on everything and everyone. Turns out Beretta's been a widow for three years, her favorite song's *What's This Thing Called Love* by Cole Porter, and she has a Pekingese dog called Daisy. Her file says she's seventy-nine. Based on the national average life expectancy, Beretta's only got two more years of Celebrex prescriptions to fill. Where she is now, the average life expectancy is sixty-eight. Where she is now, she's the Living Dead.

I put Beretta on hold a little more with a lovely musical selection from Cisco CallManager Version 10.5 while I check my email. Nothing. Nada. Not even spam. No penis enlargement Groupon. No multi-million dollar Nigerian inheritance. No phishing scams. Bummer. Email is so passé.

"Madam, I see that you've only paid for a standard No A/C room," I say to Beretta's ghost.

I can hear Beretta's crooked arthritis fingers crack as she clasps the phone hard and shrieks, "I reserved and paid for a premium air-conditioned suite."

"You're already in a premium suite," I tell her. "What's the problem?"

I know what you're thinking. I'm messing with her. Yes, I am. I know what her problem is, but why solve it quick? If I solved it, then I'd have to take another call. And another. And then another. Not my style. I'm cultivating my Golem Effect.

Bob, my boss, claims all customer calls are recorded. Don't know if I buy it. I think they just make shit up to dupe us into working harder. I mean if they had all my shit on tape, why the hell I'm still working here?

Statistically dead Beretta says, "The hotel's charging me extra for a premium air-conditioned suite. I already paid extra when I made the reservation four months ago. This is totally unacceptable," her voice changing from a shriek into a high-pitched squeal. "Totally unacceptable," she says. "Totally."

"This isn't what's showing in my records, Madam. You only reserved and paid for a standard non-air-conditioned room," I say in a carefree voice with both eyes on my phone. For the life of me, I can't make out the color of this dress on my feed. Is it black and blue? Or is it white and gold? #thedress

From seven thousand miles away, I can hear Beretta's heart skip a beat. And with her screech owl voice she tells me she can't sleep in a non-air-conditioned room. She tells me my customer service isn't up to snuff. She tells me how big of a disappointment her whole trip is. She tells me lots of things. I tune her out. I'm busy on my phone. I'm leaning white and gold. And after she's done listing her disappointments, I say, "Don't you have A/C in the room now? What's the problem?"

Sometimes, I can't help but chuckle when I feign ignorance. Play dumb. Fake stupidity. Make believe I have a congenital brain defect. Not everyone takes it the same way.

Everyone has a tolerance limit.

Some callers just keep explaining their problem to me while I keep pretending I don't get it and they just won't get angry. Book of Job stuff. Some other poor souls just give up and stop calling. My favorites though are the exploders—those who explode in a blue rage at the slightest hint of stupidity on my part. I hardly mind the abuse. In fact I like it. They make me feel alive. I feel their anger. I want their fury. They see something wrong and unleash. Let go. Unload. They don't bottle things up, they unbottle them. Pop out like the cork of a bottle of champagne on New Year's Eve.

I'm their 1-800 THERAPY.

Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! I hear this non-stop sneezing sound. Clattering like a washing machine on spin cycle. The guy just goes paroxysmal. Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! He's rattling my cube.

"What's with you? Are you dense? I'm telling you they're making me pay extra for a premium air-conditioned room. I already paid for a premium air-conditioned room." Beretta's raising her voice, upping her game, and I'm starting to like her.

"This isn't what it says in my records, Madam. It says you paid for a standard non-air-conditioned room," I say, and before she opens her shrivelled lips again, I recite her Miranda rights, her right to remain silent, while I drown her in Travel Go fine print. IBM xenon fine.

Look it up: IBM xenon 1989. I'll put Beretta on hold until you come back.

I know all of this sounds like great fun. Don't get fooled by the chitter. My department is just a glorified call center. There are perks though, we can piss whenever we want and the coffee in the rec room isn't half bad. #dreamjob

What you've got to keep in mind is that there are only two kinds of people who work at call centers: students and mummies. Students, they do this to pay for college and they're out of here pronto, Flash Gordon fast, as soon they get their degree. Unless they drop out and join the second category: the mummies. The middle-aged and bitter about life. The never-applied-themselves people. They'll be here forever. Mummified. I'm in the latter category, except I'm skipping ahead a few years.

Beretta is still on the phone. "They told me I would have a premium air-conditioned room, when I made the reservation." And we're back full circle. We've hit an impasse. I suggest Beretta speak to Martha in the Customer Satisfaction department. I tell her our relationship ends here, put her on hold and shout across the hall: "Martha, Code Yellow on three. Can you take it?"

Martha has the worst job in the world. She's Travel Go's last line of defense. This is where customers' demands threaten the bottom line.

You don't want to do her job. Believe me.

Martha's marching orders are to make customers believe they've eaten cake while she keeps the whole torte. It's a zero sum game and she comes out ahead every time. Martha's where customers' dreams go to die. Black hole. She's persuasive. Martha's only 24, but she outranks me. She

has her own semi-private office. Two walls and a window. My company doesn't believe in walls. They've been tearing them down since I started working here five years ago.

I believe in walls. Walls are the epitome of progress. The first thing nations do when they advance is build walls.

I want to build many walls. Bricks walls. Concrete walls. Clay walls. Steel walls. Wood walls. Double walls. Triple walls. Laminated walls. You know, walls. Walls in every direction. And then I want to make a website where we all work with no walls. A kind of virtual open working space. I want to call it Officebook. And after it grows into a handsome unicorn, I want to cash out and buy an island with no walls.

Hawaii.

Bora Bora.

Martha will be out of here as soon as she saves enough to pay for the last six credits of her applied psychology degree. Martha gestures for me to pick up the phone. I dial her extension and say, "Hey beautiful, we have an old lady in distress." She says, "I told you to dial me when you need me. Stop shouting across the hall!" I apologize and I instamessage her a picture of the dress and she says, "This thing is so yesterday." Martha tells me it's black and blue. Ten million tweets settled it. #blackandblue

Are you kidding me? And I'm flipping my phone every other way, landscape and portrait, up and down. I can't believe my eyes. Black and blue? "No way," I say.

I have a thing for Martha and she has a thing for me. Marty (as she wants me to call her) is no beauty queen. She's a bit

on the chubby side with a cute baby face and big indigo blue eyes. Long, wavy, chestnut hair, dip-dyed purple and blue. Marty's edgy and always dressed in black. Takes that whole black hole thing to heart. Vinyl. Fish stockings. Platform boots. The works.

And I'm back checking my feed. Nat bought herself a new cat. Like. Jonathan's climbing a hill. Like. Ethan's sitting on a bench. Like.

I must say, my social media dedication is paying off. I have a respectable five hundred and fifty-three followers on Twitter and I'm closing on three hundred on Instagram. My Facebook feed is a hive of activity brimming with the chatter of a thousand friends. People who treasure me and care about me as a dear friend and confidant. I have so many online friends I can barely keep up with the birthday reminders. And I just celebrated three Friendaversaries this week alone. Epic.

Bob walks by and I hide my phone and pretend I'm working and start shuffling reservations around. I'd better remember what I'm shuffling though, because if I don't Mrs. Robinson's going to end up taking her Hawaiian vacation in Wilcox Nebraska and Mr. and Mrs. Patel will end up celebrating Diwali in Reykjavik instead of Jaipur.

Bob vanishes into his four-walled office. And I'm back checking my feed.

Mom's having chocolate cake for dessert. Like.

@space2001 posts an Arthur C Clark quote: *It has yet to be proven that intelligence has any survival value.* Like, retweet.

Ray posts a link about some guy making a ton of money eating in front of his webcam in South Korea. I click it open, and it says:

“...at around midnight, he goes online with a couple of friends and performs his meal, spicy raw squid one day, crab the next. He is extravagant in his gestures, flaunting the food to his computer camera to tantalize the viewers. He eats noisily and that's part of the show. He's invested in a good microphone to capture the full crunch and slurp...”

This guy's making five times my paycheck slurping noodles in front of a Logitech webcam.

My name is Tom and I'm here to help you.

Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo! Ah-Choo!

My life is so fucking awesome.

#SFA

3

Plenty of blubber flapping around. I thrust, she moans. I thrust. She moans. Beads of sweat sway on her back. It's hot in here. In ancient Rome they called it *coitus more ferarum*. Latin for *sex in the manner of wild beasts*. In the Kama Sutra, they call it the cow position. Today, they call it doggie style. I'm at Marty's in her one bedroom condo on Smithe St.

I thrust, she moans. My eyes looking into Alice Cooper's. He's dressed like Uncle Sam, black top hat and a blue jacket. Black tires around his eyes and he's pointing at me with his index finger. I WANT YOU, it says below in large print. Try to get a hard-on with Alice's flustered eyes staring at you. It takes practice. I thrust, she moans.

I moan, I cum.

Marty's lying on her belly, still breathing rapidly. I'm slouching against the wall beside her. My legs are on top of hers and the skin under my calves and thighs feels damp and sticky. The rubber's still on, wrinkled and bursting with hot sperm.

The Cure's "A Strange Day" plays softly on her stereo. I slap Martha on the butt. Smack! Oops! My spank comes harder than I intended. "Aww, stop it!" she yells. I look over her butt and ask her if she wants to elope with me to Vegas and she laughs out loud. She says she's not the marrying type. She says this thing we have isn't that kind of thing. She says, even if she did want to do that kind of thing, she wouldn't do it with me. She says I'm still a little kid inside. She says, "go flush your babies before they mess up my bed."

I jump out of bed and head to the bathroom to wash up, dick in my hand and careful not to spill my offspring on her sandstone beige cable carpet. A neighbor with a cigarette in his hand spots me from the window. I give him the finger. He rolls his eyes and takes a puff. The way they stick these condominium totem polls so close, you don't have any privacy anymore. The other day I got back from work and saw my neighbor across the street jerking off in his kitchen with a phone in his hand. This wasn't as bad as the day I saw this middle age couple put on Teletubbies costumes and go at it *wild beast* style. Watching Laa-Laa give Tinky Winky head takes a toll on your mental equanimity.

The red light on my phone flickers and I start drooling like Pavlov's dog. I put the bathroom on hold and I walk up to the build-it-yourself compressed wood dresser where I left it. I grab my phone in one hand and my other hand's making sure the rubber doesn't slip. I thumb it open: Kim's having cocktails. Like. @Shawcable: We wish you a wild evening! Like. Some redhead Megan I Tindered with the other day dropped me a message. "You want to have drinks tonight?" Wink face emoji.

"Disintegration" plays.

I rest the phone back on the dresser by the blue frame with a picture of Marty's kid nephew and gait to the bathroom. I throw the condom in the toilet and semen trickles down from the cone of my dick. That sweet pancake smell again. I grab a tissue, dry my junk, and throw it in the toilet too. The tissue, that is. I take a leak. Piss splashes and drums against the latex like rain on the windshield of a speeding car and ricochets against the rim of the rose toilet seat.

Flush, wipe the seat, flush again.

I wash my hands thoroughly while looking at my face in the mirror. My stubble's bursting out and giving me a manly five o'clock beard. It's just perfect. I grin at the mirror and check out of the bathroom. Back in Marty's room, The Cure's Robert Smith sings,

*Oh, I miss the kiss of treachery
The shameless kiss of vanity
The soft and the black and the velvety
Up tight against the side of me*

Marty's under her fuchsia wool blanket now and typing something on her phone. My phone light's flickering. I grab it. Megan again. "Hey, where are you?" Frowny face emoji.

I put my Galaxy S7 Edge back on the dresser with its sleek curves and its pin-sharp screen bleeding on the sides. Talk about a chick magnet. I always have the latest and hottest phone. You don't want to fall behind status-wise. Believe me. You know the feeling, don't you? That feeling when you slide out the hottest phone from your back pocket, and you see their eyes drool. This is when you know you made it. This is when you know you're worth something.

My hands are itching for the latest iPhone. They say it'll have four LED flash lights—two in cool colors and two in warm colors—and an ambient light sensor that will make your photos to die for. I'm super excited. I got my guy on TaskRabbit primed with his tent and camping gear. Last time I was the first at Travel Go to walk around with the S6. Man, did I score that week!

I can't confirm it, but a guy in the know told me the other day the next iPhone won't have a headphone jack. I didn't believe him, but he swore it on his dead father's grave it was true. I told him that'd be a gutsy move. We're talking *real* courage here.

Real *fucking* courage.

I jump on Marty and try to grab her phone. She pushes me back. "I need to do this," she says. I try to sneak a peek at her screen. She pushes me away. I give her a sullen look, but her eyes are fast back on her phone.

It's only Tuesday and I don't think I can take it anymore. Reservations. Modifications. Cancellations. Credit Cards. Overbookings. Transfers. Happy customers. Angry customers. Shitty customers. Day in and day out. What's the fucking point?

#shootmejustshootme

I tell Marty, "I can't take it anymore. I'm closing in on thirty, and I haven't done anything with my life. When my dad was my age he had two kids and ran his own drug store."

She's still on her phone.

My phone's light's flickering again. I try to leave it alone and say, "Marty, I'm dying here."

"Hold on."

Flickering.

Flickering.

Damn. Why did I leave my phone on the dresser? I'm too comfy on top of Marty's folds to go grab it. I attempt some kind of telekinesis, *The Force* style voodoo. I stretch my arm forward and point my hand at my phone and command it to leap over. It doesn't.

Flickering.

Flickering.

"Okay what is it?" she asks, her eyes still glued to her five inch screen.

"I can't keep working at Travel Go. Talking to assholes all day. I want to do something. Something big."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, become a drug kingpin?"

"What do you know about drugs?" she says.

"Dave, my roommate in college, he was doing his Master's in chemistry. He used to say if he didn't find a job after graduation, he'd start cooking in his parent's basement to pay his student loans. He taught me a thing or two. He told me with my dad's drug store we'd have access to everything we need."

She shrugs and says, "You, a drug lord? No way. Maybe you should change jobs."

"Who the fuck wants to hire a history major? I wouldn't even hire me."

"Why did you major in history?"

“Good question.”

Flickering.

Flickering.

I don’t have a good answer for her. It kind of just happened. I mean for a long time I didn’t ask questions, I just went with the flow. It was like watching a bad movie on TV that for some reason you just have to watch to the end. You’ve got to figure out what happens before you shit all over it. History is just like that for me, but with one crucial difference: History just keeps on going! One awful flick running all the way to the Big Crunch. The End. Rewind. Starts over.

My European history teacher was a big fan of Churchill. Every class he’d chalk a quote on the board. My favorite: *History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.* I love a good quote. I guess that was another clincher for me. I studied history for the quotes.

Flickering.

Flickering.

Marty’s back typing something. I have to check my phone. The blinking red light is literally poking a hole in my soul. I clumsily climb down the bed and elbow all over Marty.

“Watch it!”

It’s Jerry’s birthday today. Wish him a Happy Birthday my phone says. Who the fuck’s Jerry? Oh yeah, I forgot to say, half the people I wish Happy Birthday to, I don’t even know who they are. I think I may have even wished Happy Birthday

to a couple of people who might have been dead. At some point there'll be more dead people on social networks than those alive. This is what the math says. It's inevitable. Social graveyards. And Robert Smith says,

*How the end always is
How the end always is
How the end always is
How the end always is*

And now I'm just feeling down and blue, and I say, "Marty, I think I'm going to go."

"Alright," she mumbles.

I slip my pants on. Throw Marty an air kiss and slam the door shut. I don't even know if she noticed, her head still fused with her phone.

I text Megan from the lobby, and we agree to meet in an hour at Earl's. Hearts and kiss face emojis flying back and forth. @Shawcable wished me a wild evening back at Marty's. Things are looking up. Cable company wishes always come true.

It's 7:38 p.m. Still a bit hot outside. I walk slowly. Got time to kill. It's busy on Robson. The sun is sinking behind tinted skyscraper glass. A jet liner draws a thin contrail like a knitted white ribbon across a creamy pink aquamarine blue vanilla sky. A few feet down the street and under a row of designer bags at a Nordstrom window I see a bony, sallow old woman selling bootleg DVDs on a tarp. Never seen her before. I stop and pull out my phone. I snap a picture of the sky and float it to the cloud.

#vancouver sky

This'll get me a few likes.

I slide my phone back in my pocket and see a flock of Asian teens swarming around. Asians always walk in groups. I guess it's a cultural thing. Sometimes I imagine them flocking on Robson wearing bird masks. Dead ahead I see a fit guy in sweatpants and a sleeveless shirt with headphone cords dangling out of his ears like yarn threads facetimeing on his phone. He's racing towards me and I hold my ground. This is my lane too. He tilts his head and sees me in his path. I pretend to look away at some graffiti. A jack-o-lantern painted in red on a street map. I'm still tracking him from the corner of my eye as he bolts forward. The bony old woman hands a man a DVD with Tom Hanks' picture on the jacket. She smiles. She's missing four teeth. Inches away now, I can feel his breath on my face and I haven't budged, and he rams through me like I wasn't even there. I sway and spin and almost slump to the floor and I want to yell at the dolt, but no words come out. I'm at a total loss. And now it's too late. He's already twenty feet away crossing a light. Three girls with nametags sitting at a bench by a blood red Mustang are giggling with their faces hidden behind their phones. Are they laughing at me or something on their phones? I can't tell.

I check my phone. Four likes for my sky snap. Makes me feel better. I slip my phone back into my pocket. Three black Lamborghinis whizz by at snail speed. Van's Richie rich doing their evening daddy-got-money parade. I take my phone out again. Snap. #smallpenis

I stop at a Starbucks to take a piss and a rough-looking Barista hands me the key attached to a heavy chunk of wood

and makes a face. Mischief in her eyes, she says, “this isn’t some piss hole pit stop.” I grab the key and go take a leak.

Picasso. On top of the stainless steel urinal there’s a scratched plastic frame with a poster for a Picasso exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery. I can’t make out what the scratched letters say. I think it says *pitch black*. A guy unlocks the door and comes in with his phone tucked under his armpit. He’s surprised to see me and I him. I thought this was a one-pisser-at-a-time kind of deal. It must be that stupid bitch at the counter playing a prank. He shrugs and puts his chunk of wood on the sink. He walks to the toilet bowl, and with the toilet seat down, unzips his pants, grabs his phone and starts typing something *with both hands*. No aim. His penis loose. Free.

Time to go. I zip up quick, rinse my hands, leave the key on the pick up counter and bolt out of there.

I hit the bar at Earl’s. I have a cold lager sleeve in my hand and my phone face up by the coaster. A football game’s playing on the big screen. I don’t know who’s playing and I don’t care. Photos of Trump and Putin are displayed on the news bulletin on another screen. Lonely faces and eyes are glued to screens big and small everywhere. The guy next to me’s flirting with a girl on his touch screen. Sexting. I can make it out from my upholstered leather stool. He types, I want to put my lips on those nipples so badly. He types, I want to circle my tongue around them and suck on your breasts. Whoever’s on the other side types, Oh baby I need you. I tilt my head and glimpse a mound swell under his belt.

My notification light twinkles. I thumb my phone open. Jessica and Emily and James overlay their FB profile photos in

red, white and blue stripes, and Oliver who's backpacking in Europe says, *I am safe*. Birdie's madly flapping its wings, #terrorinparis is trending up quick, and the news bulletin on the TV screen flashes Breaking News in white print on a red background.

Ms. Walker took us to Paris on a field trip a few years back for my art history class. The City of Light. I was really surprised how small everything was. The first day we arrived I lost my wallet near the hotel in Le Marais. My friend said he saw a pickpocket snatch it and vanish in the dense crowd. This is what happens when everything is clogged up and small. It took the receptionist an hour to direct me to the police station. He didn't speak a word of English. A week in the has-been continent and I couldn't be happier seeing that red maple leaf on the tail of the Boeing 777 whisking us back home.

I belt down my sleeve.

Megan texts me last minute and says she can't make it. Her dog's feeling ill. She drops me a sad face emoji. I slam my glass down on the polished oak. *What a fucking waste of time.*

I'm emoji's pissed off face.

That's when he showed up.

Daniel Drake. He pops up out of nowhere. Tall and stylish with silver gray hair wearing a white tieless shirt under a classic fit Hugo Boss suit, outer space black, four-button detail at the cuffs. He leans in my direction and says, "Looks like you're having a lousy day. What you need is a real drink," and he orders us two Jameson shots.

"Excuse me, do I know you?"

"I don't think so," he says, his eyes ash gray.

The bartender plonks two ambers on the oak. Hugo Boss lifts his shot glass and I lift mine. "Straight up," he says, and my tongue feels like I'm sucking wood. A smooth finish hits my throat. I order another round. No chasers. Just shots.

He says his name is Daniel Drake and gives me a firm handshake with a hand that feels as cold and as hard as a brick of ice. "*Sine Metu*," he says.

"What does that mean?"

"*Sine Metu*'s been written on every Jameson bottle for centuries. It means *without fear*," he says. "Are you without fear Tom?"

"I went bungee jumping once when I was in college."

"That's not what I'm talking about. When you're harnessed from head to toe, attached to a cable and pampered by a safety crew, that's not courage. That's just an adrenaline rush. You want real courage, drop the harness and dump the crew."

I thought my bungee jump was a big deal. I still remember it like it was yesterday. My heart pumping, hands shaking, dangling hooks flapping around while I waited my turn. The crew telling me to chill out while a guy scribbles a number in bright green on the back of my hand. The guy pats me on the back and says they've done this a million times. Then it's my turn. Feet bound, I waddle over towards the ledge. A piece of the grip tape peels up and a guy behind me holds my

harness, like a kid holding a bride's wedding dress. And I tell myself, this is happening, my kick-ass Instagram moment. I bend my knees and steal a glimpse of the emptiness underneath, adrenaline goes rushing in my veins, and then I just jump, I plummet down, the wind ripping through my hair, weightless and plummeting, soaked wet in adrenaline and plummeting, the ground comes rushing at me, and just before I turn into Jell-O, the bungee pulls my feet and I bounce. Twice. Hanging upside down, I feel like my balls are made of steel. That's what I told myself anyway until Daniel Drake showed up and told me this hardened steel I think I'm packing is cheap tin. Scrap metal. Faux Iron.

Daniel Drake clips my bungee ropes and says, "Look around at these people. Does any of this make sense?"

I say, "Does *what* makes sense?"

"Nobody's here anymore. They're all somewhere else. They're all waiting for their dopamine fix, waiting for when this little speck turns red," and he's pointing at the little diode at the tip of my phone. "Let me ask you something. If everyone here's on their phone and everyone on the other side's on theirs, where is everybody?"

I wash down another shot. He lifts his left hand and his smoke black Breitling glitters under the track lights and points at a little boy fumbling with a phone while his parents have dinner in the dining room. "This boy will never know solitude. Every blunder, every trifling faux pas, and everyone he'll ever know will forever fester in his pocket." He pauses, "No human being should grow up like that."

I sit there looking at the little boy swiping a screen as big as his head, and Daniel Drake turns back to me and says, "What we are is some gigantic social engineering experiment. We're all just lab rats. We're all being turned into check and click junkies, a click bait generation," he says, "Think crackheads. Think speed freaks."

I say, "Why do you care so much?"

This is when he tells me about his behavioral research at Cyber Marketing Logic. This is when he tells me about the dirt of the technology smartphone social media industrial complex. About the digital drug money. His task at CML was to crack the *magic formula*. That's what he called it. The formula to pump us full of dopamine and have everyone chock full of oxytocin. The formula to turn us all into check and click junkies. Into clickheads. Into checkheads. Into feed freaks.

I say, "Did you crack it?"

And he says, "Did you take a *good* look around?"

This was my first encounter with Daniel Drake. The meeting that sparked the revolution. I still wonder to this day if Daniel knew what was going to happen or if it all just sort of spun out of control and happened by accident. But if there's something I learned about Daniel Drake, it's that he doesn't believe in accidents.

He orders us another round, looks me in the eyes and says, "Do you want to start a revolution?"

And my mind goes blank.

Bob's waxy pate glitters from under his combover. My head's pounding like it's being perforated with a drill. The projector light's beaming in 1280×800 native resolution. My eyes squinting. I don't know what the hell I did last night, my brain feels like a ball of tangled copper wires. What I want to do now is to walk up to the NEC-35 projector box and smash it to pieces with a sledgehammer. Reduce it to bits. Dice it into chunks. Destroy it beyond recognition.

Bob's clobbering the room with PowerPoint slides: growth rates, response rates, satisfaction rates, target rates, conversion rates, cancelation rates. Every week Bob locks the customer service division in the conference room to review last week's numbers and set next week's target numbers.

Every week I'm emoji's pouting face.

Bob's flipping his slick slides on the ninety-two inch polyester screen, and what I want to do now is to walk up to the cream white NEC-35 projector box and sink it in hydrofluoric acid. HF. My dad used to say HF makes other acids look like citrus juice. HF can chew through anything. Rock. Glass. Metal. Ceramics. Concrete. You name it. This stuff is nasty like you can't believe. My dad sold Hexafluorine at his drug store to neutralize superficial HF burns. If just three ounces of the stuff spills on you, it'll kill you within days. And HF won't just eat into your skin. It'll suck every bit of calcium and magnesium from your every cell. You'll die an agonizing death within a week of exposure. Multiple organ failure. I told you. I'm fun at parties.

Last night's drinking binge was kind of a blur. I think we hit every bar in town and Daniel Drake's words are still doing twirls in my head. Lab rats. Junkies. Clickbait generation. Everyone drooling for their dopamine fix. Checkheads. Clickheads. A life written in snippets. A post here, a comment there, an emoji here, a tweet there, and then you just die. Bite the dust. Take a dirt nap. Cash in your chips.

Relationship status: six feet under.

Daniel Drake wants to hand me a revolution.

I'm meeting him at his place after work. I don't remember much from last night, but I do recall him explaining how to make the perfect highball.

"Customer waiting times increased by 3.2% last week," says Bob. "This is unacceptable." Bob's horn-rimmed, birth control glasses looking in my direction. His tiny green eyes hidden by the projector glare. I can't tell if he's looking at me or in my direction. I just nod. He looks away.

You take a tall narrow-mouthed glass. If the glass is too wide, the bubbles will float away. Drop in a single cube of ice. A hand-cut rock is even better if you can find it. Stir the ice until the glass chills. Pour off any melted ice water. Pour your desired measure of whisky and add another piece of ice to a level point in the glass.

Now stir thirteen times clockwise.

Add your last piece of ice and two measures club soda. Stir three times, clockwise. Now the final step. Nestle a spoon underneath the base of the ice and lift upward to harmonize

the whisky with the water, and without jostling or stirring gently, remove the spoon from the glass.

Perfect highball.

This is how you make a perfect highball. Daniel Drake told the bartender, and for some reason I remember every detail.

“We’re at a 17.3% conversion rate. Next week we’re aiming for 20%.” In the five years I’ve been here, I’ve never seen a two handle conversion rate. The conversion rate is how many incoming calls we convince to purchase additional travel services. Travel Insurance. Room upgrade. Class upgrade. Car rental. Carbon offset credit. Keep in mind those calling our floor are calling to complain. It’s a miracle we’re converting anyone at all. You’d think our conversion rate was negative with all the refunds and cancelations.

The office pool says the day we convert 20% of our callers, Bob will turn into a fairy-tale prince.

The fresh drone next to me with his new drone smell is inscribing each of Bob’s words like he’s transcribing a holy edict. I can see him arcing the two as he writes the number twenty in his notepad. It’s uncanny. I can’t quite place him. I mean, he doesn’t fit either the student debt slave class or the given-up-on-life mummy category. I take a good look at him. Celeste blue eyes bursting with flair, tattersall standard fit shirt tucked into some freshly hemmed slim fit mustard khakis. He’s gunning for Bob’s job. Problem is he’s forgotten about his buddy’s photo tag of him hosing a crippled man with sunflower yellow spray paint back in high school.

The picture hasn’t forgotten him.

I skip the boy scout and scan the dimly lit room. Faces blued by the reflection of the projector light. Eyes twitching, hearts racing, craving their dopamine fix. Their oxytocin plummeting at an alarming rate. Their fingers tingling. Hashtags to tweet, pixels to gram, chats to snap, hearts to collect, thumbs to put up. Every minute in here is inching them closer to social media oblivion. A couple sneak a peek at their cracked screens. In the good old days, you did coke on a screen. Now you skip the coke and get high off the screen.

I look at these silver blue faces, and I see myself.

I'm emoji's frowny face.

Bob wraps up his slides and the recessed LED ceiling lights flicker on. That vampire tint again.

"Any questions?"

Everyone hides their eyes, and the boy scout asks about a slide. Bob's happy to oblige and everyone's inner golem sighs. I slide my hand in my pocket and check the time, it's twenty to ten. I thumb my phone open and discreetly tweet: must have coffee, pronto. #oneofthosedays

Bob's long gone. It's 7:07 p.m. and the video display says it's eighteen degrees Celsius, partly cloudy. My ears pop. The gearless marble-coated elevator cab zips me to Daniel Drake's penthouse at twelve hundred feet per minute. All the way to the sixty-first floor of the Shangri-La building at 1128 West Georgia Street. Top of the totem pole. Condo towers work like a caste system. Get into a condo tower elevator,

press the highest number on the panel, and everybody'll bow down.

A man and woman and their two kids ride with me, bowed down to their smartphone screens until they get off thirty floors below my stop. Peasants. Feed freaks.

The Lost Horizon. I remember this James Hilton book from classic lit. I remember it well because we had to read the damn thing and write a paper about it. I watched the movie instead. I got a C+. Why am I talking about this? The Lost Horizon is where James Hilton describes this supposed paradise. This secluded, harmonious, beautiful and happy place called Shangri-La. Kind of like a mythical Disneyland. The people living there were almost immortal. They were ruled by a bunch of monks living in a mountain. Shangri-La was a sort of a sanctuary from a crazy world. This was like a decade after World War I. The plan was, once people were finished destroying themselves, Shangri-La would reveal itself and hand the world its history back, or something like that.

I pull up my phone and chirp this, *"If we have not found the heaven within, we have not found the heaven without."* #jameshilton.

On social media, everyone is the Dalai Lama. Quotes get you many Likes.

I knock on the grand stained oak door. Twice. Not a peep. I knock again.

Daniel Drake opens the door in a burgundy silk robe, barefoot, his hair damp and sleek. "Sorry, just got out of the shower." The only thing between me and Daniel Drake's swinging gonads is a single layer of paper-thin silk. I pray the

wind of the door closing doesn't lift his robe, Marilyn Monroe style.

We make it safely to the endless living room. Tinted glass windows span from the herringbone parquet floor to the ceiling. A blanket of puffy clouds spreads in every direction. A tinted sphere of sun looks you straight in the eyes.

Daniel Drake is a minimalist.

This vast living space has hardly any furniture. At one end of the room, I see a vintage hickory brown Worthington couch, an ash white Dolf coffee table, and a black Eames easy chair with its button-tufted ottoman. At the other end, I see a wet bar lined with two Playa turquoise counter stools, and a varnish steel Tolix dining table, hugged by four white leather Toulon dining chairs with a diagonal stainless steel frame. My ex was an interior designer. The sparse futuristic retro nature of the furnishings and the panoramic blue sky above the cotton candy clouds feels like you're walking onto the set of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

One. Two. Three. Action.

I'm sunken in the Italian aniline leather of the easy chair. In my hand a Waterford brandy snifter twinkling in the rays of a sun barely atop the clouds. On the upholstered leathery cushions of the Worthington sits Daniel Drake, his gold-dotted fleur-de-lis burgundy silk robe reaching below his crossed knees. He's scenting his fine Remy Martin brandy like a man basking in the fragrance of a beautiful woman.

I eye him discreetly. This guy is no Che Guevara. Maybe the guy's gay, and this whole revolution spiel from the night before was just an act to get me into his bed!

I brush the silly gay thoughts away and take a sip from my snifter.

When I was a kid I was too scared to sleep in the dark, so my mom put this orb-shaped red night light in my room. The type you plug into the socket directly. Things were fine until one day they showed *Space Odyssey* on the movie channel and all I could think about that night and every night afterward was that crazy spaceship computer Hal. I'd hide under my Transformers blanket thinking Hal was watching me through the night light in the electrical outlet an inch above the baseboard, whispering in its soft creepy voice, *Just what do you think you're doing, Tom?* I was too freaked out to get near the thing until it finally just died. Told my mom not to replace it because I wasn't afraid of the dark anymore. Liar.

Daniel Drake looks my way and says, "Do you know how we measured our volunteers' dopamine release at CML?" He explains, "We shaved their heads and drilled holes in their brains, and then we skewered them with deep brain carbon fiber electrodes, and after that we made them fumble their phones for hours."

"That sounds pretty risky. Is that shit even legal? If you're doing this kind of stuff in the States, someone is going to sue you. That's how they do business down there."

"Nothing a thousand dollar an hour lawyers can't manage. The thinking was, the odd meningeal inflammation couldn't hold a candle to pacing that flickering light just right. The occasional fatal seizure was worth it to figure out the perfect hue for that notification pop up. I mean, sure, you could end up with some serious brain tissue damage, and spend the

rest of your life limping on all fours thinking you're Mister Kittens, but without your sacrifice, how are we going to know the optimal shelf life of that dick pic you snapped from your shared bathroom in college?"

"Don't they have regulations against this kind of stuff?"

"Regulations," he says and chuckles. "Wall Street gets a bad rep for gaming the system. As do the fossil fuel companies, the tobacco companies, the drug companies, hell, even the toy companies. What nobody tells you is that Silicon Valley's calling the shots. Who do you think gave the NSA the knowhow to spy on your every move? You scratch my back, I scratch yours. As old as the hills. A bunch of lobotomized test monkeys is fair game if it fattens the pockets of the techno billionaire class. Trust me, I'm one of them."

"You're worth a billion dollars?"

Daniel Drake grins wide, his bleached white teeth leer at me, his ashen eyes turn silver and without saying a word, I can hear him say, Fuck yeah!

He goes on, "In the old days we glued our phone junkies in front of computer monitors for days, hooked their genitals up to piss catheters and needled their arms to IVs. We drew blood samples every couple of hours. It was messy. Not very precise. So we switched to PET scans and pumped our subjects full of iodine. Those tests were more accurate, but were bulky and far from real life usage conditions. You know, like driving with a hand on the steering wheel and the other texting your buddy." He swashes the last bit of brandy around the inside of his glass and says, "Nothing compares to jamming wires right into their striata. We're talking real time."

Live. Every time our clickheads posted, shared or checked whatever, our instruments would go haywire. Whenever their phones flickered, their dopamine release plot lines would skyrocket. This was a hundred times more accurate than anything on the market. We had Silicon Valley unicorns lining up door to door begging us to beta test their dope. We made shitloads of money.” Daniel Drake takes the last sip from his glass. “Last I heard, CML is working on something similar for measuring oxytocin to replace the old needle-in-the-spine shtick. They’ve probably pulled it off by now. If not them, someone else. Too much green at stake.”

And I don’t know what to say. Daniel Drake’s telling me all this shit about dopamine and oxytocin, gaming the system, carbon fiber electrodes, Silicon Valley, Atlas Shrugged capitalism, and I say, “You’re obviously smart and wealthy, and you’ve clearly put a lot of thought into all of this, but what it is you want from me?”

Daniel Drake eyes me intently, and his silver eyes turn black as the sun dives into the horizon. “They call it the social media revolution,” he says, “Do you know what happens to revolutions?” He pauses, “They turn into the decadent social order that fuels the next revolution.”

This guy has a flair for the dramatic.

“We are that next revolution,” he says as he stands up and walks over to the floor-to-ceiling windows, and as his silhouette dissolves into the false dusk he turns towards me and commands, “Come over here, let me show you something.”

I walk up to him. The clouds have thinned out and underneath, below our feet, the city is already wrapped in the night, and the speeding cars draw white and red trails from under the low hanging clouds. I stand there as Daniel Drake gazes out the window. I mimic him. A copy. An imitation. Fake. And when it turns almost pitch black, and a handful of dead stars twinkle in the blackness of space overhead, Daniel Drake turns towards me and says, "Do you see all those radio masts dotting the roofs of those skyscrapers?" his fingers pointing at the pointy ends piercing the cloud cover. "These are our targets."

"Why is that?"

"Those are Silicon Valley's foot soldiers. Their drug dealers. Their Achilles heel. If we take out the cell towers, their whole edifice falls apart. And the day they fall is the day we rise."

My eyes dive into the dark and I see cell towers as far as the eye can see. "How the hell are we going to take down all these towers? There must be hundreds of them."

He's inches away from me and I can barely see him now. Only the faint dark outline of his face, the spanning forehead, the curving nose, the extending cheeks, the malleable lips, the proud chin, and he says, "You're thinking too small. There're over 250,000 cell towers in North America. We're going to take them down. All of them."

Is this guy insane?

"You want to take down a quarter of a million towers? The whole North American cellular network?"

“North America’s just the beginning. By the time we’re done, there won’t be a single radio mast standing on the face of the planet.”

Maybe living at this height messes up your brain with some kind of penthouse-altitude sickness. “Mr. Drake, are you serious or is this a joke?”

“Call me Daniel,” he says.

“Ok, Daniel,” I say, and I ask him the same question again. And now I can’t even see his faint outline anymore. Instead, I see the slim contours of a waxing moon, and the appearance of a chorus of twinkling stars, candlelight vigil style.

And from the darkness, he says, “This is no joke. But first, we have to raise an army.”

5

A block away from the winos and crackheads in Pigeon Park, Marty's sitting on my bed in a Meatloaf T-shirt and midnight blue spandex panties, her knees folded and her blue and purple dipped hair spread out behind her. She's coloring her toenails licorice black to match her blackberry lips.

Right there, just below the hip, I see them. Dozens of pale jagged lines running across her thigh, school of fish style.

Marty's mother died of cancer when she was fourteen, and to cope she stole one of her father's razors and sunk them into her teen flesh. She grieved for her mother's death in blood. Her father worked two jobs and had no clue what his daughter was up to in her bedroom. When the slicing got old, she turned goth. Her best friend stopped tagging her, and cyberbullies and trolls called her a witch.

Die, you dirty witch.

Die.

Die.

Die.

#dropdead, they said, again and again, until she carved the word "death" on her skin. I can't make out the letters anymore. Just a jumble of pale scars now.

I'm sitting next to her in my boxer shorts, and my studio's a pigsty. Dirty dishes in the sink, clothes and shoes thrown on the floor, crammed full garbage bin, dusty books and DVDs on shelves, tangled socks climbing out the dresser, souvenirs,

gift cards, chargers, wires, old phones, iPod, iPad, iMac, television set, candy, Kleenex box, black bulky speakers, empty picture frames, printer, my collection of Simpsons and Star Wars figurines, and a thousand other little things floating around.

I've been carrying this shit in cardboard boxes from place to place all my life. Collected one Visa swipe at a time.

Next time I move, half of this room is going in the garbage.

Marty's flexing her toes and she looks happy with herself. "What do you think?"

"You have cute little toes. I want to bite them off your foot."

She smiles, takes a quick glance at her phone and dips the little paintbrush in the little bottle of nail polish, proceeding to blacken the nails on the other foot.

I examine my place some more and look at my history books. *The French Revolution: A Bloody History*. Daniel Drake says his revolution will be bloodless. No revolution worth its name was dry. Daniel's either a liar or a fool. During the French revolution over forty thousand people were beheaded with guillotines. Decapitated.

Talk about headcount.

I turn to Marty and say, "Did you know back during the French revolution chopping heads was a festive event?"

She's meticulously coloring her left pinky toe. "No kidding."

"I'm dead serious, people would gather at the *place de la Revolution*, sing songs and tell jokes and recite poems. They'd

buy souvenirs and grab a bite and women would watch and knit. Even the condemned played along making smartass quips and dancing their way up the steps of the scaffold. Some crazy shit!”

One second you’re looking at a basket with your head firmly attached to your body, and another second you’re in a basket sucking wicker, looking up at your own opened up neck spurting fresh blood all over your face. Mobs cheering for your death. Brain activity lasts for four seconds after decapitation.

One Mississippi.

Two Mississippi.

Three Mississippi.

Four Mississippi.

That’s how long it takes for God to do the paperwork.

Marie Antoinette, the let-them-eat-Sacher-Torte queen, she was shaved bald, her hands tied. She was chucked into a tumbril and paraded through the streets of Paris before they took her to the scaffold. When she walked onto the platform she stepped on the executioner’s foot. He cried out and she said, *“Pardon me sir, I didn’t mean to do it.”* #guillotineetiquette The crowd burst into laughter when the guards took off the white cap covering her bald head to prepare her for the execution. They laughed until the blade came down and blood washed over her pate, and their laughs turned into cheers. Her husband Louis XVI had it worse. They dropped the blade *twice* before his head fell off. #ouch

“You know what would’ve been awesome?” Marty says, now coloring her left ring toe, “If they had smartphones back then.” She tilts her head sideways, examining her toes.

I’m trying to picture it in my head. Thousands stretching their arms, claspings their phones high above their heads. Pushing and shoving and clamoring for that money shot, for that instant when the head is severed from the body, for that moment when death is born.

Marty says, “I bet you someone would stream it on Facebook!”

I’m thinking Instagram, and I wonder what kind of filter would best match a decapitation. An enigmatic Brannan? A spooky Sutro? Or a vintage Gingham? I can’t make my mind. It’s a tough call. I wouldn’t want to be defined by the wrong tint. Not for something so special. Deep down I know I’m leaning for a nostalgic look. My friends would expect nothing less. I definitely settle on Gingham.

Many years back when my parents took us to London, we stopped by the Madame Tussauds wax museum. Madame Tussauds was pretty handy with waxwork. Turns out Madame attended guillotine executions to make death masks of the severed heads in the basket. She melted hot wax over the freshly severed heads of His Lordness Monsieur le Marquis and Her Loftiness Madame la Contesse, and took their death masks on tour. #waxgram

“Marty, I dreamt of you a couple of nights ago.” I tell her about the dream I had the other night. The black Jeep, the sheering cliff, the M67, the fake Ray Bans, the cracked windshield. The round hot orange sun, the endless blue sky

and the plumes of dust. I tell her my dream and my heart's racing like I'm there. Everything's so real. Everything in slow motion. Everything I want to be.

"It's so steep, it'll be like flying," she says, "I can see myself saying that."

"Marty, this is what I'm talking about. We've got to do something with our lives. We're not living. We're pretending. We're masquerading as living souls. We're the body doubles of our own lives."

"Tommy, these things only happen in movies." She calls me Tommy sometimes. I like it when she does because this means she's into me.

"What if I told you we can make it real?"

"Damn it!" She's accidentally knocked over her bottle of nail polish and spilled liquid licorice on my aqua blue fleece blanket. "I'm so sorry," she says.

"Don't worry about it. I'll throw it in the laundry." As she gets up to grab paper towels from the shelf, I say, "This whole place needs to go to the laundry."

She proceeds to carefully wipe out the stain. "Do you have any acetone?" she asks. When your mom checks out early, you learn a thing or two about fighting stains on your own. Marty says the best way to remove nail polish from fabric is to place the fabric facedown on paper towels and blot the backside of the stained area with acetone. She says, don't use acetone if your fabric contains acetate or triacetate unless you want to melt a hole in your blanket. The blotting action will transfer the stain to the paper towel. She says,

rinse the stained area in the sink then place it facedown on a clean set of paper towels and blot it with acetone again. Rinse and repeat. Keep doing it, she says, till the nail polish stops transferring to paper towels. She says if the fabric doesn't react well to acetone I can use hydrogen peroxide. Hydrogen peroxide can act as a bleaching agent though, so that introduces another set of problems. Hairspray can also do the trick, she says. You spray it on the bristles of an old brush and scrub in a circular motion. A bug repellent is equally effective. She tells me all of this, and I don't have acetone or hydrogen peroxide or hairspray or bug repellent.

Despite the clutter, my home is greatly lacking in basic necessities. Marty says every household needs to have a nail polish removal emergency kit.

Marty takes me to court on my lack of the aforementioned critical nail polish fighting agents. And it hits me. Juno. Juno with its color intensity and its bright hues. This is what I need for my guillotine selfie. Or do I?

I'm emoji's musing face.

Marty gives up and settles for wiping the stain with a dry paper towels. "You were saying?"

"I was saying, we can make it real." And I tell Marty about Daniel Drake, his magnetic ways and his grandiose plan to rid the world of its technology addiction. His plan to blow up the global cellular network. His billion dollars, his space castle and his paper-thin silky burgundy robe.

She wipes methodically while she listens and says, "This sounds fishy to me. Are you sure this guy's for real?"

"I think so. He seems to know his shit. I don't think he's messing around. Maybe there's more to him, but one thing I know, he's very charismatic."

"Window cleaner?" she blurts out.

"Check in the cupboard under the sink."

She jumps up to check. "Yes, this should do," she says and grabs the window cleaner and sprays the stain. She grabs a dishcloth and again starts scrubbing in a circular motion and says, "Maybe he just wants to impress you. Maybe he just wants to sleep with you?"

"I don't think so. I don't think he's gay, and even if he was, why would he make up such a crazy story? I think he's dead serious."

The stain slowly begins to disappear as she scrubs in circles like she's making whipped cream.

"But I like my phone," she says, "and my feed, and my tweets, and my snaps, and my vines, and my grams. What did these people ever do to him?"

And I tell her about the dopamine tubes and the oxytocin spine needles, the brain damage and the fatal seizures. I tell her we're lab rats. I tell her about our stolen present and the never dying past and the compromised future. I tell her how our lives and our love and our friends, our hopes and fears are manipulated and monetized. I tell her about a distraction economy built on the back of a life sliced into meaningless snippets. I tell her about fake happiness delivered on a flickering red light. I jest about clickheads and the clickbaits. Daniel Drake's words coming out of my mouth, and in case all

of this isn't enough, I stray where I know it hurts. I tell her about cyber bullies and trolls ruining people's lives. I tell her Daniel Drake's raising an army.

Her cheeks flush. "Wow," she says and she stops scrubbing, lifts her head and says, "Where do I sign up?"

"At the sixty-first floor of the Shangri-La." And I lean over and press my lips hard against her sweet blackberry lips. #sweetkiss

I kiss her. And this time it really hits me. I don't want a fucking guillotine filter. I want to see fresh blood, hot and Bordeaux red. I want to see heads fly with my God given eyes. I want to breathe iron with the two holes in my face. I want to hear the drums of death with my own ears.

I want to be born back. I want to break free.

"Let's go see this Drake!" Then, she lifts the blanket and says, "Ta-Da!"

"I knew that was up your alley," I say, and I'm not talking about the stain removal.

The three of us are sitting in the open air in three Finn lounge chairs. It's late afternoon and the sky's light blue with no cloud in sight, the sun's losing some of its shine, readying to go to bed. We're by Drake's open roof deck sky pool, and wrapped around us is a three story high, two inch thick, crystal clear glass and steel frame fence. Daniel's dressed in blue jeans and a black sweatshirt. Steve Jobs minus the turtleneck collar. On the reddish-brown teak coffee table sits three chilled Vespers with a lemon peel curled on the side of each goblet.

At this height you can hear the wind whistle. You can feel the town breathe. Inhale. Exhale. You can't help feeling you're suspended mid-air, floating wingless in a chair, and from his drifting throne, Daniel says, "Tom's told me lots about you."

"Good things I hope," Marty says. "Tom's told me lots about you."

"Crazy things I hope!" Drake says, and I can see a hint of a wink and a smile on his face.

Marty and I both smile, and there's a blend of cordiality and tension in the air. In Drake's presence, I feel like these tiny ant-sized people walking the streets down below. Daniel Drake has this larger than life quality to him. The man is carved out of a magazine, pulled out of a movie. This whole thing feels surreal, and I'm thinking Tyler Durden. Dissociative identity disorder. Split personality. This guy's going to turn into me any minute now. Surprise!

Marty bluntly fires back, "Crazy, alright! Tom tells me you want to take out the global cellular network? I'm sorry to be so brusque, but this does sound insane."

Marty's candid ways put a damper on things, and Daniel Drake's eyes harden, the ash in his eyes turn into coal, and he says, "Do you know who said, 'No great mind exists without a touch of madness?'"

Marty shrugs. She doesn't tweet many quotes. I know this but I dare not say. Right now I'm like a kid in a classroom waiting his turn, so I reach down, pick my drink and take a sip, and it feels bitter and crisp on my tongue.

"Aristotle," he says. "You can't do big things without a touch of madness. It comes with the territory."

Marty isn't impressed. Aristotle and her aren't on the best of terms. Aristotle thought women were incomplete men, as if being born a woman is a deformity. Marty would have given Aristotle hell. "Fine. What's your touch of madness plan?"

The sun is sinking lower, and on the tiled concrete floor, our chairs draw stretched black shadows with tall thin legs, like elephants from a Salvador Dali painting.

And Drake says, "We start by infecting people's phones with an NFC virus. Dissemination is simple. When a phone comes within a ten foot radius of a phone that's infected, the virus automatically downloads to the clean device. Think of it like a flu virus."

A gentle breeze sends a waft of a piney floral scent from the bed of lavender lining the fence, and I say, "How do we launch this thing? Where do we start?"

Daniel pulls a small thumb drive out of his pocket and holds it up in his hand. "This is where you two come in. You need to upload the virus on this drive to your company's mainframe, and Travel Go's globetrotters will do the rest. Once uploaded, the virus will piggyback on every reservation confirmation. Overnight, tens of thousands of ignorant clients will turn into loyal foot soldiers, spreading the virus like wildfire, beaches, hotels, brothels, conference centers, malls, restaurants, swimming pools, gyms, taxis, airports, you name it. It'll be everywhere."

Global *infected* village.

Marty looks perplexed and says, "What will this virus do exactly?"

"It'll detox the world of its addiction. It'll free the masses from their meaningless sliced up existences," says Daniel, and his gaze glitters like mercury spilled into his eyes.

Behind us the sun sinks further, and a ring of fire forms in the distant horizon. The view is magnificent, and you can't help feel the majesty of *real* existence.

Marty's like one of those attack dogs: once they bite, they never let go. "I understand the objective, but how does it work?"

"Every time someone uses an infected phone, they'll be flashed with subliminal messages. Flashes lasting a fraction of a fraction of a second. Completely indiscernible to the naked eye."

Movies are projected at twenty-four frames per second. A subliminal message is projected at one frame per

millisecond. One thousandth of a second. Imagine a second, divide it into a thousand pieces, and a message inserted in a single piece.

Marty sinks her teeth in a little deeper. “What kind of subliminal messages?”

“On October thirty-first, a flurry of subliminal messages will instruct people to take down all cell towers wherever they may be, and by whatever means necessary. In just over sixty days, if our plan is successful, the skyline of this city and every other major city won’t look the same.” He pauses as if for dramatic effect, and continues, “October thirty-first is the day we reset the clock to zero.”

At one frame per four milliseconds, a human eye has a one out of two chance of catching what’s projected on a wall. At one frame per millisecond exposure, you’d swear you were looking at dry paint.

Marty’s mulling over Drake’s every word. Examining his every move. I know Marty well enough to know when she’s in doubt. I’ve seen her shoot down thousands of customers pleading their case. Something’s on her mind. She ain’t buying what Drake’s selling. Marty’s stranded at the banks of the Rubicon and can’t quite make the leap.

And now she finally asks what I bet she’s been dying to ask since we arrived. “What I don’t understand is, how can someone go from making a fortune pedaling digital drugs to wanting to burn it all down?”

Drake didn’t flinch or tense up. With legs crossed and back comfortably leaned against the white cushion, he says, “When I first joined CML, I did it for the money. I didn’t care

about anything or anyone. I neglected my son and ex-wife. I had the skill Silicon Valley wanted and offered my services to the highest bidder. They wanted me to make them the best drugs technology had to offer, and I did. I was their Walter White. But then one day, I looked around and I just saw drones. I saw Skeletons in Sketchers. I saw a world stripped at the core. And it dawned on me that this ship has no captain. A world steered aimlessly forward by a brew of naïve scientific curiosity and pure greed. I had to take a stand, so I walked away.” Drake uncrosses his legs and rests his arms on the teak armrests and says, “Even those professing no evil forget that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Marty tilts her head to me and I can see her eyes peering at me from the other side of the river. Daniel Drake’s gotten through to her.

To the east of us the night climbs into the heavens, and to the west the sun inches towards the horizon, its shrinking red-orange disc hiding behind Drake, endowing his silhouette with a reddish aura.

And I’m thrown back to my history books. #tbt

A long time ago from Mesopotamia comes a fabled creature called the Bull of Heaven. The Bull lived between the earth, the domain of man and the heavens, the domain of gods. The Bull could only graze where the sun sets and rises, its pasture the horizon. The Bull was sent to earth by Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, to destroy the ancient city of Uruk.

Daniel Drake and his halo rest on the horizon, and while my eyes discreetly search for his horns, I say, “How do we get to Travel Go’s mainframe?”

Marty takes a sip from her dewy goblet and says, "I think I know how."

And then we were three.

Two steel columns composing the glass fence structure cast a shadow over Daniel Drake's head, superimposing two long black horns onto his shadow. And he says, "If you guys want to take a dip in the pool, be my guest, the water's at room temperature."

At an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet the air is fatal. Step out of the fuselage and the severe cold and lack of oxygen will kill you in seconds. At extremely cold temperatures your body shuts down the regulatory system, forcing blood to rush in tides and giving you the feeling you've been hit with a massive fever.

Marty's playing Angry Birds, and I'm looking out the airplane window. We're on our way to Travel Go's server farm in Montreal. Marty talked Bob into sending her and me to our data center in Quebec under the bogus excuse that our customer interaction data needed reviewing. She told him she wanted to undertake a comprehensive audit to figure out why we're not hitting his 20% customer conversion rate. He bought us two coach tickets and put us on a plane to Montreal first thing next morning. Bob may yet turn into a fairy-tale prince after all.

In extreme cold, just before turning into a popsicle, one in four people take their clothes off right before their organs shut down. Climbers will tell you stories of frozen dead bodies found on the tops of mountains sitting naked with their clothes folded neatly beside them. Kind of like the doctor's office when you go for a full physical, minus the paper gown.

At an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet there's no cell signal. A taste of what's to come. In sixty days, even at three and a half feet above ground level, there won't be a signal. That'll be me. That'll be my doing, and now I'm feeling the blood of James Bond, Indiana Jones, and Ethan Hunt in my veins. My spirit's sunbathing on the wing of a triple seven

jetliner cruising at almost the speed of sound. Mach 0.89. Galloping to re-shape history.

Tom Perkins is what the two boys in the next aisle want to be when they grow up. They just don't know it yet.

Snowflakes. Two tiny snowflakes take shape on the Plexiglas oval window. The sky this high has a tinge of navy blue to it, and the clouds are white dunes of cotton candy spread out and dropping into the horizon.

Back in the fifties, airplane windows were square. There was a slight problem though. It made planes crash. One second you're looking at the clouds and the next you're water vapor. It's the corners. Differential pressure stress builds up and then one day you're minding your own business sipping Scotch neat and BOOM! The windows burst wide open.

And it's on the rocks.

Marty's dropping egg bombs and smashing birds into buildings and boomeranging birds all over the place. Intense. She didn't even crack a cracker. She spent the whole flight flying birds. This is how Marty copes with stress nowadays. No more Angry Birds clawing her thighs.

I was more of a Candy Crush man. Striped candy, wrapped candy and color bombs. I used to live for this back when Candy Crush was crushing it. My favorite was matching a striped candy with a color candy and knocking it out of the park. Divine. And then there's that big stupid candy you get when you match wrapped candy with striped ones. It didn't do it for me. Tasty? I don't think so.

Time stops when you want something badly enough. Time is subjective. You don't experience time as it is. You experience time as fast or as slow as your brain narrates it back to you. Time is a construction of the brain, and right now the work crew in my head is on strike. My spirit's flying at Mach 0.89, but my actual body is stuck behind the picket line.

I close my eyes and later open them to the disembodied voice of a woman. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Montreal. Local time 11:03 a.m., the temperature is fourteen degrees."

She mumbles something in French. I only understand *Montréal*.

Travel Go's data center is at the edge of Montreal. A sixty-two thousand square foot Tier 3 state-of-the-art underground facility. Five hundred cold storage racks hosting over an exabyte of data. I don't know what half of this means. I just know it's a shitload of data. This is the mother lode. This is where they store all customer data. Home addresses, credit card numbers, emails, phone numbers. Room types, bed size preferences, favorite Kama Sutra position. Favorite In-flight meal selection: kosher, halal, vegetarian, ovo-lacto, vegan. Travel history. IP addresses. Passport numbers. Rental car preference: compact, standard, speciality. Air travel: first class, business class, steerage.

All of the above resting comfortably in an EMC Isilon cluster in a pleasant twenty degree Celsius environment.

You weren't thinking that was it, were you? We still got all the third party data Travel Go spends a fortune buying from data aggregators: Your age. Marital status. Parental status.

Current work, previous work. Education. Music, movie and TV show preferences. Places you go to. News you read, celebrities you worship. Friends you have, friends you don't have. Languages you speak. Religious beliefs. Place of birth. Weight. Pets you own, pets that own you. Books you read, you want to read or you pretend to read. Your favorite sport teams. Banking history, household income, outstanding mortgage balance. Health status.

You get the idea.

"For your safety and comfort, please remain seated with your seatbelt fastened until the Captain turns off the Fasten Seatbelt sign. At this time, you may use your cellular phones if you wish."

She mumbles something in French. I only understand *téléphone*.

A cacophony breaks out. Hundreds of phones vibrate and chime and ding and whistle and ring. Suspended animation over. Life can begin anew.

A handful of belt buckles go undone. Premature unbucklers. Every time.

"On behalf of Air Canada and the entire crew, I'd like to thank you for joining us on this trip and we are looking forward to seeing you on board again in the near future. Have a nice day!"

She mumbles something in French. I only understand *Air Canada*.

I feel slightly nauseated. The acidity of the plane's tomato juice lingers on my tongue. I never drink juiced tomato at ground level. Hurling in a metal tube above the clouds makes me yearn for cold tomato soup. Party fact opportunity. You may want to write this down: When you're a mile above sea level, cabin pressure reduces the amount of oxygen that goes to your blood. The mucus in your nose expands, and your odor and taste receptors go numb. That's why everything in a plane tastes like cardboard.

Life of the party. Guaranteed eyebrow lifter.

I didn't know any of this data center stuff until Marty filled me in during the drive from the airport to the server farm on Boulevard Curé-Labelle. Then, just before the cab stopped in front of the data center gates, Marty crushed me like a candy. This is when she told me about the audio recordings. She tells me, every cough, cleared throat, fart, sneeze, stutter and sigh, and even the occasional moan, made on a call to Travel Go is recorded and on file. It's all there. Bob wasn't just pulling feathers out of his ass. The audio stash is real. All the shit I put clients through is neatly indexed and accessible.

I'm emoji's I'm fucked face.

We're crammed in a tiny office space under bright florescent lights. No LEDs. Good old mercury vapor. No vampires here. We're packed as tight as the skinny jeans on Xavier, the jumbo size network admin next door. We're in the auxiliary basement office at the data center, which seems to act as a storage space as well. Marty's wearing big ass headphones

and listening to customer calls. Taking notes. Working hard. This whole thing is supposed to be a cover operation, but Marty says we'll need to hand Bob our report when we get back, and she hands me a bunch of files and asks me to cross reference customer call dates.

Two giant Starbucks ice teas watch over us, and this double-o-seven spy shit feels boring and terribly mundane. If this were a movie, half the theater would be at the counter asking for their money back, and the other half asleep. Movie theaters will give you a full refund up to thirty minutes after the movie starts. I bet you didn't know that.

The access terminal where we're supposed to plug in the USB key is guarded by Xavier next door. Harry Potter on Anadol. Xavier and his green hoodie sweatshirt and his Warwick specs greeted us when we got here and squeezed us into this alcove before going back to hugging his workstation.

I'm flipping the USB key in my pocket. Am I still up for this? Shit's real now. This isn't like when you put on a tux and pretend you're James Bond. This is real and it's scaring the shit out of me. Do I really want to do this? If push comes to shove I can always move to South Korea and belt down noodles for a living.

I hear the one they call *The Diva* makes over nine Gs a month smacking bulgogi.

I swallow hard and nudge Marty with my elbow and say, "How are we going to go about doing this?"

"In a few minutes I'll go distract that green giant. I'll ask him to show me around, explain to me how all the servers and equipment work. You know, cuddle the geek in him," she

whispers, “And when I do that, you walk up to the terminal and stick in the thumb drive. The whole thing should take under a minute.”

And she goes back to work. Marty looks calm and composed, not breaking a single bead of sweat. When you’ve got guts to blade a crosswalk on your thighs, you can do anything.

I’m a nervous wreck. I’m queasy and my palms feel like they’ve been dipped in holy water. This thing’s moving along and I’m turning white like when I’m showering in LED light back at the office. Marty sees me decomposing in real time and she takes off her headphones and says, “Don’t worry, it’ll be a breeze.”

My own Katniss Everdeen.

Marty gets up and makes her way to Xavier in the server room. She’s quick and nimble despite her chubby look. Whizzing around like a purple hairstreak butterfly. “Wait here for a couple of minutes and then look inside. If no one’s there, go for it,” she says before bolting out.

From the crack of the door I see her approach him. She moves fast. They’re already talking and giggling. Marty’s doing her customer satisfaction thing. She’s doing her dance, and she lures him out like when a seagull does a rain dance to catch worms. He leaves his desk and takes her on tour.

My time to shine. I open the door slowly and try to play it cool. A Trenta size paper cup clasped tightly in my hand. I feel the lenses of a thousand CCTV cameras on me. The coast is clear. No guard at the fort. No excuse. I walk in strides and slide into the comfy leather chair. Still warm from Xavier giant ass. I feel tiny. I rest my feet on the chrome cross-

shaped base and place my giant cup by the keyboard. I look at the monitor. Looks like Chinese to me. Luckily I can tell what a USB key port looks like, and in a swift play of the hand I slip the thumb drive out of my pocket and lift the cup with the other. I slide the drive into the USB port and use the Trenta cup as a barrier to cover my moves.

My gaze flicks to the file upload progress bar, and the first word that comes to mind is *frozen*. The second word that comes to mind is *stuck*. The next several words that come to mind are a derivation of *fuck*.

I'm sweating bullets and my heart's pounding hard. Bloodless revolution my ass. If Xavier comes back, there will be blood. My blood. If Xavier catches me, he'll shove the thumb drive up my ass. This fucking progress bar's jammed. The word *abort* comes to mind. The word *run* comes to mind.

Mission failed. We'll get 'em next time, echoes in my mind.
#callofduty

My face burns from the heat of countless humming servers on racks sucking people's lives, and my panicky thoughts sink into the whizzing of cooling fans. I take a deep breath, and command my heart to slow down. My blood pressure takes a dive, and I feel palm trees and white sand serene. There it is. There is my soul proudly strolling down the beach. It comes to me and says, Tom Perkins, you're changing the world. Tom Perkins, you're making history. My soul says, think of the Storming of the Bastille. Think Lexington and Concorde. Think Petrograd. Think liberty and freedom. And all of a sudden, the progress bar unlocks. Little white bricks line up at lightspeed. Done. Full bar.

Mission accomplished.

I rush back to the storage room. I'm all psyched and gritty with adrenaline rush afterglow. The thumb drive's back in my pocket, and I'm jammed up with folders and abandoned CPUs and switches and spare cooling fans under white fluorescent lights, and victory never felt so crammed.

Marty walks back in from her tour, her eyes wondering if we're game, and my glowing face says, Buckle up! She squeezes by my side and winking at me she whispers, "Tom Perkins, you badass." Then, she flips her hair and dives back into her giant headphone cans and says, "We still got work to do."

The rest of it was like I was high. I remember us leaving the server farm and hailing a cab back to the airport, just after tossing our cell phones into a garbage bin. And for the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't have a cell phone in my pocket. I was *there*. I was really *there*. Everything felt more real. The cab driver's midnight blue turban in my face. The red and yellow and orange maple tree sprinkled hills. The chugging of cars on the road. The worn out leather rubbing under my pants. The filmi Bollywood dance tunes. The lemony smell of cheap air freshener. The feel of Marty's snow white skin brushing up against my hand. I was *plugged back* and I loved it. I loved every minute of it, because for once I wasn't dispersed into a thousand moments. Because for once, a single moment was my world.

Peter Jennings sunk into the gray moquette fabric seat two hundred and fifty feet below sea level, while cruising at a hundred miles an hour through miles of darkness. The Eurostar from London to Paris always made his ears pop at the thirty-one-mile stretch below sea level. Peter didn't expect to visit Paris during his stay in London this time around, but the lead guitarist of the band he flew to London to see OD'd and had to be rushed to the ER in the middle of the night, and the hard rock concert was called off. Peter looked into switching his return ticket to the States to an earlier flight, but when that proved to be a hassle, he hopped on a train to Paris to catch another concert.

Rock and drugs. Bread and butter, even the Beatles admitted taking LSD. Comes with the territory. This is what Peter was thinking about while listening to the clickety-clack sound of the train as it raced over the tracks.

Clickety clack. Clickety clack.

At this depth, cell phones signals flatline, and for the twenty minutes it takes the train to speed through the Chunnel, passengers find themselves hurled back into the pre-cell phone era. This is when Peter noticed a pretty redhead reading a fashion magazine across from him and struck up a conversation.

Clickety clack. Clickety clack.

"Hello, I'm Peter," he said.

The redhead lifted her head from the magazine and eyed him. They say it only takes seven seconds to form an

impression of a person. She eyed Peter for a few seconds. He made the cut. "Hi, I'm Megan. Megan Cody," she said in a British accent.

He nodded and said, "So, what brings you to the City of Light?"

Megan told him she was there on business, to check some impressionist artwork for her employer. She told him she worked for an art auctioneer and then asked him what he did for a living.

"I'm what they call an influencer."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I have a large following on Instagram, and brands pay me to promote their products to my follower base."

"You mean you just post on Instagram for a living?"

"Yup."

"What do you post about?"

"Music mostly. Bands and concerts and such."

"And they pay you for that?"

"In essence, yes," he said as the train sped out of the tunnel and emerged with a whoosh into the endless daylight spread over the French side of the Chunnel.

"Is this why you're traveling to Paris? To take pictures for your Instagram?"

"My plan was to take pictures of a rock band in London, but their gig was canceled last minute, and since switching my flight back was a pain, I figured I'd catch a concert in Paris and come back in time for my flight from Heathrow tomorrow night."

"If you don't mind me asking, do you get paid well for the stuff you promote on your Instagram feed?"

"A couple of grand per sponsored post. I do a few of those a month. You do the math."

"Wow, you have the most awesome job in the world! Traveling around the world, going to cool concerts, snapping pics. I love it," said Megan as she tossed her hair.

The two hit it off and chatted all the way until the train eased up at Gare du Nord at ten past noon. Just over two hours after leaving London's St. Pancras, the Eurostar stopped and the doors opened with a hiss. Gare Du Nord can be an intimidating place. This shabby station is in a sketchy part of town, and the place crawls with pickpockets and fishy characters. Megan asked Peter if he'd stick with her until she was safely tucked into her cab. He jumped at the opportunity and agreed to share a cab.

The two of them waited at the cab stop across the street from the station gates, and as they both sunk their eyes into their phones to check what they had missed, Peter felt something crawling at his back pocket. He quickly turned his head to look over his shoulder and spotted a gypsy kid trying to snatch his wallet. He jerked his elbow back, and the pointy tip of his elbow landed on the kid's face. The kid fell down to the ground, quickly jumped back up and bolted. The few

other people waiting with them briefly looked away from their phones to watch the incident play out and then went back to what they were doing, except for two who reflexively double-checked their pockets to see if their wallets were still where they left them.

Peter opened the door of a white Renault taxi for Megan and got in after her. Peter was heading to the eleventh district where he'd booked a room at a boutique hotel close to the concert hall. Megan was staying near the Opera Bastille in the twelfth district.

The cabbie told them on the way that pickpockets in Paris can make over six Gs a day. He said pickpockets dress and act like tourists around the Eiffel tower and rob you clean in the upper levels when you're relaxed and taking in the view. One popular trick is when one blocks you with a selfie stick as you promenade around the tower while another empties your pockets. He also told them to watch out on the subway.

The cabbie spoke in broken English as they inched along on the cobblestone streets, until his cell phone rang and he began shouting at someone on the other end. That's when Peter talked Megan into joining him at the concert. They agreed to meet at six at the Loving Hut in the Marais district for an early vegan dinner prior to heading to the concert hall. Megan was vegan and swears by the place.

The cab dropped Peter off at the end of a quiet street, just across from the art deco metal door of Hotel Blanc. Peter and his wheeled teal carry-on walked into the hotel's mini foyer at around one thirty. "Mini foyer" is an overstatement. Hotel Blanc's entire reception area was nothing but a raised rundown wooden reception desk, two antique bergère

chairs, a pamphlet display case and the steel base of the elevator shaft. Lounged behind the desk was an elderly man, a receptionist with a thick peppery moustache and two tiny peepholes for eyes that look as if he'd chugged a carafe of Pinot Noir at lunch. The man didn't look pleased to see Peter walk through the door.

"Votre réservation, Monsieur?" the man asked as he straightened himself on his mid-back swivel chair.

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes. Your reservation?"

Peter pulled out his phone, looked up the reservation confirmation and handed his phone to the man.

"No paper confirmation?"

"No, I just booked it this morning before boarding the train from London."

The man made a face and picked up the phone with two fingers as if he's forced to carry a bag of nuclear waste, and after checking on his computer and going through the pile of papers on his desk, making a couple of phone calls and then going back to his computer, he said, "How would you like to pay?"

"MasterCard."

"Hundred fourteen euros with taxes."

Peter grabbed his credit card and handed it to the receptionist. The man swiped it and returned it along with a key attached to a large, heavy, metal key chain. Peter's room

was on the third floor, room number thirty-four. Peter picked up his carry-on and took two short steps to the elevator shaft. The elevator cab was so tiny he had to carry his single piece of luggage against his chest so he could fit. A big man, he thought, would never squeeze in, luggage or not.

Everything is so small in Paris.

Peter's room wasn't much bigger than the elevator. It had a single cramped bed, a bedside table, a flat-screen TV, a small wall closet and a shower, and that was it. The room was so small he couldn't even open the window because the bed obstructed it. The flat weave carpet had cigarette burns. And this was supposed to be a non-smoking room. The accommodation would do for the few hours of sleep after the concert, but he still felt ripped off.

Peter freshened up with a tiny bar of soap and dried his face with a small hand towel.

For November the weather was surprisingly agreeable. Peter left his jacket in the room and walked out of the hotel looking for a place to eat. He left his oversized key chain at the reception. Peter strolled along Boulevard Voltaire and snapped a few pictures for his followers. He promised them a great set of pics for the evening. He picked a brasserie and feasted on steak frites and a glass of Bordeaux as Édith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose" played on the radio. Despite the Parisians' rough ways and the gypsy pickpockets, there was something magical about Paris. The city had this charming beauty that he felt in his heart and that he just couldn't put his finger on.

After lunch, Peter had a few hours to kill before meeting up with Megan. He had an idea that he was sure would be a

delightful surprise for his loyal followers. He looked around for a flower shop and bought a bouquet of white lilies and gerberas, and amid the balmy weather, he strolled to the cemetery.

At an altitude of thirty-five thousand feet the temperature is seventy degrees below zero. I don't need to tell you what happens if you step out of the fuselage. We're flying back to Vancouver, and the two massive 110,000 horsepower GE90-115 engines are roaring in the background.

In seat 21E on a little square napkin sits a miniature plastic champagne flute on the folding tray, and within the little indentation, a doll size champagne bottle rests empty. The kind of bottle that makes you feel like a giant. Marty and I are having our mini celebration. When you do big things the whole world looks miniature. You become a giant. The big fatso hugging the armrest to your left becomes a hobbit, and this sprawling triple seven jetliner shrinks down to one of those toy remote control planes.

My soul is flying at Mach 20, Composition B goes BOOM style. My soul is flying at Mach 20, leaving me and Marty and the crew behind.

Nothing comes close to the high you get when you write history.

Take opium, meth, heroine, crack cocaine, LSD, MDMA, speed, DMT, Robitussin, salvia 90x and G-13, puree them all together and inject the mixture into your spinal cord, and it won't even come close.

The world is made of only two types of people: those who do and those who live in their doing. Until I met Daniel Drake I was the latter. Now I'm the former, and it feels un-fucking-real.

Marty's sleeping, my shoulder pillowing her head. She worked all the way until we took off, crunching numbers, filling spreadsheets, dotting bullet points. Bob will have his report, but that doesn't matter anymore. This sliced up damaged world won't be around for much longer. The real world beacons bright in the distance.

Soon everyone will stop floating in server racks. They'll be *there* with you. As real as that Kodak moment you don't remember anymore. Everyone will talk like before. Fathers and sons will watch a ballgame with their raw eyes. No filters. No Likes. Just a father and son and hot sunlight delight. Daughters will confide in their moms and hug and cry and sleep on their lap with no phone in hand. Your social network will be flesh and blood. No pixels. No ads.

My name is Tom and I'm bringing the world back.

I signal the air waitress to bring me another chilled miniature champagne bottle. I'm too giddy to sleep and I'm staring at the video display lodged in the reclined backside of seat 20E.

Altitude 34988.3 ft.

Heading 262.00 W.

Ground Speed 419 mph.

The screen alternates between the flight stats and a map of the world with a tiny white plane trailing a yellow line. The world stretches eight inches from end to end. This is how small the world feels to me. The tiny paper plane hardly moves. Kind of like my life. Until today.

Time Remaining 2h 55m.

Estimated Arrival 06:24 A.M.

Distance Remaining 1229 mil.

The air waitress cracks open my Lego-sized champagne bottle, pours me a full baby portion and vanishes in the dark. The plane's asleep. I can never sleep on planes. I'm not one of those people who jump out of planes bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I'm the dim-eyed and wispy-tailed kind. The fatso to my left chokes on his spit and wakes up coughing his lungs out. He can't sleep anymore, so he turns my way and starts yammering.

His name is Sergey. He tells me he's been choking a lot at night. His doctor thinks his salivary glands are producing too much saliva. Hypersalivation. The doctor told him to suck on ice and avoid excess sugar. Good luck with that. The doctor told him to snack on salted nuts. He signals to the air waitress. I know they're not called that. He asks her to bring him more microwave-heated nuts and extra salt. He tells me he's a flight accident investigator. I ask him how that's working out for him, and he says it's like solving puzzles.

I've got nothing, and our conversation reaches a premature death.

I pick up an Air Canada enRoute magazine from the seat pocket in front of me to peruse, and the whole thing is an Instagram commercial.

10 Top Canadian Instagrammers You Should Be Following.

Two Instagram Masters Face Off to See Which Smartphone Is the Best for Photography.

What the hell is an *Instagram master*?

Sergey taps my arm and says, “You do know that 70% of your body’s cells are made of water, right?”

I say, “Yes, I do know that.”

“Now imagine dropping a water balloon at terminal velocity from where we are. What do you think would happen to it?”

“It explodes?”

“Bingo,” he says, “this is exactly what happens to the cells in your body upon impact in an airplane crash. They explode and your insides turn into goop.”

I give him a polite *this is fantastic information* nod, reach for my bubbly, chug it in one gulp, and go back to flipping through my magazine. Just more smartphone and social media and app ads masquerading as editorial content.

Top 4 Apps to Make Smartphone Shooting a Snap – If you’re taking a selfie or a video, don’t shoot without one of these tools.

Here is How to Gain Instagram Followers with a Better Feed.

What is with all of this social media smartphone app crap on every page? It hits me: This is social media withdrawal therapy. With no cell phone coverage at thirty-five thousand feet, this is as close as it comes to getting your fix. An oasis in a social media dessert. National Geographic for the social media age.

“If the plane hits the ground at a slower speed and you’re wearing a seatbelt, you’ll bruise badly where the strap holds

you in place,” Sergey tells me, “but if you weren’t leaning down, things could get ugly. There’s a good chance that your twenty-five-pound head ends up in first class.” He cocks his head towards my ear and whispers, “I’ve seen a body torn in half by the lap belt.”

I listen with mild interest and indulge him with a question, “So what’s the best way to prepare for a crash?”

“Pass out. Hypoxia. Oxygen deprivation. Your best bet is catastrophic decompression at high altitude. You would lose consciousness in under thirty seconds. If a crash is inevitable, whatever happens, don’t wear the oxygen mask,” and he waves his hand upward pointing overhead.

I figure I might as well return the favor and decide to give him a tip of my own. I lean towards him, clasp his blubbery forearm on the armrest and tell him, “Whatever happens, don’t fly on Halloween. Lock yourself in your home, and no matter what, don’t use your phone. If I were you, I’d flush my phone down the plane vacuum toilet right now.”

Sergey looks at me completely dumbfounded. He can’t tell if I’m being serious or just blowing a bunch of hot air. “Maybe you should take it easy on the champagne.”

Party fact:

On older planes they used Anotec made from formaldehyde and bleach to flush waste into storage tanks. It smelled like poison and had a dark bluish purple tint. Problem is, once in a while the thing would leak, and a frigid ball of blue shit would form on the exterior of the plane. When the plane dropped in altitude, the ball would partially thaw and plummet to the ground. Blue ice, they call it. Blue balls of ice

and shit would smash into cars and tear through roofs. There hasn't been any confirmed fatalities. Don't despair, quite a few of these old planes are still in service.

End of fact.

All of a sudden, there's a violent jolt, and the plane starts shaking. The little seatbelt sign flashes yellow and green, Marty's head slips off my shoulder and she wakes up trembling in her seat, and now we're both wiggling and swaying under the flickering reading light. The plane shakes and Sergey's nuts fall into my lap. Warm and gritty with salt.

Falling.

Falling.

Butterflies. A butterfly melee in my stomach. The plane's losing attitude, and my ears pop as I levitate off my seat and float under the seatbelt like on Space Mountain. "We've hit an air pocket. Please remain seated and buckle your seatbelts," the pilot blurts out over the plane's PA system, as the little paper plane on the eight inch screen swirls in every direction. I hear screams and gasps and see hands clasping hands between the seats ahead of me. Sergey's sweating by the bucketload.

Falling.

Falling.

The video display now reads "System Error" in white on a black background, and Marty's holding my hand. I hear wailing and whimpers. They'll die forgotten. Disconnected. Those six last meaningful seconds on Vine. Lost. Never

uploaded. That slimy poutine in 1334 × 750 pixel resolution. Poof. Gone. That last *we're boarding now* update didn't go through. It'll die now. Never shared. Forever gone. That revenge porn collection, cinder any second now. That ripped MP3 playlist, ripped to pieces. MP3s to ashes. That selfie snap on your feed, the one with the crossed eyes, is the last portrait you'll ever have. Epitaph.

A few seconds pass. Heart still beating. A few more seconds. Head still attached. More seconds. Still not dead. The little paper plane resurrects like a phoenix, and captain whomever says, "Good news folks. We've passed the turbulence zone."

Die Another Day.

Second Life.

Everyone claps. I take a deep breath and check on Marty. She's fine. I press the little button with the symbol of a flight attendant holding a tray and a sumptuous blonde appears from the dark in her navy blue uniform and a red shawl. I want one of those buttons at home. She looks impeccable. Not a tiny bit shaken by our near miss to where even Pokémon can't go. I order two more mini champagne bottles, and when Marty says we've already had enough to drink, I tell her, "Drink up before we all turn into goop."

A week into my smartphone social media sobriety and I'm in the hornet's nest. Deep behind enemy lines. I'm at the British Ballroom at the Vancouver Fairmont attending a Social Media Marketing in the Twenty-First Century seminar. I'm attending it as part of Travel Go's 360 Employee Training Program. This is where I learn what Paul does in marketing, while he learns what I don't do in customer service.

In the past they just dumped us in each other's department and prayed that we don't fuck everything up. We did fuck everything up, and that was the end of that.

Then came the new and improved 360, v. 2.0. Now they send us up to seminars where the scope of fucking up is limited to spilling coffee on the guy sitting next to you. If I'm not mistaken, this has happened already. Twice.

This avant-garde event has a decisively Victorian feel to it. Relief ceiling. Crystal chandeliers. Hand-finished inlay carpet. Gilt chairs. Pastel brocade curtains with golden tie back tassels. High tech hip meets old world decadence.

Your presenter today is Justin.

Justin has more ready-to-pop white on pink pimples than I have hair on my balls. The guy's no older than twenty. He calls himself social media "expert". I'm surprised he didn't go for "master." Justin hits the stage in slim cut jeans and a hoodie like a rock star. Sliding from side to side on his wool sneakers, Michael Jackson moonwalk style. Justin says in the olden days, when he was still semen in his dad's balls, marketing didn't use to be real time. The game's evolved. He says, companies have to catch up or perish. If you're not on

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the like, you're a dinosaur. And we all know what happened to the dinosaurs: They were all rounded up and shipped to Jurassic Park.

Right after Montreal, Marty asked me to move in with her. The next day I gave my landlord a week's notice, and when he pointed out that my contract stipulates four weeks advance notice, I said, "Call me on my cell and we'll work it out."

Before moving out, I donated half of my stuff to the Salvation Army, and the other half went to 1-800-JUNK. I moved to Marty's place with a single suitcase. Three pairs of pants and six shirts. 1:2 pants-to-shirt ratio. A pair of fleece gloves, a navy blue polyester GEOX jacket, ten pairs of socks, ditto pairs of underwear, and a single magenta paramount plaid tie. My laptop and my collection of Simpsons and Star Wars figurines were the only non-fabric items that survived the purge.

I'm now a minimalist.

Justin's firing stats left and right faster than a Maxim machine gun in the battle of Shangani. The average American spends five hours a day on social media. The average American checks their social media accounts seventeen times a day. The average teen checks their phone over a hundred times a day. Some over two hundred. Tweens spend six hours a day on screens. Toddlers aren't far behind. Justin says their addiction is your ticket. Their compulsions, your yacht.

I donated my history books to the public library. When I got there the place looked deserted. A museum. A time machine.

A couple of bums on the computers, one checking porn, the other checking his feed.

Justin says we should remain *engaged* with our clients. “Tweet and post and update every day. Hammer them day and night. If you’re not making yourself heard, you’re dead.”

Living with someone with no cell phone and no social media distraction was harder than I expected. I mean yes, I loved being *there* in the moment with Marty. Having sex without worrying about what was happening anywhere else. Having dinner without an eye on our phones. Talking to each other for hours. Uninterrupted. No blinking lights. I was *there*. She was *there*. Just me and her. Real human connection. But there were moments when we had dead silence and we both felt weird and uncomfortable. Long continuous swaths of time where nothing happened. At times, it felt like a Twilight Zone episode. Black Mirror. We had to re-learn to be.

We didn’t cut everything. Turning Amish wasn’t the plan. We still have TV and laptops and we watched HBO and Netflix. Daniel Drake said when social media merged with phones, technology made a leap too far. Watching TV with no phone in hand threw me way back to when I was nine or ten and watching Ren & Stimpy on Nickelodeon. Psychotic Chihuahua and a ball of ice cream. No flickering red lights. No FOMO. Heaven.

When I grow up, I want to be ten again.

Justin says in Malaysia, Thailand, Argentina, Qatar, and Mexico, people check their social media accounts over forty times a day. Three times every waking hour. “Their obsession is your mansion on the beach.”

I'm emoji's the world is going to hell in a phone basket face.

My mom used to read books instead of her social feed. My dad used to dust off his Kodak camera at the start of every summer instead of fumbling with his iPhone zoom. I still remember the aroma of a fresh roll of film and my dad teaching me how to hook the perforated edge of the film to the teeth of the spool. I was a bundle of nerves when I loaded my first film. Terrified of exposure and finger damage. And taking pictures was something else. You could never tell if a picture would come out okay or not. You had to be careful. You took your time. You had 36 shots and they all had to count.

No deletes.

No second takes.

No filters.

No cropping.

And when the prints came back from the drug store, it was an *event*. We'd huddle up in the living room as my dad ripped open the envelope and unveiled the pictures one by one. Still warm. We'd literally be holding our holidays in our hands. I miss those days. I miss the days when pictures mattered.

When I mattered.

61% of Americans use their phones on the throne.

I have a little sister I rarely see anymore. She's always on her phone. She and her little phone dramas. At my mom's the other day, I wrestled away her phone and told her to

disconnect. “Let’s just be,” I said, and she said, “Tommy, you don’t understand,” and she grabbed her phone back and walked away thumbing the screen.

12% of Americans use their phone in the shower. 10% during sex.

Justin gets to his last slide: “I have a word of advice for you young grads out there: Old media’s a dodo with fleece. Cable’s a bunch of loose cord. TV’s a collector’s item. Newspapers are just cheap window cloth, and journalists are soup kitchen client base.”

Justin says, the future is in your palm. Think Social Media Coordinator. Think Social Media Producer. Think Content Strategist. Justin declares word of mouth mute. Electronic World of Mouth, eWOM, is the new game in town. Justin says, what happens in real life doesn’t matter anymore. Think Clickbait. Collective Intelligence. Crowd Sourcing. Engagement rate. Throwback Thursday. Follow Friday. Hangout. Klout. Live streaming. Native Advertising. Podcast. PPC. Reddit. Viral campaigns. Justin says, the future is now.

Justin finally shuts the fuck up and opens the floor for Q&A. I raise my hand and say, “What if the customer doesn’t have a cell phone?”

Everyone in the room burst out laughing.

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha. #stoneage

I say, “What if a customer doesn’t have a social media account?”

ROTFLMAO. #retard

I say, "What if we're ruining the world with all this shit?"

The laughter dies down, and Justin with his pointillist face says, "Chillax dude, it's just business."

The terminal lights are flashing in every color and my ears are sweating under the pillowy soft ear cushions of my Voyager Focus headset. At Travel Go your earlobes sweat in style.

I'm back in my plywood coffin. Marty's at her desk. Here at the office we pretend it's just business between us. Last night Marty woke up screaming. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. She yelled. She startled me. Living with someone isn't like dating them. You've got to take in the whole package. The good, the bad and the boring.

Marty's into industrial goth. I'm no expert on the stuff so don't bite my head off, but from what Marty explained to me, it's a sort of a hybrid. You have goth, and you have rivetheads. Goth is a romantic punk offshoot. Rivetheads are militaristic with a post-apocalyptic feel. Rivetheads came from the eighties industrial music scene. Punk. Both groups cross-pollinated and birthed a new race: industrial goth.

Goths types are into beauty, poetry, femininity and sentimentality. Rivetheads are aggressive, scientific and political. Marty's a bit of both, which I like. I mean, you look at these people with the purple hair, and black leather and big-ass boots, and you think, this is one kick-ass fashion statement. Fashion press release. A fashion breaking news.

I'm cool with Marty and her goth stuff, except when she listens to her darkwave tunes full blast and its like holes being drilled in my head.

The good, the bad, and the drill bit.

I'm taking calls and shuffling reservations in my 6 × 6 cube, and I can't take any of it seriously. Not that I did in the past, but this is a new low. In six weeks, this world will be turned upside down because of me, because of what Marty and I did in Montreal. And I want to climb over my desk and scream it from the top of my lungs, but I can't. Daniel Drake's insisted on absolute secrecy. Drake says nothing's certain until the virus has propagated beyond the point of no return. Drake says the point of no return is two weeks after initial contamination.

Today is the last day of week two.

The other day I was sitting with Marty on her red jacquard sofa. No phones, no tablets, TV off. Plenty of time to talk. She opened up. "A bundle of papier-mâché bones wrapped in leathery blue skin. That was all that was left of her. Tubes popped from her every hole, and the morphine drip pretty much wiped her mind clean." Marty was talking about her mother's last days in the hospital.

My roommate Dave, remember him? The chemistry major wannabe drug dealer guy. Yeah, that guy. He told me that morphine is named after Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams. Morphine's cousin heroin was sold by Bayer in the late nineteenth century as cough syrup. They called it a miracle drug back then. You could buy it in pill form or as an elixir mixed with a glycerin solution. Good times.

Dave showed me how to make heroin.

Heat equal amounts of morphine and liquid coal tar in a glass container. Do not boil. Wait six hours and you get a brown powdery substance. Add warm water (and some chloroform

if you're looking for a pure color) and stir rigorously until fully dissolved. Filter the solution (you can use an old T-shirt) over a bowl. Mix in a dash of baking soda and filter the mixture some more until you end up with a brownish sludgy substance. End of phase one. Now add muriatic acid and Liqui-Char or Actidose. Let the mix settle for thirty minutes. Filter a couple more times. Add diluted ammonia and filter again until you get an almost solid white base. Now you're ready for the final step. Yippee. Dissolve your base with muriatic acid and acetone. Filter the solution (using a paper filter this time) over a metal bowl. Finally, allow the filtered liquid to evaporate and you're left with an off-white powder that Bayer calls *heroin*.

If anyone asks, just say you have a cough.

Morphine, heroin, and codeine all come from a single flower with four mauve petals. Sometimes the petals are white. The Sumerians called it *Hul Gil* or *the flower of joy*. Today they call it the opium poppy. This innocent flower with its grayish green stem and lobed leaves has killed more people than Christianity, Islam and Judaism combined.

Sometimes what kills you comes in small packages.

Marty said at times her mom would open her eyes and be confused about where she was or who she was with. It was either her mind or unbearable pain. They went with the former. Marty's dad couldn't take it and always found some excuse to leave the room. Not Marty though. Marty sat by her mom's side day and night. She caressed her corded blue arm and assured her she'd see her in Heaven far above. She told her not to worry, that she'd be strong. She told her how much she loved her. "I love you so much, forever I will."

Marty hid her tears. She didn't know if her mother could even see anymore, but she knew she had no problems with her ears, and sobbing wasn't what she wanted her mom to hear. So she locked up the tears and sung her baby tunes:

*Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and all.*

She sang all night, and when Marty shut her eyes, she dreamed of edges and blades, while machines hummed on and off pumping flowers of joy into her mom. And one night the machines played their tunes, but her mother danced no more. The nurse came in and told Marty her mother's soul had left the building. Marty kissed her mom on her shriveled lips and went straight home. That's when she grabbed her father's razor blades, locked herself in her room and drew grooves into her thighs. She hurt so much she could barely feel the cold steel slicing into her flesh. The next day she cut herself some more, and the next day, even more. She didn't want to hang out with her friends anymore and skipped many days of school.

One day when she was sitting sad and alone on the stone church steps, a girl with coal black lips, with skin white as snow, dressed in a black vinyl skirt, fish stockings and a black top, towered over her in big platform boots and asked, "What's wrong?"

Marty opened up and told her everything. The stranger in black then hugged her right there on the stairs. And for the first time since her mom's death, she cried. Not even when they buried her mom did she cry. Not even when her dad

wept did she flinch. The girl in black hugged her tight, tight, tight and Marty cried, cried, cried. The church steps flooded with her tears, and when her eyes finally dried, the vinyl angel pulled black lipstick from her bag and painted Marty's lips coal black, turning her into a baby bat.

The next day she went to Hot Topic and painted her wardrobe black. At school no one said anything to her face, but after she went black, she stopped getting tagged. Friends called her a faker. They said it was all an act. Then came the fake online social media accounts. Teens cloaked in pixels said she was a witch. They scorned her and cursed her and mocked her to no end. They photoshopped pictures of her doing crack. They taunted her, banished her from their hangouts and wished for her to die. Every morning she'd wake up in bed with her phone buzzing with death.

Die witch.

Die witch.

Die witch.

They called her *the fat ass bitch with no class*. Until one day, she stood in front of the mirror and carved DEATH on her thigh, and with hot blood running down her leg, she snapped a picture and sent it back.

That was the last time they messed with her.

Kids will call you crazy, but won't dare if you really are.

Marty told me all of this in one go and she cried. And like that church girl did, I held her tight, tight, tight and told her no matter what, I'd be there for her. I was falling for Marty hard,

harder than a gazillion Justin Bieber Twitter fans ever could. And with Marty taking over my mind, I'd already forgotten half the names of my so called Facebook *friends*. Sometimes, you only realize the worthlessness of something when it's gone.

In case you forgot, I'm still in my cube. Bob and his four-sided red tie steps into my plywood casket and taps on my back and says, "Great job on that report."

"It was all Martha," I say.

"That's not what Martha says. Don't sell yourself short."

This isn't the first time Marty's stuck up for me. You know how I give clients the runaround? I wondered out loud to her the other day why none of that shit surfaced when we did the audit back in Montreal. "Who do you think sends the office audio files to the server farm?" Turns out Marty had been editing my recordings before they got stacked in the server racks. She'd been cleaning my shit for years. If any of my uncut recordings had made their way to Bob, I'd have been canned a long time ago.

Turns out she cared too much for me to let that happen.

That's how cool this girl is. As special as they come.

My angel in black.

I'm staring at the twinkling stars in the fold of night. She's typing something on her phone. This is one of these rare nights when you can see the stars in the night sky. This is one of these nights where everyone feels like being in a penthouse above the clouds. One, two, three, four, five—unless I double counted I think I counted a good dozen glistening dots in the infinite darkness of space.

They say in September you can see the constellation Capricornus with the naked eye. Capricornus is Latin for sea-goat. A mythical creature with the head and body of a goat and the tail of a fish. In Greek mythology, the god of time, Chronos, created Pricus, the father of the sea-goat race. Both Chronos and Pricus can manipulate time. I studied Greek mythology in my ancient civilizations class. Sea-goats can think and speak like humans do, and they're wise and beloved by the gods. The legend is, Pricus' children were drawn to the shore where they used their front legs to pull themselves up to bathe in the sun. But, there was a catch. The longer they stayed in the sun, the closer to regular goats they would become. Their fish tails would become hind legs, and they'd lose their ability to think and speak. They'd transform into regular dull earth goats roaming in land. In time, they all did.

Pricus was heartbroken after losing his children to the shore, so he used his power to reverse time, and everything went back to where it was. Pricus' sea-goat children were all back swimming in the sea, oblivious to their past fate onshore. Only Pricus knew the truth. He tried to warn his children and forbade them from setting foot onto the shore. But no matter what he did, the sea-goats always ended up finding

their way to land and transforming into dumb goats. No matter how many times he reversed time, he'd always end up alone, until he gave up and asked Chronos to let him die so he wouldn't spend eternity underwater alone. Chronos refused and instead sent Pricus to live his immortality in the sky where he could see his dumbled down goat children wherever they were.

And she's typing something on her phone.

My baby sister. Like I said, I don't see her much anymore. We were real tight when we were young. We'd huddle together on the sofa and pull all-nighter X-Files marathons. Our big sister called us Mulder and Scully. I remember my little sis and I were once messing around with the video camera in the garage. I played the Cigarette Smoking Man, but I'd never smoked, so when I took a puff, I choked and the cigarette slipped and landed on a rag soaked with paint thinner and caught fire. My sis dropped the camera and ran for the garden hose and sprayed me, the rag, and the entire damn garage to put the fire out.

And there I was still choking and dripping wet and standing in a pool of muddy garage grease and my sis snickered and said, "Smoking's bad for you."

She was a real smart ass, but I loved her. Still do.

I took my little sis for dinner the other day because she sounded down and broken on the phone. Her boyfriend Mark hooked up with an ex on Facebook and before she knew it she was dumped and stewing alone with her phone at home. I took her to Denny's before we hit English Bay.

My sister collects messages people inscribe on brass plaques on benches. She takes a picture of the engraved message, whenever she comes across a bench with a plaque. We're sitting on a bench now that reads, "Jim Addison 1948 - 2013. I Came Back as a Bench." She knows where all the good ones are. Once in a while she'd email me pictures of funny plaques she'd seen. The last one said, "In Memory of Roger Bucklesby, Who Hated This Park and Everyone in It."

And she's on her phone. She looks glum and tired and pissed. She didn't even touch her chicken strips back at Denny's.

"Why don't you put down that stupid thing?"

"I don't want him to think I'm weak. I have to keep posting and tweeting and stuff. If I go cold turkey, he'll think I'm crying in my bed."

Animated, she says, "Can you believe it? This bitch Trisha unfriended me after me and Mark split up! I thought we were friends!"

I've had enough. I wrestle with her to confiscate her phone. She resists, but she has no chance. After securing the phone, I say, "Repeat after me: I'm not my social feed."

She stares at me, eyes and mouth open wide like I'm some nutjob.

I say again, "Repeat after me: I'm not my social feed."

She echoes, "I'm not my social feed."

"I'm not my social reel."

She echoes, "I'm not my social reel."

"I'm not my tweets."

She echoes, "I'm not my tweets."

She says, "What's gotten into you?"

Holding on to her phone, I say, "Your life's been hijacked by geeks in hoodies and jeans. They don't give a shit if you're living your dreams or your life's falling apart at the seams. They just want you checking and clicking and hooked up on dopamine. They want to social engineer your life. They want to curate your feelings and position you *just right* for that perfect ad. The more you live through them, the more life they suck out of you."

And I say, "Repeat after me: I'm not how many followers I have."

She echoes, "I'm not how many followers I have."

"I'm not how many online friends I have."

She echoes, "I'm not how many online friends I have."

"I'm not how many Likes I get."

She echoes, "I'm not how many Likes I get."

She says, "But if I disconnect, I'll miss out on what's going on."

"If you don't disconnect, you'll miss out on your life, and when you look back at that made up social media reel of your life, you'll feel hollow and bitter inside. Your pixelated friends don't care if you live or die. They'll only remember you if you Like their pics, and they'll ditch you for that next click. You

can text and laugh and share links and snaps, but at the end of the day, you're still alone with a phone in your hand. Little sis, real life doesn't happen on screens. Tuck this thing deep into your purse and you won't miss a thing."

And she looks at me with pondering eyes. My baby sister has these deep, deep eyes. When they look at you, you feel like you've been wrapped in words inside your mind. I look into her eyes and she's looking into mine with these bleary eyes like she wants to hug me and lie in my lap, and she says, "Can I have my phone back now, please?"

As I relinquish the phone, I say, "I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"This Halloween, I don't want you to look at your phone. Hide it really well, and whatever happens, stay at home. All day."

"What for?"

"I can't explain why, but I'm dead serious. Promise me you won't use your phone and you'll stay home. I want you to promise me. Say you promise?"

"I promise."

I tell her we've sat on Jim long enough. We go on walking and talking all the way to Morton Park where there's fourteen of these bronze barefoot men about ten feet tall, with ear to ear grins and reddish brown skin shimmering in the light of passing cars.

My sister slips her phone into her purse and frolics around, mimicking the giants and making funny faces, bending her knees and stretching her arms and contorting her waist. I'm looking at her and I reflexively reach into my pocket to take a photo and share it online, and when I press against my thigh where my phone used to rest, I start laughing as hysterically as these enormous mirthful brass men.

I'm still cracking up and my sister comes up to me and says, "I don't think I told you about that one: 'Rene Launer, 1916-1993, Who Liked to Sit Down!'" And now we're both bent double with laughter, our eyes tearing up, and we fall to the ground laughing by the giant toes of happy men.

This was the last time I saw my sister before I died.

Police, fire trucks, and ambulance sirens wailed on every corner with a Starbucks, which pretty much means every corner in town.

Out of the blue and for no apparent reason, thousands of Starbucks employees descended on their stores and began to destroy them. They carried sledgehammers, mallets, crowbars, axes, meat cleavers, shovels, baseball bats, spades, kitchen knives, and even a couple of scythes. The incensed Starbucks *partners* demanded the mermaid's head. They pounded and smashed and hacked up their place of employment with everything they had. A barista cut through a display case of blueberry scones and chocolate muffins with a chainsaw, sending sparks and smoke and glass and chocolate shrapnel everywhere. A shift supervisor emptied a nail gun on a Clover brewer, turning it into a steel porcupine. An assistant store manager blasted a storage room with a homemade flamethrower, and the scent of burned coffee beans with a subtle hint of cocoa and roasted nuts wafted throughout the neighborhood.

Macgyvering a homemade flamethrower isn't that hard. I used to build them with my cousin. Take a can of hairspray and a sturdy rubber band. Thick and large. Industrial grade. Find an L-shaped wall bracket and fasten it to the can. Use chewing gum to stick one of those magic relighting birthday candles to the tip of the bracket. Now you've got yourself a flamethrower. But if you really want a cool flamethrower, get yourself a high quality water gun, like a Super Soaker Scatterblast Blaster, and tie a flat metal bracket one inch from the nozzle, and then wrap the nozzle with tinfoil. Fill the reservoir with lighter fluid. Naphtha also works. Stick your

candle with gum on the tip of the bracket and you're in business.

By the time the black and green locusts were under control, nothing was left standing. Not a single intact chair, window, coffee press, cup, espresso maker, grinder, or teapot. All the mermaid logos were desecrated and trampled upon.

Vancouver was in total shock. Police in riot gear fanned out at major intersections. Too little, too late.

The media called it the Starbucks Revolts. It was a bloodless affair, except for the accidental burn and scratch here and there. The brakes of police cars squealed in front of broken windows and busted doors, but the damage was already done. The crazed staff dropped their makeshift weapons on the sticky skim milk-stained floors and surrendered on the spot. Clueless of what just happened. They walked with their hands on their heads and kneeled like prisoners of war. When the fires were put out, firefighting foam oozed out of burned out windows and doors powdered with cinnamon like frothy lattes bursting out of mugs.

#starbucksbaristasgoneinsane

That day at Travel Go, nobody could get any work done. Everyone was glued to their phones and tablets and smartwatches and computer monitors. Even the lonely relic of a TV in the rec room became a star attraction. Everyone typed one question. The same question. Why?

Why?

Why?

They asked why again and again. Only Marty and I had an inkling of who was behind it. Daniel Drake and his virus had something to do with it. Of that I had no doubt. But Drake was nowhere to be found, and we were left as baffled as everyone else as to what this all meant.

I'm emoji's I don't know what the fuck's going on face.

Some of our staff cried. Yes, they cried. I don't know if it was because of the chaos or because they'd just realized that that Grande Iced Coconut Milk Mocha they had yesterday was the last one they'd have for a very long time. That Venti Caramel Frappuccino with low fat soy milk is just a memory on Instagram now. That Skinny Cinnamon Dolce Latte, just a hashtag on Twitter.

Even I will miss my thick-cut slow-smoked fluffy egg topped with melted cheddar on a croissant breakfast sandwich, and my short Caffè Misto and its ristretto espresso shot in steamy milk.

I've never been a Timmy's man. Something about those fluorescent lights that takes the shine out of my coffee. Without my Starbucks I finally learned what the people in Aleppo must have felt.

Clients canceled their Travel Go reservations in droves. Our conversion rate went through the roof of a building turned upside down. One rumor was that terrorists were hell bent on throwing us into a caffeine-free hell. They've clearly gone too far. Red line. Some said this was the work of some sect or a cult of some kind, doing the type of mass brainwashing that only a few brands and Jihadists know how to do. Others said

labor unions were to blame. Pay the people a living wage, they said, or they'll take you off the stage.

No one suspected subliminal messages on cell phones. But I knew it. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. This has got to be the work of Daniel Drake. Marty and I've been used, abused and thrown out like a used condom. Not cool. But why the hell go through all this trouble just to trash a bunch of Starbucks coffee shops? What kind of revolution is this? I mean, unless the guy is making a killing with Tim Horton's stock, this whole thing smells of a stupid prank. #lame

Not everyone ran away from Van. The media was all over us. Thousands of reporters. They swarmed the city like hungry hyenas in cars and boats and trains and planes. The world's watching, they said. A major city without a single Espresso Con Panna, not even in Solo size. This was something they had to see with their own phones.

Better to spill coffee than blood, I say. Boston's got the tea revolution thing. We got the mocha thing.

Not everyone was as Zen about it as I was.

The Starbucks Revolts were troubled times. People overlaid their social media profile photos with white and green flags and #starbucksstandwiththee was trending like crazy. Roses were laid and paper hearts were drawn and sewn on big cardboard posters in front of shattered windows and broken doors. The city stood united with Starbucks' plight. The mayor, glum but superbly dressed, gave a resounding speech. "This city is stronger than their hate," he proclaimed and took the media on a city bicycle tour. He rode on two wheels, black designer suit and pink shirt and all. "Van is

open for business,” he said. Except for Starbucks stores of course.

The prime minister and his tucked away tattoo flew to the city and drove around in a long black motorcade before he stopped to lay a beautiful wreath of lavender gladiolus, pink Asiatic lilies, lavender chrysanthemums and pink mini carnations at the location of the first Starbucks that ever opened in Canada by the Seabus Skytrain Station. He threw his wavy hair around and said, “The world is watching and will be dazzled by the strength of this nation.” He went on and on. The CEO of Starbucks stood solemnly to his side, eyes steeped in tears.

I didn’t know what to do with all of this.

Marty didn’t take it well. Marty felt awful. She felt guilty for what she thought she’d done. I told her no harm had been done. I told her bailed out insurance companies would foot the bill. I held her arms, looked into her mascara lined eyes, and said, “Starbucks’ stock price will soar again, and they’ll be back serving a Nariño brew on Robson in no time. This isn’t the end of the world. These things happen.”

She didn’t buy any of it.

She brushed her hair by the edge of the bed and said, “I didn’t sign up for this. I didn’t sign up to see girls cry and jumpy caffeine-free guys.” She stroked the paddle brush through her dip-dyed purple and blue hair and said, “I only signed on to Drake’s plan because I wanted people to *be*.”

Marty wanted people to check out of the Cult of Me. She wanted to see their eyes again. She wanted to see people laugh and talk and walk like they did before a bunch of

greedy geeks catfished their souls. Instead, people were locked in their thin film cells more than ever before, updating and tweeting and texting and gramming vigil selfies amidst candles and taped paper hearts on walls of burned up coffee shrines.

“This revolution is a fucking joke,” she said.

And then it was a joke no more.

14

October eleventh.

7:03 a.m.

Seven hundred and fifty thousand pounds of fiber composite, steel, aluminum, and two hundred gallons of vacuum sucked human waste rushes and spirals and crashes down towards the heart of Vancouver at over twelve thousand feet per minute, demolishing and burning and bashing everything within a city block impact radius.

A flash of light. A massive explosion. The carpeted floor shakes under my feet and I'm thrown to the ground. A bookshelf topples over me. Windows crack, and the Venetian blinds swing and sway. I'm going to die. I'm alone. Marty had gone to stay with her father in Kamloops for a few days to recharge after the Starbucks Revolts. To power up. To forget.

One second you're taking in the sunshine by the living room window and the next you're sucking up carpet yarn, chewing on lint and tonguing dust mites.

Miracle on Smithe Street. The crumpled three-legged coffee table in front of the bookcase absorbed most of the impact. I manage to climb from under Marty's dystopian trilogies and my Simpsons and Star Wars figurines with only minor scratches.

Lucky \adj\

1. Prone to good fortune.
2. Succeeding through chance.
3. Homer Simpson.

I hastily put on my shoes and run towards the plumes as everyone runs the other way. I run until I get to Richards and Robson and stand in awe at the sight of a massive jetliner tail with its giant red maple leaf propped vertically on the roof of the Hermitage Hotel garden. Unreal. Down Robson I can see a pall of black smoke hover over orange and red raging flames three stories high. You'd think I'd walked onto the set of Independence Day. Mayhem. Inferno.

Hot wind blows in my face as I edge closer to the point of impact. Airplane crash. People screaming and bellowing and bleeding and burning everywhere. Surreal. A horror film in 3D. A man is crawling his way onto the searing cement with his arms, his legs lumps of smoking charred coal dragging behind. A woman walks haphazardly, her head covered in white dust and deep red blood, her face a cherry crumb pie. Down the street sooty flames feast on the Nordstrom building. Fendi Snakeskin trim leather shoes. Valentino calf leather bags and Badgley Mischka haute couture silk dresses fanning designer flames.

A body cleaved in two at the waist, right at the belt buckle, hangs from a tree. Straight cut jeans and ankle boots dangle from the blue polyurethane foam like a half mannequin in a department store. Last night's steak climbs up my esophagus. Bright yellow puke gushes out of my mouth. My nostrils. My face.

Shattered glass with every step, simmering pools of blood, gummy body parts. Arms and legs and torsos severed and twisted and pummelled and scorched, bursting like overdone pizza pops. Magazines and bras and pants and shirts and phones and toys scattered all over. Streets, buildings and cherry trees adorned with singed flesh and boiled blood.

Lines of cars fuming and painted black. First class suitcases wide open, inheritances spewed onto hot asphalt.

I smell grilled fatty pork mingled with burning jet fuel and acrid smoke smell. Chanel No. 5. A waft of Chanel No. 5 hits my nose. Citrusy. Floral. Soapy. My mom used to wear this. I look down. I'm standing on a broken Chanel No. 5 bottle, spilled over a torn Boeing 777 safety card. In the midst of this mayhem, I'm wrapped in my mom's arms. Sweet nightmare.

I stand in my Ecco shoes by the edge of a giant smoking crater of what used to be the Vancouver Art Gallery heritage courthouse building. Black smoke rolls over my head. Was this just an accident? Did Daniel Drake plan this? Did Marty and I cause this? I'm standing in Hell and thinking about how many souls I've condemned to Heaven. Soul Express. FedEx SameDay.

I'm emoji's eyes soaked with tears face.

At Travel Go half the staff hasn't shown up for work and the working half is sitting idle in a state of utter confusion and disbelief. The Starbucks Revolts were a walk in the park, a consommé to the main event, a warm-up quake.

This was the Big One.

Nine on the Richter scale.

In the rec room, CNN's on full blast. Forty planes crashed today. All out war's been declared. Plane wreckage has been found in Canada, the US, Russia, China, France, Germany, Sweden, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, India, Nepal, the

Pacific, the Atlantic. Everywhere. Not even the Arctic was spared.

This was no accident.

This was Daniel Drake's revolution and I helped make it happen. I was complicit in the death of thousands, and so was Marty.

This was murder. Mass murder.

Marty broke down in tears at the sound of my voice when I called her that morning. She was hysterical at the thought of us playing a part in what happened. I hid my thoughts, lied through my teeth and told her it was an unrelated terror attack or some freak accident. She wouldn't have it. She told me to find Daniel Drake and drill him for the truth. I told her to stay in Kamloops until things calm down. I promised her I'd find Daniel Drake.

Breaking News: President Trump Threatens to Use the Nuclear Option.

The world's boiling with rage. Martial law is declared on virtually every corner of the planet. Everyone wants revenge. They're thirsty for blood. The leaders of the free and oppressed worlds vow to strike with an iron fist. But nobody knows who to punch.

Breaking News: President Putin Puts Russia's Strategic Nuclear Deterrent on Alert.

At the corner of the rec room by the window sits a shell-shocked Bob looking outside. His marquee four-sided red tie crooked and off to the side. Red is perhaps not the ideal

choice for the occasion. His thick horn-framed glasses sit on the table in front of him, his arms pinned to his side. Dead man sitting. I walk over to him. "We'll get through this."

He gazes at me with blank bleary eyes. "Travel Go is finished."

"What do you mean 'finished'?"

"Air travel's banned. They're shutting us down until further notice. We're effectively out of business." Dead. Finished. Conversion rate 0%.

"Go home," he says and turns back to gazing dazedly out the window.

Bloodless revolution my ass. Pain and blood is all I see. Fucking Daniel Drake. Where the fuck is Daniel Drake?

I storm out of the office and head to the Shangri-La.

Half of downtown Vancouver is cordoned off with yellow tape. Buildings adjacent to the air crash site have been evacuated, including Marty's apartment building. My apartment building.

At the Shangri-La I zoom up to the clouds and a maid opens the door on the sixty-first floor. Daniel Drake's in his solarium smoking a Romeo and Julieta Cuban cigar in a Boomerang rocking chair. Not a worry in the world.

I walk into the glass room. Plumes of smokes slither in the distance, police and army helicopters hover around them like little flies circling a smoking hot carcass. Faint echoes of sirens dissipate into the bright blue sky. Daniel Drake

gestures for me to take a seat and offers me a cigar. I decline the cigar and sit in the nearest free chair. Another rocker. I sit, and Drake rocks his chair, staring out of the floor-to-ceiling panorama. He rocks and blows smoke rings that float like little white donuts in the air. Going from little thick-rimmed small donuts with small holes to bigger thin-rimmed donuts with big holes. A big pretzel. They dissolve, leaving a pungent sweet and tangy tobacco smell. He lowers his cigar and gently rolls it in the ridged crystal ashtray, carefully rounding the tip into a gray and black cone of ash.

I'm bewildered, flabbergasted, confused, and steaming at his blasé temper. Looking at him, you'd think, he's watching a rom-com in an open-air theater.

I drop any semblance of respect and I blurt out, "What the fuck, dude? What the fuck's happening?"

And he just pours more kerosene on my fire: "Did you know that sixty-two people own \$1.76 trillion dollars in wealth? This is more money than what the bottom 3.5 billion people own combined. Only sixty-two people. Think about that." It's like he's around a campfire and prattling under the stars.

"What's this got to do with anything?"

"In 2010, that number was three hundred and eighty-eight. In a couple of years, this number will dip into the single digits, and one day you'll wake up and find out that a single Silicon Valley wonder boy owns more money than all the rest of us combined." He scoffs and says, "That would be something, wouldn't it?"

Yak-Yak-Yak-Yak ... Yak-Yak-Yak-Yak

A VPD chopper with red, yellow and blue stripes flies by so close I can see the pilot and his big white helmet through the tinted teardrop-shaped cockpit glass.

Yak-Yak-Yak-Yak ... Yak-Yak-Yak-Yak

I can't hear myself think.

Yak-Yak-Yak-Yak, getting softer, Yak-Yak-Yak-Yak, getting fainter, and it's quiet. I turn towards Drake and say, "What does this yammering about billionaires have to do with what's going on?"

"It's got everything to do with what's going on," he says and floats a donut that goes chasing after the shrinking chopper in the distance. Bull's-eye. From where I sit, the chopper's positioned right in the hole of the big smoke donut.

The donut disappears.

Enough nonsense. I slide to the edge of my seat, the rocker leans downward, and I hammer Drake with questions: "Are we behind the Starbucks thing? Are we behind the fucking airplanes falling out of the sky? Are we responsible?"

He continues to rock back and forth in his chair and blows more smoke.

"Are we?" I raise my voice. "Are we?"

"The trick to making a cigar ring is to fully open your mouth once you're ready to release the smoke. Amateurs pucker up their lips and make a stupid fish face. You've got to open your mouth and jaw wide, but slow."

I've had enough. I stand up and walk over to him, lean over and force his chair still, both of my hands pinning his arms to the armrests, and I look him square in the eyes and say, "What the fuck, man? The world is burning and you're making smoke rings. Answer me, dammit. Did we do this?" My left arm and shoulder stretch back and point at the plumes of black smoke on the horizon. "Did we have something to do with this? Did we?"

He nods. "Yes, we have something to do with it." He twists his head left and blows a donut away from my face.

I now have him pinned to the chair and my head is spinning like the blades of that chopper. I had suspected as much all along, but there was this part of me that refused to believe that I was responsible for the death of thousands. The part of me that latched on to the possibility that the Starbucks staff and the planes were just your run of the mill terror plot. That part of me just went apeshit crazy, pushed over the edge, plummeting and now plastered all over the sidewalk. No bone left intact. Bone meal.

"Are you fucking serious? It's a fucking war zone out there. This isn't what we agreed upon." My spittle lands on his cheek, and his rocker jiggles as I shake.

He gently pushes away my hands. I let go and he wipes away my spit with the back of his hand. "Everything we agreed on is still in play."

"If what we agreed upon is in play, what the hell is going on?" Now I'm pacing and hovering around him like these choppers flying above the crash site.

"Technical tests, he says. "Those were technical tests."

I blow a fuse.

“Technical tests. Are you fucking kidding me? Are you telling me we killed thousands of people for tests?” I’m so incensed and shaken and distraught by Daniel Drake that I can’t look at his face anymore. I can’t even look out the window. I collapse back on my chair, and my mind goes blank looking down at the cigar ash in the crystal ashtray.

He leans over my way, puts his left hand on my knee, his expensive Breitling watch in my face, and says, “Look. We had to know how far people were prepared to go to execute the plan. Nobody’s attempted something like this before. We had to see if it works.”

I watch the rotating second hand go past the tiny eleven on the little date box, and I say with a broken voice, my head still down, “The Starbucks thing I can live with. The airplane crashes I can’t.”

“The Starbucks test was to see if we could target a specific organization. It worked like a charm. The airplane thing was to see if passengers could force a plane down. The test didn’t exactly go as planned.” He cups my chin with his hand and forces my head upward to look at him. “The plan was to force emergency landings. The goal wasn’t to kill thousands of innocent people. Something malfunctioned. I’m not a murderer. You’re not a murderer.”

I push his hand away and say, “Is this supposed to make me feel better?”

He blows a waft of smoke, no donuts this time. “This is war. What did you expect? It’s called collateral damage.”

The US Air Force *Intelligence Targeting Guide* defines the term “collateral damage” as the unintentional damage or incidental damage affecting facilities, equipment, or personnel, occurring as a result of military actions directed against targeted enemy forces or facilities. Such damage can occur to friendly, neutral, and even enemy forces.

He jumps up from his chair and says, “Let’s go for a short drive.”

The elevator cab hurries down to the underground parking. Drake and I stand in silence, broken only by a guy showing a girl a noisy video of himself getting wasted in Cancun on his phone.

We make it to Drake's blood red Mustang Shelby and nestle into the Recaro leather seats. Drake zooms us through the ongoing chaos to the intersection of East Hastings and Main Street, the poorest postal code in North America.

This place is usually crawling with cops. Not today. With the crash downtown, the human wreckage in this morbid ghetto is left to the dogs. Crackheads, coke whores, burned out junkies, the homeless and the disabled, mingle and roam the grimy asphalt, Walking Dead style.

We park next to a drunk sprawled across the sidewalk, lying in his own urine, his dick hanging out in the clear. Where is Thomas Ganter when you need him? #bppportraitprize. Knock knock. A haggard old woman with margarine sallow skin and dirty rags for clothes has made it to the Mustang on her walker. She's knocking on the driver's side window. Knock knock. She's rubbing her grubby thumb against her joined index and middle fingers, the typical gesture for money. Drake pulls out a twenty from his wallet, rolls down the window and hands her the bill. She throws him an ear to ear smile. Four of her upper teeth are missing.

There's dive bars, flop houses and dodgy characters everywhere. And they just saw what happened.

Drake rolls up the window, looks to me and says, "This is Van's human garbage dump. Where the greenest of cities

composts its rejects,” he says and tilts his head away. What are we doing here? Destitution porn comes to mind. Deprivation voyeurism. If I had my cell phone I’d be tweeting about human rights and equality. Virtue signaling bonanza. Holier-than-thou social media morality. #fakeoutrage

Down the street, a neighborhood tough in a velvet tracksuit breaks away from a huddle around a glass pipe and coaxes a dirty white pigeon into a corner by our car and starts stomping it. The pigeon coos and whimpers. CLACK. Its wings crack.

“Have you seen enough?” Drake asks me. “Have you seen enough?”

“This place isn’t news to me. It’s not like I didn’t used to live a couple of blocks from here. It’s not like I didn’t wait for the bus ten feet away from the stop because of the weirdos holding court there all day. It’s not like I wasn’t offered a hand job for the change in my pocket. It’s not like I didn’t walk on a heap of used syringes on my way to the grocery store. I wasn’t born yesterday. I get it dude. I get it.”

Daniel Drake is scrutinizing what’s happening outside. He turns and looks at me with his Romeo and Julieta cigar ash eyes and says, “You don’t get the half of it. You walk in the midst of these people and you say you don’t have it so bad. You figure you have a job, a roof over your head, a girlfriend, a good credit score, and you suntan on the beach two weeks a year. You feel so bad for these rejects, every Christmas you walk into a food bank and hand them your groceries. But what you don’t get is that what you see here is exactly what the tech billionaire class sees when they look at you.”

Knock knock. Another bum knocks. On the windshield this time.

Daniel Drake sneaks a peek at him and continues, “The shiny phones, the flashy apps, the flickering lights. These are their weapons of mass distraction. The baby rattles they wave in front of your eyes so you don’t see that you’re swimming in a pool of your own urine.”

Drake’s words are doing laps in my head at two hundred miles an hour like stock cars on NASCAR tracks. I’m hiding in my Nappa leather seat, and Daniel Drake’s words are custom-building my mind like a made to order drag racing car.

“They don’t want you to see your worthless smartphone drained life. They don’t want you to see their hoards of cash. They don’t want you to see their diamond encrusted yachts, their gold plated private jets and their stately estates.” He raises his voice. “So now why don’t you get over this little moral drama of yours, this misguided outrage and look at the big picture. What we are trying to do is bigger than forty planes. We are trying to save the world. We’re racing to reset the clock before they strap a VR headset on everybody’s head and turn us all into AA batteries powering their world.”

Drake’s words supercharge my soul, and my rage against the machine spikes and ignites like the engine of that F-18 Hornet Jet racing Daniel Ricciardo’s Red Bull car. I’m ready to follow Daniel Drake to the gates of hell. And he pulls a small folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and says, “Go to this address tomorrow at midnight. Make sure to wear a mask.”

“What kind of mask?”

“Any mask will do.”

Clamoring. I look around and our car is encircled by a horde of pallid-skinned half-dead half-stoned Walking Dead zombies. The news of a blood red Mustang dispensing twenty-dollar bills spread faster than hepatitis in a back alley. Howling and bawling Walkers close in on us, and bunched up against the windows, they start kicking the car. They want money. They want bills. They want it now. I see crowbars. Baseball bats. Fuck. I look at Daniel Drake. He’s calm. Composed. Centered. He honks the horn. And again. And again. His ash gray eyes sparkle like two droplets of seething mercury, and with his foot on the brake he floors the gas, the engine roars and the tires squeal against the road, sending sparks and smoke into the air. The mob hastily retreats. He lets go of the brakes, and we launch out of the hairy asshole of Beautiful British Columbia like a bullet from the barrel of a gun.

She stands by the sink, her fingers gripping the black polymer handle of a *Shun Sora* kitchen knife. She leans over the sink, the stainless steel rippled pattern edge of the knife pushing against the blue veins of her wrist. The licorice black nail polish on her thumb is chipping off. I know this knife. I gave it to her as a housewarming gift. The word *Shun* is Japanese for eating food only in its proper season, when it's at its peak flavor. *Shun* is perfection. *Sora* means sky. *Shun Sora*. Perfect Sky.

Marty sobs and her nose runs and sniffles. "I killed all these people. I deserve to die." Weeping, she says, "This isn't some cry-for-help display. Murderers like me don't deserve to live." The black mascara under her indigo eyes run down her cheeks like Exxon's Valdez oil sheens.

Marty stormed the condo last night at five in the morning just as I fell asleep. The Mounties wouldn't let me back home until four. I waited all night slouched on a chair at McDees looking at a life size replica of Ronald McDonald. Back in Kamloops, Marty couldn't take it anymore. The guilt nibbled at her soul like termites in a wooden house. She wanted to see me one last time, so she jumped in her secondhand Honda civic and drove under the stars. She drove all night on Highway 5 back to Vancouver. She drove through the police check points and the ongoing uproar until dawn, when she got to our building, exhausted and distressed.

With her left arm stretched over the sink, her right hand clasping the knife, she says, "Tom, we've made a big mistake. We've been played by a homicidal lunatic and I don't how to make things right."

Marty's doing her suicide thing. She's uttering her last words and I feel like I should be writing something down. Instead I'm just standing there barefoot and half asleep on the hardwood in my briefs playing one of those Suicide Helpline volunteers. "Marty, this wasn't supposed to happen. This was an innocent mistake."

"Tell this to the charred bodies at the morgue," she yells and pushes the knife deeper against her delicate skin, and the way it sinks in is like a knife pressing on a soufflé. My heart lurches.

No one trains you for this. "Listen, Marty. I love you. Slicing your wrist won't solve anything. It won't bring anyone back to life." She eases her grip and her soufflé skin swells back up, and I'm feeling good about this. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Forget about Drake, forget about his revolution."

I hit a tripwire. "How the hell can I forget?" she yells and pushes the knife back down, and her skin arches inward again. A purple and blue dipped lock of hair slips from behind her ear and bounces across the snow white of her cheek.

Minedfield. One wrong word and her ulnar artery is sliced spaghetti alla bolognese style. One wrong vowel and she's spewing hot Marinara sauce all over the sink.

And people volunteer for this?

We've been standing here for god knows how long, bouncing pro-life and pro-harakiri words back and forth until the sun rises and a ray of sunlight crosses the living room, beams through the open kitchen and falls onto Marty's *Shun Sora* before ricocheting into my eyes. I squint, and I'm scared stiff.

I'm scared if I move an inch, she'll slit her wrist. I stand there stiff as a corpse in my royal blue Calvin Klein undies, the light blinding my eyes, my feet numb and cold. And I say, "Listen, you wanted to do a good thing. You wanted to free people, to give them their life back. Don't punish yourself and those who love you for a lousy mistake." My eyes water and my voice break. "Please baby don't hurt yourself, please don't, please, please, please."

And she lets the knife go.

I run to her and hug her tight, tight, tight and she sobs on my chest. Her hot tears slide down through my curly chest hairs down to my belly button and down to the C and K woven onto the waistband of my briefs.

I walk Marty slowly to the bed and sit by her side until she calms down. I tell her about what Drake had said, about the tests, the technical malfunction and the collateral damage, about an unjust world and how a bunch of billionaires are taking us for a ride. I explain that what's happening is way bigger than both of us, that we're at the dawn of a new world, that history will look back at us and hail us as unsung heroes. I tell her Daniel Drake is fighting for a just world. And Marty's listening to every word in total silence. She hasn't blinked an eye. She lets me speak until I have nothing more to say. When I shut up, she turns to me and says, "Whatever you're doing with him, whatever you want to do with him, I don't want to hear about it, I don't want to think about it. I'm done. Drake can take his revolution and shove it up his ass, and if you're smart, you'll walk away from all of this now, too." And just before she hides under the cotton flannel sheets, she says, "Nothing good will come of this."

I've lost Marty.

This is when we stopped seeing eye to eye. I want more Daniel Drake. She wants none. I want to change the world, and Marty wants to hide under a blanket in bed. Marty says collateral damage is just a made up term invented by generals and warmongers to justify slaughter and mayhem. She says I shouldn't let my soul be collateral damage in Daniel Drake's bloody war.

After I tuck her into bed, I head out to Dressew to buy a mask. And although I won't wear it at home, from now on, I'll always be looking at Marty from behind a mask.

I'm emoji's collateral damaged soul.

It's chilly and just after midnight. It's dark and I'm standing in front of an unmarked metal door at 437 West Pender Street, holding the string of a V4V mask in my hand. It's pitch black except for the faint light coming from a dim bulb above an old intercom. I stretch my arm and press the cracked translucent square button below the microphone. Nothing happens. I press again. Nothing. I walk back to the sidewalk and look down the street. It's deserted. Just a handful of subdued streetlights shimmering in the silent night.

Is this the right address?

White noise. I hear crackling white noise coming from the intercom. Someone's listening from the other end of the microphone. I walk back to the intercom, press the button and say, "*Sine Metu.*" Drake told me to say this. The intercom cuts off.

A sharp buzzing sound springs from the steel door. I push it open, and I'm facing a poorly lit, steep and descending stick-narrow staircase. I strap on my mask, go through the door and carefully climb down the steps. The door hinges back and closes behind me. I can barely see anything now. I make my way down one step at a time, my hands gripping the cold rough walls on both sides. The steps below my feet creak like an old ship being tossed around in a storm. The creaking and the sound of my own Darth Vader style heavy breathing under my mask is the only thing I can hear. I climb down some more, and there's a lonely flame flickering at the bottom of the stairs.

I reach the bottom, the stairs stop squealing and my shoes hit a hard, rough, rotted floor. A candle on a wooden sconce hangs on a cobblestone wall. I see two chase doors to my right, their eye-level, square windows blackened out, and it feels like I'm in the catacombs. I take a deep breath through the two small nose holes and push the chase doors wide open.

Now I'm in an obscure hallway, pitch black at the vanishing point. I let go of the doors behind me and make my way down the corridor along the rough stone floor. The air feels cool, damp and still, like a wine cellar. I pace forward until I see the silhouette of a man sitting at a desk by the end of the hall in front of another set of doors. I wave and say, "Hello?" He doesn't reply. I keep walking. I hear chattering. The noise gets louder the closer to the man I get. I'm close enough now to make out a lamp mounted on the desk and an outline of a large man in black sitting behind the desk wearing a plain white mask. Few feet behind him, there is another set of black chase doors.

I'm at the end of the hall. The white mask asks, "Number?"

I don't know of any number. I reach in my pocket for Drake's note and I lean it towards the light. I see a number. "Twenty-three."

The white mask checks his clipboard. He flips his eyes back up. "Is this your first time?"

"Yes."

He takes a pen and writes "C23" with a blue pen on a self-adhesive nametag. He hands it to me. It reads, *Hello my name is C23*. I stick the tag on my navy blue polyester jacket,

and the white mask hands me a clipboard with a typed document clipped to it and says, "Sign this."

It's a legal disclaimer. I can hardly make out the small print in the dark. I bend closer to the lamp, and I can only make out a few lines: No cell phones allowed. No word of what happens here can ever be uttered outside. Something to the effect that I'm here at my own risk, and that I forfeit all my rights to legal recourse, blah blah blah. Fine print. IBM xenon fine. Sucks to be on the receiving end.

He offers me a pen. I hesitate for a second. Should I listen to Marty and walk away from Daniel Drake and his schemes?

No.

I pick up the pen and sign my name on the dotted line. I hand him back his clipboard and pen. He takes them, walks to the chase doors, and pushes a door open. I walk in.

I'm standing in a vestibule and there's another candle on a carved wood sconce, and to the right at arm's length, yet another set of black chase doors. It's like I'm walking inside a Russian nesting doll. I hear cacophonous chattering and can feel the presence of a great many people on the other side. This must be it. I push the doors open.

A large cobblestone hall. Dozens of pendant lamps hang from between the ceiling's crisscrossing ducts and pipes. The place is full, many people, and they're mingling in Halloween costumes. A mesh of jeans, suits, long dresses and masks. Many masks. Scary masks, fashion masks and masquerade masks in every color and every shape. I melt into the crowd, and I only see eyes. Amber, green, blue, grey, and hazel eyes shifting and leering behind masks. I look to the end of the

hall and I see red velvet drapes dropped down onto a stage, where a cone of light floods a wooden lectern in front of a row of black folding chairs.

This is either a Halloween party out of sync or a ball of a secret society with an eclectic dress code. Something is missing though. There's no music. Just tongues fluttering behind masks.

I stand there and I feel weird and out of place. I'm hiding in the darkness between the round cones of light shining from the hanging lamps overhead. And from the obscurity, I see fuzzy red hair, a red nose, and glossy black eyes staring at me. A man in a clown mask gazes at me, and I feel naked and exposed behind my mask.

This revolution's turned into catacombs and circus clowns.
#WTF

The glossy-eyed clown turns away and the room grows quiet. A man dressed in an ankle-length black overcoat and a golden half mask with a long crooked nose walks to the podium under the cone of light.

Medico della Peste.

Hundreds of years ago, when Venice was hit with the bubonic plague, a French doctor came up with the idea of a mask with a long crooked nose. He filled the nose with spices, camphor and pungent herbs. The idea was if you masked the repugnant smell of the dead and dying, you wouldn't contract the disease. They called it the Venetian *Medico della Peste* mask. I'm not sure what happened to the French doctor, but I'm guessing rosemary and curry didn't do the trick.

The man and his crooked nose and buttoned up overcoat and glittering silver eyes picks up a small mallet and strikes the gavel twice. The remaining murmurs die away as the chairs behind him fill with men in black wearing bird masks. White owl feathers and red rims masks, black raven feather half masks, latex full head eagle masks, wood-carved hawk red tailed masks. *Medico della Peste* begins, "We stand here today not because we want to, but because we have to. We stand here not because we want to destroy, but because we want to build. We stand here not because we want to rule, but because we don't want to be enslaved."

I recognize the gravely wondrous voice. It's Daniel Drake.

"They have left us no choice. They have left us no choice, but to rebel. They have left us no choice, but to rise up and take our dignity back. This world they have made is theirs, not ours. Its time we take it back."

The room clamors and cheers in approval.

"Halloween marks the day when the boundary of this world and the world of the dead breaks down. It is the day when the spirits of the dead come into this world. We are the spirits, and they are the world." He pauses, and resumes, "Halloween is the day the dead will come undead."

Daniel Drake's words bounce between the dark stone walls like orbs of light. His words chirp from under his beak and the crowd is galvanized. Electrified. "Halloween is the day we burn all our masks."

Queen is my dad's favorite rock band. We listened to their albums in the car so much I learned the lyrics by heart. I see masks, and I think of everyone hiding under their social

media masks. I see masks, and I think of Queen. When you put on a mask, you can become anyone. Everyone is the Great Pretender. I hear Freddie whispering in my ears,

*Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell*

A projector screen descends from the ceiling and unfolds under projector lights. A blood red smiley face flashes onto a black background. It's an emoji with an ear to ear Joker style grin. Underneath reads Operation Clock Zero in red. The birdmen in the back rise up from their chairs, and Drake says, "The Rebel Council will walk you through the plan."

Daniel Drake's structured his rebellion like an army. Every major city has a general and a Rebel Council at the top, field commanders and soldiers at the bottom. Daniel Drake's spent the last two years preparing for this. Travel Go and Marty and I are but a tiny last minute addition to this global jigsaw puzzle. And right there, listening to the talking birds, standing between Freddy Krueger and Chucky, I realize how massive this thing is. Daniel isn't taking the cell towers down. He's taking the whole internet down. He's taking all communication down. By the time he's done, cell towers, telephone exchanges, satellite relay stations, server farms, fiber optic cables, dark fiber networks, submarine cable landing points— they'll all be gone. Poof. Out of order. Broken. Burned. Sabotaged. Daniel Drake is cloistering the world into small enclaves so he can take it down. Daniel Drake is gunning for the world. And history will be kind to him, as he intends to rewrite it.

I'm emoji's cold sweat face.

The birds retreat back to their folding seats, and a woman in a long turquoise dress, a gold bunny mask and two long pointy ears walks to the podium. "If you have a C on your nametag, come and see me after our last agenda item to receive your assignment."

Assignment? What assignment?

She steps away from the podium, and two musclemen in black with pig masks come out from behind the curtains dragging a man by his arms. He's shirtless and his pants are torn. Blueberry bruises cover his skin. Two black tennis balls where his eyes used to be. They drag him along, and the crowd opens up to make room for them, pair of scissors style. The two pigs and their swill move to the center of the room under a hanging cone of light.

Dead silence. Daniel Drake and his crooked gilded nose walks up to the lectern as a pig pulls an M9 from his pants while the other pins the right arm of the limped man to the ground. Timberland boots. Everything looks choreographed. A flash and BANG! The sound of the shot echoes throughout the room and the swill shrieks. The M9's made a nine millimeter hole in the back of the pinned man's hand. Blood gushes out and seeps in between the rough stones on the floor under rubber soles and stiletto heels. The cone of light above the swill goes out. At the stage, Daniel Drake strikes his mallet and raises a cracked cell phone in his hand. "We found this in this scum's pocket. Let this be a lesson to traitors."

He and the Rebel Council in their bird masks walk away from the podium and vanish behind the red velvet folds.

The stage goes dark.

The two pigs grab the hapless man by his armpits and drag him out of the room, his bleeding hand dragging by his side, and leaving a trail of deep red in its path.

Too real is this feeling of make-believe

Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal

I'm emoji's shitting my pants face.

250 PTN. Mist silver Maserati.

467 GBN. Arctic white Bentley.

I've been writing down licence plate numbers in a little brown notebook all day long. In Vancouver you don't have to look far, there's a million dollar car on every block. I'm doing my assignment. Turns out my assignment is to walk around town and scribble down licence plate numbers of luxury cars. Some assignment. Don't they have this in a database somewhere?

812 CKA. Raven black Masybach.

017 UTS. Vintage gold Jaguar XJ.

After the pigs exited the stage, I went looking for the bunny to get my assignment. When I found her, she eyed my nametag, pulled me aside and told me that after the revolution we're going to collect the city's priciest cars and give them to the homeless. She said the city's full of our people, they're scouting for grandiose villas, yachts, designer dresses and diamond rings. She said this city has luxury shoes and bags made from the skin of more endangered species than a nature preserve. Water snake Manolos. PMK Brooklyn Zoo Air Jordans. Fendi Baguette. Hermès Birkin. You name it. She said, after the revolution, valuables will be collected, cataloged and indexed like they do on server farms, and then handed to the needy—those born with a scrap metal spoon in their mouth.

This wasn't just happening in Vancouver. She told me, down south in Palo Alto, a social media tycoon villa is going to be

razed and turned into a community garden. And the four houses surrounding it will be turned into social housing. She said, deep in the Pacific, a tech mogul's private Hawaiian Island is going to be turned into a nature reserve for ex-billionaires. No poaching allowed. Ex-tycoons skin trafficking will be severely punished.

New York's Trump Tower's is going to be turned into a free Ivy League college, and Mukesh Ambani's skyscraper home in Mumbai will be converted into a free public hospital. The keys to Prince Alwaleed Jeddah's tower luxury condos will be handed out to South Asian slave laborers, and the Triple Deuce Superyacht is going to be turned into a marine life research vessel.

She told me, Daniel Drake says this world's been taken from the poor to bailout the rich. Time to try it the other way around. Flip history. She said Daniel Drake doesn't want to rule, he just wants to give the world a second chance. She said Daniel Drake already pledged all his wealth to the revolution.

And just before she let me go, she said, "Don't get the wrong idea. This is no Red October. This is no communist revolution. This is a one-time re-shuffle. A single reset."

917 ZWT. Sierra blue Bugatti.

768 YTN. Firecracker red Ferrari.

It's freaking cold. Arctic blast cold. My nose makes smoke eddies and my hands are blue like a corpse in a morgue fridge. I'm not wearing gloves because I can't write anything with them on. I jot down numbers and hurry my throbbing hands back to the warmth of my pockets.

Travel Go is closed until further notice. That notice is never coming. Travel Go is done, they just don't know it yet. I told Marty I was going out to look for a job. Liar. I've been scouting all day, I must've collected over a hundred licence plate numbers.

Now the sun's gone down, so I call it a day and start walking home. I'm walking home and a black panel van with tinted windows comes racing to the curb and squeals to a stop. Three men in black wearing balaclavas jump out and grab me and shove me into the van. Sly and swift ninja style. They put a black hood over my head and BAM! Something hard slams against the back of my head and I'm out.

Black.

I wake up and it's pitch black. I open my eyes and it's so dark I can't tell whether my eyes are open or still shut. The back of my head feels like it's being hammer drilled. I reach back to feel it. It's tender. My hair's gritty like it's frosted with dry blood. My ass cheeks feel frozen solid under my jeans. Rough cold floor. Feels like concrete. I grope around and feel something mushy and cold crawling under my fingers. I yank my hand back and jump up quickly on my feet. Dizzy. I sway left and right until I slowly retain my balance on my feet.

Where the hell am I?

I lean back against the wall and wait in the dark, freaked out from whatever's crawling on the floor. Something wiggles against my shoes and I start stomping around in the blackness like a mad man until something crunches under my sole. Roach pop. I keep stomping all over the place and I hear

pops like I'm stepping on bubble wrap. I stomp until the floor pops no more.

I'm leaning against a rough wall. Total darkness screws with your mind big time. It fucks up your sense of time. I can't tell how much time has passed. You open and close your eyes and it's all the same. It's so dark in here you'd think you were cast to the edge of space, or buried miles down where no one will ever get to you. I've got a cramp in my legs and aching pain in my feet. I must've been stuck in here for hours.

I'm emoji's going mental face.

I shout and scream and call out for someone. Nothing. I lean back against the wall and wonder how big this place is? And I slowly pace forward and feel around with my hands. I make a dozen or so small steps. A few pops here and there till I get to another wall. I turn at a ninety degree angle and keep going. Pacing slowly and popping roaches. I'm in a square room. Around ten by ten feet. And there's a tightly shut steel door.

I can't see or hear anything. I think I got all the roaches though. This silent darkness is slowly driving me insane. And I get this strange sensation that my blood is boiling inside. It's like my veins are a shaken bottle of champagne. What I want to do now is rip my clothes off. I brush it off. I'm thinking all of this is just my brain. I've never done drugs, but this is what taking Flakka must feel like.

Back in college Dave told me about a drug called Flakka. Sometimes called Gravel because it looks like the gravel in a fish tank. Others call it Total Mind Melt, or Powdered

Psychosis. Dave said when people take this shit they just go batshit crazy. He told me about a guy and his girlfriend popping two Flakka pills one night. The guy went running naked in the street, and the police caught him three hours later trying to fuck a tree. The girl was found rolling naked in the dirt claiming she was Satan. Dave said Flakka is just bath salts on steroids. You can eat it. Vape it. Snort it. Inject it. Even push it up your ass. Dave said the active component in the drug is called Alpha PVP. It floods your brain with dopamine. Gives you this off the charts euphoria, plus the occasional paranoia. Dave said a guy taking Flakka tried to break down the doors of a police station. Told the cops he was being chased by aliens.

Dave said a dose of the stuff is cheaper than a Big Mac. Dave said if he breaks bad he'll call his home grown Flakka, Happy Meal.

Two more roaches crack under my feet. I've now smashed so many roaches, the ground under my feet feels greasy and smells like a clogged drain.

Krokodil was the drug Dave really wanted to make. They call it that because it makes your skin green and scabbed like a crocodile. Dave said a high dose would turn your flesh into goop before it falls off and brings out your cream white bones.

He said Krokodil was just cheap heroin.

You mix codeine, paint thinner, gasoline, muriatic acid, iodine and red phosphorous from the tip of a match in a glass flask and cook the mixture for thirty minutes till you get a foul murky yellow brew that looks like squash soup. Needle the

soup to your veins, and you got yourself a two-hour heroine high for next to nothing.

Dave said if we break bad we should go for mass market drugs. He said there's way too much competition at the top. He said the money's in dealing cool new drugs to Joe six-pack. "Imagine if we could get a zillion people hooked on the stuff," he mused. "We'd be talking unicorn money."

Dave always said if I hit a dead end, he'd have me working for him in his parent's basement.

My mind swings between insanity and paranoia. Someone must be watching me. Maybe they have night vision cameras. Maybe they're watching me pace around in my cage. I start goofing around. I start making those funny faces and awkward poses like those giant men in Morton Park. I keep posing and monkeying around for the cameras until I give up and retreat back to the wall. I'm leaning against the wall again. And what I really want to do now is fucking pee.

Light.

Blinding light.

The steel door rattles and opens, and my cell floods with light. Too much light. I cover my eyes with my hand, and real slow, I spread my fingers apart to see what's in front of me. Squinting, I can make out two guys with balaclavas over their heads standing at the door. They're big and tall, dressed in black like Slender Man twins on Dianabol. They storm in, grab me by the collar of my shirt and drag me out of my cell and through a hallway. More bright light. I'm shoved into a room with a steel table and two chairs. A bare light bulb hangs by a wire overhead. No windows. I must be in some kind of

concrete bunker, miles deep underground. One of those bunkers you only read about in books or see in movies. Where the likes of the KGB and the Stasi hauled political dissidents before they disappeared, before no one ever heard from them again.

“Sit in that chair over there,” one of them says, pointing at the chair furthest from the door. I make my way there and sit. The other one closes the door. I can open my eyes a little bit more now, and I can see the two ninjas flanking the door in a military attention position. Heels together, toes pointing out at a forty-five degree angle, heads erect, faces straight, arms pinned to both sides. A gun holstered at the thigh. Everything about them is black except for their sparkling hawk eyes.

My head hurts, and my bladder feels like a giant balloon ready to pop. “I’ve really got to go. Is there a washroom I can use?”

The door swings open. A stubbled face man with tucked jeans and a powder blue shirt with rolled up sleeves storms in. His eyes cut out from the same blue of his shirt, his hair copper dust brown. A magazine model but for that hook-shaped snout. Gonzo comes to mind.

Gonzo pulls up a chair across the table. “I’m Captain Martin Phillips, Anti-Terrorism Special Action Unit.” He pulls out a badge and flashes it in my face. His polished teeth wrap around inside his mouth like a pearl necklace. “We know you’ve been involved in a terrorist plot to destroy this country’s communication infrastructure. We know it’s going to take place soon. We want to know the exact targets and the exact time and who’s exactly behind it?”

That's three exacts. Gonzo likes precision.

The average human bladder holds between 14 and 20 ounces of piss. That's as big as a Grande vanilla latte. On average a person produces 50 ounces of a piss a day. That's around three Ventis. The math is simple. Fifty ounces a day of piss, sixteen ounces in average storage capacity. This means you've got to pee at least three times a day. Bladder bursts are a myth. If you hold your pee for too long, your bladder will override your brain, and you'll have a hot latte spill in your boxer shorts.

If you're holding it until you finish this chapter, put the book down and go take a leak. I'm not going anywhere. I'll stall the cop till you come back. I promise.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

Captain Martin Phillips gazes at me intently with his powder blue eyes. I can't make out his facial expression. Not sure if he has another question or he just wants to punch me in the face. He says, "Listen, we are way past I don't know. We have evidence, pictures, testimonies. We're out of time. The faster you co-operate, the better it'll be for you."

I don't know why or how or where I found the courage to say, mockingly, "Is that so?"

And Gonzo explodes like those exploders I cherished back at Travel Go. “Do you think this is a fucking joke?”

I think I know why I taunted him. When we were kids, my big sister was a bitch. Not anymore, but she sure was back then. Just to piss me off, she’d steal my toys and hide them. So when my toys went missing I’d go looking for her, and when I’d find her, I’d pester her to give them back to me. I’d yell and threaten her, and she’d just stand there with a mischievous smile and say, “Is that so?” She knew how to press my buttons. I’d hear these words and jump, jape, and tug on her ponytail until she weaseled out of the room crying to mom. And when mom scolded me, the little tattletale would hide behind her and grin and smirk and mock me as I cried.

My big sister was a real twerp, but she taught me a thing or two.

The truth is, I want to piss Gonzo off. I want him to cut to the chase. I want to see how far Captain Phillips is willing to go to get what he wants. Or maybe I just want to be punished. Maybe I just want someone to beat the shit out of me because of what I’ve done, because I feel responsible for the death of thousands of innocent people.

So I say, “Here’s a joke, why don’t you take that badge and shove it up your ass?”

He eases up. “So that’s how you want to play it?”

He signals to the two balaclava guys to have a go at me. They approach me from both sides until they’ve sandwiched me, and when I lift my head all I see is a tight fist flying towards me. It plows into my left eye, and knocks me off the chair and

onto the concrete floor. Before I can catch my breath, I'm pinned down to the floor with a knee pressing down on my ribs, and a ninja pounding on my face with bare knuckles that feel like the base of a plate compactor. He pummels my face until two of my teeth come loose and I'm gagging on my own blood. And I just take it, Jesus other cheek style.

He lets go and my head falls to the side. I spit out teeth soaked in blood, and from the corner of my eye, I glimpse a rubber sole land on my ear. My head's pinned down, and the grooved teeth of the rubber sole bite into the side of my face. A boot goes airborne and slams my stomach hard, ripping my insides to shreds. And heels clobber my guts until I'm coughing up stomach acid.

"That's enough," Captain Phillips yells.

They let loose and hot blood rushes to my head. Captain Phillips walks towards me, leans down, grabs my hair and lifts my head. "You still want to play hardball, funny boy?"

He lets go, and my skull hits the floor with a thud. My punched out eye is swollen shut and blood's oozing from every hole in my face. I'm numb with pain, lying on the floor on my back, my head's twisted to the side, and fresh blood trickles down my face and seeps down to the four army boots and the pair of Steve Madden rubber shoes in front of me. And suddenly it feels like Heaven. My bladder's made an executive decision. I'm pissing my pants. And pissing never felt so good. #heaveninmyboxershorts

Stillness is death. The human brain craves distraction. When you're locked in total darkness, in total silence, you start to hallucinate. Flakka and Krokodil have got nothing on pitch-blackness. With no visual or auditory input, your sensory nervous system fires off nonsensical impulses into your brain, and you end up constructing an artificial reality in your mind. A fantasy world. Your own Disneyland.

My imaginary world is filled with twinkling stars. I open my eyes and see countless specks of light drifting in swarms. I can reach out and grab them. A slew of tiny luminous stars suspended in the vast blackness of space, like a vista from the helm of the Millennium Falcon. In my fantasy world, my whole body isn't sore, and every muscle on my face isn't tender and raw. My mouth doesn't taste like blood and I'm not missing any teeth. My nose isn't broken, I don't wheeze when I inhale, and knives don't tear into my chest when I exhale. The floor isn't greasy with cockroach guts, and the room doesn't smell like a stink bomb.

I can't tell how long I've been held here. I keep dozing off and I can't tell if I've slept for five minutes or five hours. Sensory deprivation is what the CIA calls this form of isolation. Sensory deprivation is what smartphone junkies endure when they're out of mobile phone contact. Nomophobia, is what shrinks call it.

If you're locked in total darkness for a long time, your body switches to a forty-eight hour cycle. You wake up for thirty-six hours, and you sleep for twelve. This whole twenty-four hour cycle thing is just because the earth is always spinning and the light-on-light-off turns you into a coop chicken. In

chicken coops they play around with the light to get chicken to lay the maximum amount of eggs. Turns out fifteen hours of light and nine hours of darkness yields the maximum egg output. The age of the chicken and its stress level plays a role too. A good healthy chicken living a stress-free life should give you at least one egg a day. I'm telling you this in case you're thinking about a career in the chicken business.

If I was a chicken right now, my egg output would be seriously challenged. Let's just say I'm not being kept in optimum egg laying conditions. It's permanently dark and they give me one piece of bread and a glass of water a day. With half my teeth wiggling, I can't chew bread without dipping it in water. I think I dipped my bread in cockroach cream a couple of times. I can't tell. Like I said, it's pitch black.

What humans do best is adapt. I'm starting to adapt. I'm forming a routine. I'm in what I call a beat-sleep cycle. Three times already they've kicked the shit out of me. It's always the same: Gonzo asks if I know anything about the plot, I suggest he suck it, and the two ninjas give it to me. When I pass out, they dump me in here with a piece of bread.

At some point they'll break.

Today, they gave me a bucket. Must've got tired of mopping up my piss. So now I push the bucket into the corner and hope I aim right. Beats pissing all over the place.

I know, I know. I can fess up and put an end to this. I might even come out a hero in their world, but this isn't my world anymore. This world can go to hell for all I care.

My uncle had a ranch up by Douglass Lake. My parents sent me there a few times when I was in my teens. There was no cell service so I was always bored to death. I practically choked on the manure smell. One day my uncle took me aside and told me about herding cows. The key to successfully herding cows is to understand how they move, he said. Cows walk with their heads down and prefer little physical contact with each other. The same way teens walk hugging their phones in school. He said, as long as your cows are looking down and walking at a distance from each other, you won't have any problems.

I'm here because I'm one of those cows that looked up.

When you study history, you read about all these great historical figures. Martin Luther King. Che Guevara. Louis Riel. Joan of Arc. Men and women fighting and dying for their cause. It was all theory to me till Daniel Drake handed me a cause.

Before all of this, every morning I'd wake up dead. I'd snap pictures and hashtag everything. "Hey world, look at me. I'm alive." Liar. The Great Pretender. Before I joined the revolution, I backpacked the world with a phone in my hand. Dead man backpacking. Before I believed in a cause, I got a job and nibbled away at my student debt. Death countdown. On social feeds, nobody has a job. Everyone's having a blast. Beautiful lovely lives. Exotic trips and diamond rings. Parties and soirees and banana daiquiris. Every day I tuned into their feeds and felt dead. My life was a phantom vibration till I met Daniel Drake.

I'm back in the interrogation room. Tell us. Tell us. Tell us.
Fess up. Fess up. Fess up. Pounded meat. Pounded meat.
Pounded meat. My meat.

I'm all beat up and sore and numb and I can't decide whether I want a *classic* burial or if I want my ashes stuffed in an urn. Organic fertilizer or lawn ash? I'm on death's door and one of the ninjas walks up to my chair heaving a green bucket in his hands. He parks in front of me, lifts his bucket up in the air, and pours it on top of my head. Ice water. Now I'm soaking wet and shivering like a leaf. I'm throbbing and aching and shivering, my chair's tap dancing on the floor.

I lift my head and my neck crackles like I'm cracking potato chips. Ice water still dripping from my hair, one eye swollen shut, I say, "Don't bother putting this on YouTube. I've already made my ALS cash donation this year." I make sure to grin. And I grin with my wiggly teeth and puffed up cheeks and my split open lips and blood stained teeth.

"You're some piece of work," says Gonzo.

I smirk and say, "Thank you sir. You're most kind."

By now, I must look like a Picasso painting. Cubism period.

Gonzo keeps his beak shut, and the ninja picks up his empty bucket and walks back up to stand attention style by the door, morning wood position. No interrogations. No beatings. They just stand and sit there until the door opens and everything turns Salvador Dali surreal on me. Nothing makes sense anymore, now that Daniel Drake's walked in.

I must be hallucinating. I must be in my cell imagining this.

I extend my arm out for the light bulb hanging overhead. I think it might be a star. I can't reach it. But I can feel its heat.

This is no hallucination.

Capitan Philips jumps up and offers his seat. Drake tells him to stay seated and walks towards me until my stunned face is looking at his crotch. He pulls out a handkerchief and starts gently wiping my wet blood-caked face. My forehead and my temples, my busted nose and swollen cheeks, and then says, "I'm sorry we had to put you through this, Tom. We had to see if you're up for what's coming next." He pats and straightens my hair with his fingers, and I'm sitting frozen solid with my dislocated jaw wide open, blow-up doll style.

The two ninjas take off their balaclavas. One says, "For what it's worth, my knuckles are still raw. You are one tough S.O.B." The other one says, "No hard feelings, I hope. It's nothing personal."

And I'm Iceman. I don't blink. I don't move. I don't talk. PVR on pause.

Drake's still patting my head. "Jim and Stew will fill you in, then take you to the hospital for a quick check up before they drop you off home. Rest well. You need your strength back. We need you back on your feet next week." He puts his hand on my drenched shoulder. "I'm really proud of you, Tom. You did good."

I tilt my head up with my Pringles neck and stare at Daniel Drake with my good eye and all I can say is, "Whatever you need, Mr. Drake. You can count on me."

I'm emoji's dripping with cause face.

I'm lying in bed wrapped in bandages, Tutankhamen style. Five stitches on my forehead and three more at the back of my head. My bedside table has more Oxy, Morph and Captain Cody than a dealer's garage. Everyone thinks I've been in a car accident.

Marty puts a spoonful of chicken soup in my mouth like I'm three. In the hospital they clunked my jaw back into place. It still hurts when I open my mouth wide. Marty's feeding me with a teaspoon. When they got me to the hospital, I was so banged up the doctor said there was no way they'd let me go home that night. The doctor said my Picasso face didn't look like a car accident. The doctor said everything I tell him is confidential. I said, "Doc, patch me up and mind your own business."

I was sent home three days later.

Marty says, "I can't believe they didn't catch the guy. Don't they have cameras everywhere these days?"

With the teaspoon in my mouth, I mumble something that sounds like "I don't know."

Marty thinks I'm the victim of a hit and run. That's what I told her. Same story I told the doc at the hospital. He didn't buy it. This is the same story I told the nurse and she rolled her eyes. Hitler's marketing director Joseph Goebbels used to say, if you repeat a lie enough times, people will believe it. I think about that and imagine Goebbels in the social media age. @JGThirdReich1000 re-tweeting every @AHThirdReich1000 post.

Truth be told, I'm not sure if Marty bought my hit and run story either. I think she suspects my untimely car accident had something to do with Daniel Drake. She can't prove it though. She might be playing it cool until I'm better. Till I can fit a normal size spoon in my mouth.

I'm done teaspoonsing soup. Marty takes the blue faux agate tray and goes to check on Jason. Marty started babysitting the neighbors' kids. We still got bills to pay after all. It's an easy job. Jason comes pre-loaded with his father's old iPhone and spends the whole time playing Angry Birds. He and Marty get along just fine, as long as she doesn't pry the phone away from his hands. Jason can't tell a smile from a grin unless it's in emoji form.

Jason's who I'm fighting for.

I'm still sore. And I'm freaking out. I might not be in shape for what Drake's planning for next week. Drake says I'm ready for the part. He says only those who know how to shoot will take part. I told Jim and Stew I could handle a Mini 14.

My uncle taught me how to shoot a Ruger Mini 14 back at his ranch. That was the only cool thing I did up there. He'd load up a five round magazine with military surplus bullets and pop it in. You can also load one from the top. He let me do that once. I was afraid the first time I shot it. A Mini 14 isn't that small. It's 37 inches lengthwise. When you hold a firearm for the first time, it's exhilarating and terrifying. You're holding lethal force in your hand. You pull a trigger and BANG! Life's gone. In an instant. The weight of God on your arms. You reach for a solid grip. You pull the trigger and it's loud. Ear-ringing loud. The recoil whipped my neck and head a little and pushed me back a bit. I loved the adrenaline

rushing through my veins. Badass. I wanted more. My uncle says it's like that with the Mini. You pretty much aim and shoot. He let me shoot all I wanted whenever I was there.

Marty comes back, and standing at the door, she blurts out, "Tommy, what do you think about moving in with my father in Kamloops? It's getting crazy here in Van."

I say, "I'm not going to cut and run. I promised Drake I would stay here." My jaws are killing me, and every word feels like a punch in the face.

"In your condition you're no use to anyone." She opens her big eyes wide and says, "Don't you see this guy is using you?"

Marty doesn't get me anymore. She thinks revolutions happen in server racks. She doesn't understand that history's written in blood. She doesn't understand that before I met Drake I was dead. A clickjunkie. A feed zombie. A snaphead. But thanks to him, I'm revived. Restored. Revitalized. She doesn't understand that we only live when we die for a cause.

Marty says, "Do you really want more blood on your hands?"

I tell her, "This is our one shot. This is our one shot to free the world. This is our one shot to alter the course of history."

And I look at her and I wish she'd just grab her copy of *The Hunger Games*, come to my side and tell me about Katniss Everdeen's bow and arrow. I wish she'd cuddle me and tell me about the Mockingjay storming the Capitol. Instead, she shrugs her shoulders, rolls her eyes and says, "It's the things we love most that destroy us."

She scurries to the kitchen to make Jason's lunch.

All day long I hear sirens, and I can see their blaring lights. I've started to distinguish them. You've got your rumbling subwoofer kind, with its deep low-frequency rumble. Kind of reminds of the music of an old Atari game. You've got the wailing siren and its long wailing scream. Think Opera soprano doing warm-ups. Then you've got your piercer siren, with its quick high pitch bursts like the noise coming from a toy laser gun. Combine that rumbling, wailing and yelping with the Doppler effect and you got yourself a free concert. Think Guns N' Roses' "Welcome to The Jungle." Think Slayer's "Angel of Death."

Jason walks into the bedroom with his dirty blond bangs and his phone. He walks up to the bed and says, "What happened to you?"

"I was hit by a car."

"My mom says when you cross the street you have to look both ways."

"I did look, but I didn't see it coming."

Jason looks confused. He shrugs and he walks up to me and says, "Where's your phone?"

"I don't have a phone."

He's dumbfounded. Stupefied.

By the age of seven, kids understand the finality of death. They understand that a dead person can't do what a living person does. Mr. and Mrs. Dead aren't coming back. At age

seven, no kid's ever seen an adult without a cell phone. At age seven, a kid understands the irreversibility of smartphones. Having no phone to Jason is like seeing a man returned from the dead.

It doesn't compute.

Marty calls Jason to the dinner table.

"Go eat before your food gets cold," I say.

Jason takes one last look at me. Dead man talking. And he runs back to the living room. Not a single word.

And now I'm alone. Lying there, I can still see the jagged lines of the window cracks running like a crab on its back between the blind slats. Marty's still waiting for the insurance company to replace the windowpanes after the triple seven crash. The insurance agent said window installers in this town hadn't seen so much business since the 1946 Vancouver Island earthquake.

I look away from the window. I see strips of lights shining through the blinds on Marty's gothic stuff. Vintage Gothic crystal table lamp. A Cure pin. Keep Calm and Wear Black t-shirt, framed and hanging on the wall. A lace choker collar dangling from the side. A pink bow tie that looks dipped in tar, an eyeball at the knot. A steel lighter with a pentagram hex carved on the front. A sketch of Dylan from South Park. A drawing of a goth girl in leather and chains. The Alice Cooper poster from Chapter 2. A bouquet of black nylon calla lilies in a slim glass vase. A half empty Black XS Paco Rabanne perfume bottle. Tons of black ribbons, necklaces and bracelets in a bowl. Tons of black lipsticks, eyeliner, nail

polish. Black Onyx. Black Satin. Black Tire. Black Vinyl. Black Licorice. Black Leather. Black Diamond. Black Cosmic.

When you're stuck in bed all day, doing inventory is one way to pass the time. Marty's open wardrobe needs a chapter on its own. A mass of black leather and lace and velvet garments with a tinge of purple fabric in between. The drawers bursting with a mix of gloves, tight corsets and fishnet stockings. A heap of shoes at the bottom. A couple of platform pumps and many, many platform boots: ankle high, knee high, Mid-Calf, buckle detail, silver detail, skinny strap, lace up strap, Velcro strap. You get the idea. My pair's here too. Marty bought me my own New Rock black leather steel frame boots a while back. I wore them at a goth party at Decent Sundays once. Marty said I have to wear them when she takes me to Lumous next year.

If there is a next year.

I'm looking at all of this and something clicks. I rotate towards the door slowly like a mummy rolling over in its sarcophagus and call out to Marty. She rushes to the bedroom door, her hands shimmering with detergent bubbles. Marty's Christmas plan is to buy a dishwasher. "What is it?"

"Can you go to Deadly Couture and get me a —"

An Atari on wheels comes screaming outside.

Woo Woo Woo Woo

Woo Woo Woo Woo

Woo Woo Woo Woo

We stare at each other until the ruckus dies down, and I say, "Can you go to Deadly Couture and get me a leather jacket?"

"Why?"

"I can't talk about it." She rolls her eyes, and I go on, "After you come back, I want you to shave my head low Mohawk style and dye it flashy purple, Essie *Play Date* kind of purple."

Looking at me sideways, her hands bubble wrapped in foam, she says, "Are you going rivethead on me?"

"I've got to wear my boots!"

According to his Daimon, it says in Greek letters on the brass plate fixed on the granite headstone atop Jim Morrison's Parisian resting place. Peter piled his lilies and gerberas on top of the stack of flowers smothering the gravesite and snapped a dozen pictures on his phone. He cropped them, filtered them and blasted them to his follower base.

#twentysevenyearsyoung #thedoors #rip

Jim Morrison's just one soul out of a million buried and cremated souls at the Père-Lachaise cemetery. Peter breathed celebrity dust and canvased the cemetery, snapping the decomposition sites of the best and brightest, from Edith Piaf and Oscar Wilde to Max Earnest, from Frédéric Chopin to Georges Bizet and Marcel Proust. Peter's followers never had it so good.

Peter walked among the remains of gifted writers, artists and musicians and wondered whether one day they'd be joined by a new generation of social media stars. Internet celebrities. *Here rests Peter Jennings. He had a quarter of a million followers on Instagram.*

There was one more grave Peter had to see. Victor Noir's burial site. You probably don't know him. Victor Noir was a journalist killed in a duel in 1870. His death had political consequences at the time, but this was of no interest to Peter. He only wanted to see Victor's groin.

Peter walked the narrow leaf-covered cobblestone paths in between the tombs, the mausoleums, the sepulchers, the naked chestnut trees until he reached the solemn gravesite of Victor Noir, where an elegant statue lies supinely, a

depiction of the late Victor Noir as if he's just been shot, his hat upturned to his side. There's nothing remarkable about the bluish green verdigris-covered sculpture except for a single protruding brown shiny clean patch just below the belt: Victor Noir's eternal hard on.

After Jules Dalou sculptured Victor Noir's statue, people noticed a peculiar bulge below the belt, and a legend was born: if a single woman was to leave a flower in Victor's upturned hat and rub his bulge, she'd find a husband within a year. The delicate rubbing hands of countless single women for 150 years kept Victor Noir's crotch nickel clean.

Peter zoomed in on Victor Noir's groin and beamed it to his follower base.

#mosthandjobsinhistory

Content with his cemetery expedition, Peter took the subway back to the hotel to grab his jacket before meeting with Megan later for their pre-concert dinner. Squeezed in at the back of the train, looking at the black and gray clothes and the long faces and empty gazes, Peter wondered if he had ever actually left the cemetery. For a city famous for love, the people were strikingly glum.

In his absence, a change of guard had taken place at the hotel. The moustached man had metamorphosed into a handsome, elegant young black man with bleach white teeth. The African prince was all smiles when Peter approached him to ask for his room key. The friendly face was a welcome change. There was a small problem though: the man didn't speak a word of English. Peter managed to gesture 34 with his hands, but when he inquired about a gluten-free

breakfast option for the morning, he was met with a blank stare. Peter has a curious case of morning-only sensitivity to gluten. He looked up gluten sensitivity in French on his phone and showed it to the guy. It didn't make any difference. The man had no clue. But he kept smiling nonetheless.

Peter rolled his eyes and sardined to his room. He grabbed his jacket and headed to le Marais. He figured that if he was going to score tonight, it had to be at Megan's place. His chicken coop wouldn't do.

He slid a condom into his wallet just in case.

Peter arrived early at the Hut and was seated by the window of the enclosed patio. The place had a feel of cheap Chinese to it. Peter worried he'd end up with some bland and boring vegan food. Megan arrived a few minutes later. She looked gorgeous, dressed in a rose blush dress. Pressed for time, they started studying the menu as soon as she sat down. He ordered a soy chicken brochette and she the vegan pasta. The food wasn't half bad. Between sips of wine he asked her how she got into the art business.

"I've always found art sexy. There is something about conjuring up beautiful things out of nothing that's like magic to me," she said as she nursed her wine.

"Do you do any art yourself?" Peter asked.

"I dabble in water colors, but I don't think it's any good."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that? If the work's good, I'll share it. Who knows, maybe I'll make you a star."

She giggled and buried herself in her Pinot Noir glass. “How did you get into the Instagram thing? I mean did you just wake up one day and decide to make money on Instagram?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. I love music, and when Instagram came out, I started going to all these concerts and snapping pictures and sharing them. And before I knew it, I had thousands of followers. Then one day, a band came to me and offered me five hundred bucks to post their pics on my feed, and it exploded from there.”

“God, I wish I could do that. You know, travel the world, take pics of artwork and get paid for it!” she said, as if alluding to an impossible dream.

“You already spend a lot of time with art and artists, don’t you? Start snapping pictures of those people and their work and just keep posting them. Who knows, maybe you’ll grow a really big following and you’ll be able to quit your job.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I might actually give that a try.”

And they toasted, “To living off the cloud.”

The clock ticked and the bill came. Peter paid, despite Megan’s insistence to the contrary, and they took off on foot to the concert venue about half a mile away. The evening air was fresh and crisp. It was almost a shame they had to spend the night in a stuffy concert hall.

They Google mapped their way between the narrow streets and arrived at the hall’s entrance around 7:30 p.m., the concert was about to start. People were lined up in the foyer behind tall glass doors as security guards checked their tickets before letting them in. Everyone had general

admission tickets. An every man and woman for themselves type of arrangement. This was Megan's first concert in Paris. She didn't know what to expect as they marched into what looked like a Chinese temple rather than a Hard Rock concert hall. Peter promised her a night she'd never forget. He told her the guys playing tonight were amazing and that she'd smile all the way to her bed at the hotel. Privately, he was hoping he'd be smiling with her in the same bed.

They made it inside and rushed past the lobby café.

The place was packed. There must have been over a thousand people humming between the ground level and the balcony with its white oval arches and its large red railing wrapped around like industrial tape. Peter headed to the bar at the edge of the dance floor to buy them beer while Megan looked around. Along the walls of the ground floor were life-sized paintings set in blind arcades framed in white carved stone. The arcades looked like gates peering into analog times, with matte paintings of Victorian dancing couples, piano players with top hats, and cancan dancers with frills and ruffle dresses. Images from a bygone era peering back at a present they don't understand. To the back end, at the stage, the drum set, the bright orange Crush Pro Amps, the microphones and the many wires were flooded with bright stage lights. Megan liked the cool vibes and positive energy of the place. Doing an impromptu concert in Paris with a cute guy was not what she had in mind when she boarded her train at St. Pancras earlier that day. #serendipity

Peter showed up double fistfing two plastic cups of beer. "Let's go to the balcony so we can take pictures. We can go down to the dance floor later." They headed up.

Then the lights went out. And the hall roared.

The band walked onto the stage amid the cheers and bellows of the audience. Peter pushed and shoved and squeezed a spot for the two of them at the tip of the U-shaped balcony. They had a bird's eye view of the place. He grabbed his phone and shot reels of the gleaming stage and ecstatic crowds below, a United Colors of Benetton kind of swarm, oscillating and cheering for the Californian band. Megan in turn reached into her purse, pulled out her phone and typed a status update for her friends and family back home:

At my first Eagles of Death Metal concert at the Bataclan in Paris. Everyone's having a blast!

Three onyx black Ford Club vans revved and raced through the streets. Each van carrying eight ninjas, six in the back and one in front, plus the driver. Each one of us has at his right knee a red jerry can filled with apricot juice. On each lap, a rifle. Mine was a Mini 14, loaded with a hundred bullets, dual drum high capacity magazine, custom-made in South Korea. The others had AR-15s with SureFire high-capacity, one hundred round, magazines. The Club's back seats are set up facing each other instead of forward. Sitting across from me are Michael Myers, Billy the Puppet and Frosty the Snowman, dressed in black from head to toe. I eye everyone in their Halloween masks from the two holes in my V4V mask and I see flushed eyes and zipped fake lips. The vans hum and the juice sloshes with every bump. A full trash bag in the middle rolls back and forth.

The drivers and those riding shotgun are wearing the same boring, plain white masks they always wear. It has something to do with rank. White masks mean platoon leader. We have to follow them wherever they go. Except for me. I was told to keep company with Daniel Drake.

I'm wearing my New Rock boots. I feel good. I feel strong. I feel Zen.

The van stops.

The driver twists his head and white mask back, and across his shoulder he says, "Get ready, boys. We're here."

The back doors open and we jump out of the van. Jerry can in one hand and rifle in the other. The cold wind hits my newly

shaved Mohawk head and I see a wall-to-wall banner hanging above the entrance of Canada Place:

Social Media United Against Terror Global Conference

Twenty-four armed men in Halloween masks carrying eighteen jerry cans and three hundred abandoned Starbucks Trenta cups in garbage bags head to Ballroom A. The streets and the conference venue are crawling with cops and security guards. People in the street run in a panic as our Halloween army struts its way to the conference center. Not the cops or the security guards. The cops and guards take one look at us, and they drop their weapons to the ground and turn catatonic.

Another Drake trick. I'm impressed.

A ringtone of Tomoyasu Hotei's Battle Without Honor or Humanity goes off. Someone must've dropped their phone in the midst of the panic. And to the single coil tone, we march in a loose four-column formation towards the conference hall gates. My twilled and leather Handsome Soldier jacket flutters backward in the gusty morning wind.

I spot a couple of braves filming us with their phones. A white mask notices my distraction. "Ignore them," he says. Where would Gilgamesh be if his Epic hadn't been inscribed in stone?

We storm the Canada Place lobby and march over the shiny marble to the Moon Journey spot by the Totem poles. Nobody's manning the information desk. Ballroom A is straight ahead. We split into groups of six to cover the four ballroom exit doors: the one that leads to the lobby, the one

at the concourse, plus the two at the back house. I'm assigned to Daniel Drake's lobby entrance group.

Gathered inside Ballroom A are three hundred C-suite executives. The who's who in the social media and technology world. They're gathering to denounce global terror and affirm their solidarity with its victims.

Daniel Drake says it's all a photo op.

We take our respective positions and we charge the ballroom from the four access points simultaneously. Our sudden appearance is greeted by an outcry of gasps, heaves and screams. Drake signals the commanders to fire a flurry of bullets into the suspended plasterboard ceiling tiles, and a drumming of bullets sends a cloud of gypsum dust flying over the heads of the attendees in their theater-configured seats.

The firing stops. Like someone pressed the mute button. The room is so silent now you can hear the bits of dust land on polished shoulder slopes.

Bullets speak louder than words.

Flanked by four ninjas and me, Daniel Drake, with his golden beak and black overcoat, makes steady strides through the center of the room towards the podium on the raised stage on the other side of the ballroom. The PVC projector screen continues to display the opening slide of a horrified presenter:

Social Media Doesn't Kill People. People Kill People.

A ninja motions to the sweating slim suit executive to stop cowering on the stage and go back to his seat. Daniel Drake

climbs the three steps of the mini stage ladder and takes his place at the podium. We follow him. Two on each side and one behind.

Daniel taps the microphone a couple of times, and the sounds bounce and echo off the softly lit khaki walls. "Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for our unexpected appearance. I'll do my best to keep this brief."

Daniel Drake proceeds with opening remarks on the nature of terror and how technology's misshaped the world. Half a dozen ninjas go around the ballroom handing out Trenta cups. Another half dozen fill them with apricot juice from the jerry cans.

When I mentioned the juice earlier, I might've neglected a small detail. The juice is laced with magnesium citrate. Cherry flavor.

In passing, Drake says, "Anyone who doesn't drink their allotted apricot juice will be taken to the wall and shot."

Bottoms up.

"Back in medieval times, feudal lords charged illegal tolls on anyone using the primitive roads to cross their lands. Those greedy bastards only siphoned money. They added no value. The Germans called them *Raubritter*, meaning robber knights. Those were the original robber barons." Drake has a tendency to preface his point with a story. He looks around as if to check that everyone's drunk their juice and continues, "You, ladies and gentlemen, are their grandchildren. You're the robber barons of our time, hiding under your slim fit suits, hoodies and sneakers and reeking of greed all the same."

Daniel Drake's bitter words spin and twirl under a canopy of LED troffers dropping bright white light over weary faces and sweat smothered glistening foreheads. Apricot orange-stained lips murmur and stutter, and blotches of sweat draw under plush cashmere and merino armpits.

Think horror flick in 4D. Think The Purge, Silicon Valley edition.

"Come to think of it, Robber Baron is too reputable a title for your kind. What you are is a bunch of parasites feeding on people's souls. Thrusting yourself in between mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, friends and lovers. You have turned our birthdays and weddings and graduations into a fucking check and click business. Day and night, your algorithms track and dissect and probe our every move. Forever open-pit mining our souls. You fly here in your private jets and Hermès jackets on jeans and your crocodile tears, and you know damn well that your social media dreams are giving evil men the means to tear our lives apart at the seams." He pounds the top of the lectern with the knotted butts of his two fists and yells, "NO MORE! This is where we make our STAND. This is where we PUSH BACK!"

Drake's words dissolve into my blood stream like an iodine shot. Blood simmers in my veins, and I'm fired up and pumped and ready to die for the cause. I want gun smoke in my lungs. I want to taste blood on my tongue. I want to lodge bullets into their eardrums.

Daniel Drake, smite them with all you can.

Daniel Drake, show us the path.

Daniel Drake, SAVE US ALL.

“This sick world you’ve carved out of our lives will crumple under your feet. This panopticon you’re building one line of code at a time will wrap like pythons around your necks. We will reclaim the world and send you and your flickering lights and your click and check crap to the guillotines of flash mobs.” He pauses, and with eyes sizzling behind his *Medico della Peste* mask, “Humanity will not surrender to your Silicon Valley city state without a fight.”

Silicon Valley city state is the cue for the ninjas to take their firing positions. In a flash, twenty plus armed and masked and adrenaline soaked men jump to their designated positions in the four corners of the room. Fingers on triggers and barrels pointing at three hundred shuddering social media executives ready to shit their pants.

Dead silence drizzled in gasps.

Daniel Drake raises his arm up in the air. He’s readying to give the go-ahead.

And just before Drake gives the sign, a man in the front row drops to his knees and says, “Please don’t kill us. Please don’t. Please don’t. I have a family, please don’t.”

Dead silence, but for this man’s pleading weeps.

The Halloween ninja to my left and his Chucky mask climbs down the stage and walks up to the pleading man. “Don’t you worry. You won’t be permanently erased. Just temporarily disabled. Kind of like deactivating your social media account.”

The man clinches Chucky’s pants and pleads, “Please don’t kill me,” and the ninja raises his rifle and slams the man’s

head with the butt of his AR-15, knocking him unconscious, and sprawling out on the low-cut inlaid carpet threads.

Chucky climbs back up the stage to regain his previous position.

Drake drops his arm. "DELETE."

TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC!

A hail of bullets.

And the crowd sways like a gust of wind through a field of wheat.

Who'll love the devil? ...

Who'll song his song? ...

Who will love the devil and his song? ...

TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC!

Blood. Screams. Vibrating phones. Allah Akbar. Spotlights. Dark. Screams. Firecrackers. Terror. Chaos. Spilled beer. Ducking. Stampede. Bullets. Dropping on the floor. Gunpowder. Blood. Kalashnikovs. Emergency exit. Badly hurt. Slippery. Flashes. Trauma. Reloading.

TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC!

I'll love the devil! ...

I'll sing his song! ...

I will love the devil and his song! ...

Love. Hate. Escape. Stage. Trapped. Injured. Hiding. Playing dead. Dead. Pungent. Squashed. Terrified. Tears. Allah Akbar. Blood. Moaning. Gunshots. Buzzing phones. Suicide belts. Screams. BOOM. Blood. Torn flesh. Police. Bullets. Severed foot. Flashlights. Reloading.

TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC!

Who'll love the devil? ...

Who'll kiss his tongue? ...

Who will kiss the devil on his tongue? ...

Men armed with Kalashnikovs and suicide belts stormed the Bataclan concert hall. Peter jumped on top of Megan and told her to play dead amidst the hail of bullets over the dance floor. Then, when there was a lull in the shooting, the pair got up and ran to a door by the stage. They pushed it open, and huddled with others inside in room with no exit in sight. Peter reached for his phone and tweeted in haste: *I love you mom & dad @JuliaJennings @DanielDrake*

TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC! TAC!

Peter and Megan embraced each other.

Then the shut door bursts wide open, and a brainwashed kid branding an AK47 marched in. He stopped and gazed at them. His eyes oozed hatred and disdain. He tucked his hand under his vest, fingered the Mother of Satan, and went BOOM!

Urinating in the face of danger pervades the animal kingdom. Gazelles wet themselves when a predator is in hot pursuit. Chase a pigeon across a room and there's a good chance it'll leave a trail of droppings behind it. A young puppy will wet itself with a mere peek-a-boo, and frightened lab rats have a nasty habit of peeing and defecating all over the place. Nobody knows why animals do this. Some think it's a survival mechanism, masking their scent to put predators off their trail. You may want to keep this in mind the next time you're being chased by a wandering lion or escaped circus tiger.

Whatever the biological or evolutionary link is between animal bowels and fear, humans too do wet and soil their themselves in the face of danger, especially if they've just had a Trenta's worth of apricot juice laced with a powerful laxative.

I'm waiting in my black pants, black sweatshirt, black boots and black kick ass jacket. I'm black everything except for my low cut lilac purple Mohawk. I'm waiting for Bob in his office. The Vancouver Sun sits on his desk. I grab it. The front page reads in black bold letters, "Social Media Executives Scared Shitless." I laugh my ass off.

"Three hundred social media executives were rendered incontinent at the Vancouver Convention Center yesterday when an unidentified group of masked assailants took them hostage and forced them to consume a large amount of apricot juice mixed with a potent laxative. What remains unclear is why the Vancouver Police stood idle as these unidentified gunmen marched into the venue and carried out their contemptuous act.

“To induce defecation, the assailants fired a flurry of bullets around and above the gathering executives, forcing them to soil themselves. Subsequent to the unfortunate incident, a specialized team in hazmat suits was dispatched to care for the victims.

“While there are conflicting reports as to the number of attackers and their motives, reports have emerged that the assault may have been motivated by a rejection of the social media revolution and its alleged role in fueling extremist terror around the globe.

“A shaken and freshly showered senior social media executive spoke to the media just prior to boarding his company’s Gulfstream corporate jet, ‘We won’t let a group of fringe luddites impede the march of progress. Social media is here to stay.’ Another departing executive had this to say before jumping into his stretch limousine, ‘We completely reject those accusations. Our company has invested substantial resources to combat extremist discourse of all kind, and we will continue to co-operate with law enforcement to fight this evil.’ Another executive echoed a similar sentiment, ‘Our organization has been working tirelessly to foster a better social and mobile interactive experience, free of terror and hate. The individuals behind this morning attack are clearly oblivious to the needs and expectations of the common man,’ the irritated executive said prior to boarding his helicopter to Whistler for a much needed vacation.

“All executives refused to give their names for obvious reasons.”

End of article.

I'm reading this and I can't stop laughing at the sight of three hundred geeky rubber barons and baronesses rolling and swimming in their own organic feces and their expensive nootropic urine. Their Adderall-infused piss. If you want to picture the scene, think Sepia tint with no phone.

After we evacuated the venue, I remember wishing I had worn a *Medico della Peste* mask filled with rosemary and peppermint. I could've have sworn I smelled curcumin and sage when Daniel Drake delivered his speech from the stage.

Bob walks in and his jaw drops open like a vintage ventriloquist doll. He's never seen me like this, and while his Coke-bottle magnified frames are Velcro strapped to the thin strip lining my scalp, I say, "Hi Bob, how have you been?"

"I've been better," he says.

Bob doesn't look very good. His freckled crown shines now that he doesn't bother with a combover, and the two tufts of hair on the side of his head makes him look like Mickey Mouse. His shirt's half tucked in and curly hairs pop out from under his open collar. The man's a mess. Who wouldn't be? There's nobody here but Bob and rows of empty plywood cages with dusty desks waxed in finger grease and foam chairs covered with dandruff and hair. You'd think you were looking into a wall mirror in Dracula's castle.

Bob slides behind his desk across from me and sits in his curved ergonomic chair. The top of his varnished walnut desk is bare except for a landline phone and his iPhone. He stares at me searching for the right words and says, "What's with the hair?"

"I've found my inner rivethead."

“What do you mean?”

“This civilization has collapsed into a monetized copy of itself. This is dystopia in 4G. Think Mad Max. Think Escape from New York. Think Gunhed. I’m merely dressed for the part.”

He listens and I can see my words jet over his head. He gets to the point. “I got your severance cheque.” He pulls out an envelope and a piece of paper from his drawer. “Sign here and here,” he says as he pushes the paper to my side of the desk and gives me a blue pen. I sign there and there, and push the paper back to him. He hands me the envelope. At this point I’m no longer an employee of Travel Go, a Bermuda–Ireland–Netherlands Incorporated Company.

Like every hip tech company, Travel Go doesn’t pay corporate taxes. Travel Go uses what’s called a Double Irish with a Dutch Sandwich. Think Happy Hour special at Duffy’s Irish pub. This tax evasion scheme involves four companies: two Irish companies, a Dutch company, and a Bermuda company. One of the Irish companies charges royalties to Travel Go’s North American operations. The royalty payments are booked as an expense in the US and Canada, which in turn eliminates corporate profits earned in these countries. Ireland taxes the royalties at a very low rate, and using a loophole in the Irish tax code, Travel Go can transfer its profit to its offshoot in Bermuda tax free. The other Irish company pockets income from Travel Go’s European operations, and this income is then diverted to the Netherlands before it’s moved back to the first Irish company and in turn sent to Bermuda. Think of the two Irish companies as bread and the Dutch company as the filling. Bermuda is the rum cake dessert. No tax paid anywhere.

None of these companies have any employees. Just honest to God tax evading shelf companies.

How's that for Happy Hour?

I'm holding the sealed banker envelope in my hand face up. My name and employee number typed neatly in Times New Roman. Five thousand years ago the Babylonians wrote their messages on clay tablets. They'd bake them, cover them in clay, and then bake them again. The message inside could only be read by breaking the outer layer of the baked clay. The world's first envelope. Freebie party fact.

I look at Bob. "How about you, Bob? Are you just going to man this place until the world is fixed again?"

"They asked me to clear my desk yesterday. I'll be handing myself a severance cheque at the end of the week." His cell vibrates. Notification. He looks at it and picks it up. "It's my daughter's birthday. I need to post something on her wall." He starts typing.

"Why don't you just call her?"

With his eyes glued to the screen, he says, "A few days back my phone suggested I host a party for her birthday. Thing is though, she lives with her mom in Toronto, so that was a non-starter."

"Soon your phone's going to tell you when to change your underwear and when to jerk off. I hear smartphone dildos apps already do that," I say to him and he nods and smiles and continues typing on his phone. "Why not get your daughter one of those?" I say and he nods and smiles and types some more like a schmuck on crack.

I pick up the newspaper again and flip through the pages and come across an article about a fridge with three cameras inside. It comes with an app. Each camera takes a picture every time you open the fridge and stores it in the cloud. This means no matter where you are you can rest knowing you're just a click away from looking inside your fridge. The manufacturer's marketing executive is quoted as saying, "This technology will change your relationship with your appliances."

This gets me thinking. How is my relationship with my appliances? When was the last time I had a heart to heart with my Maytag double oven? Come to think of it, my Sub-Zero deep freezer's been acting up lately. I think we're growing apart. I think it might be time I pick a newer model.

I'm emoji's are you fucking kidding me face.

"My mind isn't like it used to be," Bob says as he puts his phone away.

I look at him. Why the hell am I still here?

"Is there anything else you need?" Bob asks.

For some reason, as if I care, I say, "What you going to do after you close shop?"

He sighs. "I don't know. I've been doing customer service for fifteen years. You could make a living doing this stuff back then. Not anymore. Now they hire Raj and Rajesh for next to nothing in Jaipur and call them Robert and Ray."

Bob sits there wretched and ready to weep. He sits there with his Coke-bottle glasses, his middle-age spread and his

Disney ears. The office reeks of despair. I say, "You were an inspiration, Bob. You were an example to all of us. Thank you for everything you've done for us." I'm being as sincere as I can pretend.

His face lights up. He takes off his thick plastic horn rims and wipes off under his eyes and says, "Thank you, Tom, that means a lot to me."

I simper and get the hell out of there.

The glow of red and orange flames outline the profile of their faces against the night. The moon's perfect and round and pastel white. A Frisbee suspended on a star string in the blackness of space. Smoke plumes and slithers and dissipates in the quiet of the night, ravenous flares crackle on the carcasses of melting phones. Bonfire. This is the Rebel Council's version of a company picnic. This is the first time I've seen the rebels' faces, the first time they see mine. And what I see is real people. I see men and women old and young, white and black, fat and slim. The kind of people you don't look twice at on the street or on a bus or wherever. Nobody's ten feet tall, no one's made of steel. Just a bunch of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

The crackling and sizzling of burning phones sounds like when I'm chewing on chicken bones at KFC. I sit there, my ears chewing on cell phone bones, and I'm clasping a skewer stick. Flames burst and ebb with every gust of wind. I feel great. The kind of inner peace I used to tweet about.

My soul dipped in real life.

Everything is just right, except for that occasional drill I sense in my head. It must be that head pounding I got at the hazing ritual at that Stasi bunker. Authentic Stasi experience, Enhanced Interrogation Technique style. I know all about Stasi. Back in college, in Fascism 101, they taught us about the German Democratic Republic and their Stasi spy machine.

Surveillance was big business back then. A growth industry. They'd make the NSA proud. By the time Stasi went kaput it

had files on six million East Germans out of a population of sixteen million. Ninety thousand full time staff and a hundred and seventy thousand part-time snitches tracking your every move. No stone left unturned. People you know, places you go, music you like, political views you hold, gods you worship, people you see, schools you go to, people you work for, teams you bet on, news you read. Everything tracked, indexed and filed in floor-to-ceiling filing cabinets at Stasi's headquarters in Berlin.

Forty-eight thousand filing cabinets.

Sounds like a lot until I tell you that Travel Go's data center in Montreal could fill 8.4 billion filing cabinets by itself. Daniel Drake told me the Stasi operation had one key problem: it was too expensive to scale. Drake said Stasi missed the boat by a hair. If they'd stuck around for another fifteen years, every East German citizen would have been offered a free account at StasiBook. Ad free. A social network for every East German citizen. Stasi's plan to make the world a better place.

StasiBook mission statement:

To give our people the power to share. To give our citizens the freedom to connect with their friends and family. To give every citizen of the German Democratic Republic the opportunity to freely express what they think openly and safely.

The StasiBook promise:

StasiBook will never use your personal data without your consent. StasiBook will never curate or edit or interfere with your personal life.

We are Stasi. We only track you because we care.

The Nokia 6800 at the tip of my hardwood stick's frizzled and roasted, marshmallow style. These flip keyboard models worked best for our little barbeque. You just flip them open and stick your roaster between the flaps. The phone will dangle long enough for the tiny screen to swell, melt and crumble, and fall over into a hell of sizzling plastic.

Divine.

Therapeutic.

The average cell phone lives for only eighteen months before it's thrown out. That's the life span of a house mouse. The life span of a marriage in the not too distant future. Millions and millions and millions of phones end up in landfills every year, and when the local landfills overflow with the latest and greatest last year's models, they load them up on big ships and dump them in some poor country's backyard.

#ewaste #nimby #gift

Third world slums. This is where young kids smash old smartphones with mallets and clubs to get the silver threads and copper wiring, plus their daily recommended dose of cadmium and mercury. Shantytowns. This is where old women spend their days bent over bubbling hot baths of lead, cooking circuit boards for scraps of gold.

The local Rebel Council figured we'd give the good people of Kitsilano Beach and their ocean side villas a bit of that fresh e-waste smoke they so generously gift to the slumps of Bangladesh. This was the whole idea behind the bonfire.

The bonding experience was a side effect.

Yesterday at dawn eight masked ninjas in two smoke red F-150s raided the Vancouver landfill in Delta. The target wasn't the landfill itself. The real target was the RDO, the Residential Drop-Off area, where Van's green citizens discard their pitiful 4.7 inch phones after swapping them with new snazzy 5.5 inch models. The RDO's where these hefty 143 gram models end up, now that you can pack a feather light 138 gram model instead. Where those dim 500 cd/m2 brightness models get dumped now that you can bask in the crisp glory of 625 cd/m2. Some of these phones are so old they don't even have fingerprint-resistant oleophobic coating. #medieval

It's not only phones and iMacs you find at the RDO though. You've also got lead acid batteries, smoke alarms, thermostats, DVDs, digital cameras, ultra thick flat screen TVs, fax machines and secondhand smart dildos.

Think of the RDO as a technology consumerism toilet bowl.

The security guards didn't put up much of a fight. A bunch of last year's gadget turds weren't worth taking a bullet for. We've tied them up and locked them in a room with Big Bang Theory re-runs playing on loop.

The RDO had more cell phones piled up than used syringes in an East Hasting drug alley. We filled the back of the two F-150s to the brim, and we didn't even scratch the surface. We hauled enough gold and silver and copper and mercury and arsenic and cadmium and chlorine and bromine to feed, and poison, a small third world country.

After we unloaded the last batch of trashed phones from the truck, I told the white masked platoon leader, “This city sure *loves* to recycle.”

The flames dance and curve upright and crackle like stomping Flamenco dancers in orange and red ruffled dresses. The bunny. The girl handing out assignments back in the masked underground rally. She’s sitting on a log to next to me, toasting a Nokia 7270. No bunny mask. No long dress. Just floating in a puffy North Face jacket and knee cut jeans. And the way she looks with her cinnamon bun hair is Princess Leia from Star Wars.

We start talking. She tells me my hair cut is to die for. I smile and tell her I’m a big Star Wars fan. I tell her Princess Leia lost her adoptive parents. Lost her entire planet. Lost her birth mother, father and husband. Lost her son to the dark side and was abandoned by her brother, and she’s still fighting on. Talk about buns of steel. One tough cookie and still sexy as hell.

The bunny chuckles, “my hairdo is no accident,” she says winking at me, and then pivots the subject back to our rebellion. “After the revolution, the rebels will collect all iPhones, douse them in gasoline, dump them into the donut hole of Apple’s spaceship HQ and light them all on fire. We’re going to install safety nets around the building’s outer rim in case Apple executives want to jump ship.”

The words “poetic justice” come to mind.

The bunny’s charring the hell out of her Nokia. “Baotou,” she says.

“Baotou?”

“In Inner Mongolia there’s a radioactive sludge lake called Baotou. The sludge looks like stinky date molasses and stretches as far as the eye can see. I saw it myself when I worked for a major smartphone component supplier as a rare earth metal sourcing manager. Rare earth metals are the shit you need to polish touch screens and make batteries. Cerium, neodymium, thorium, dysprosium. The kind of words you’d see if your phone had a nutritional label.

“To extract the stuff local refineries use what they call ‘acid baths.’ Think of it as a sulphuric-nitric-hydrofluoric acid spa for low-concentration ore. This toxic molasses sludge ends up in the lake after the rare earth metals are squeezed out.

“One day I was stuck in a nearby village after my rental Cherry Tiggo broke down. This is when I noticed the nasty fumes, the dead plants, the rampant disease, and the despair in everybody’s eyes. Locals told me about the time before that radioactive sludge lake existed, how there used to be green fields and farms brimming with watermelons, aubergines, tomatoes, and wandering pigs, cows and chickens. It’s all dead now. The handful of people still living in mud houses told me the only farming they do now is on Farmville,” she says and then her voice jumps up, “This is when I just snapped. I walked away from it all and found Daniel Drake. That’s when I joined his revolution. When I switched the Sith for a Jedi, if you will.” She continues, “After the revolution, we’ll haul that toxic sludge in big metal containers and dump it into these private luxury lap pools in Silicon Valley.”

#mudbaththerapy

The battery on my marshmallow phone bursts like an M-80 on Canada Day. The two of us and a few others get startled and burst out laughing. I turn back to Princess Leia. "What do you think's going to happen on November first? After its all done?"

"Nobody knows exactly. We're just nudging history in a different direction. It's going to be up to them to find a better future," she says, pointing at the villas straddling the beach.

"What if they end up making the same mistakes?" I ask. "What if they waste away again in make-believe utopias of clicks and feeds and touch screens and selfies? What happens then?"

"That's where we come in. Look over there." She points to the phone pile at the back of one of the F-150s. "This generation has no history. Everything they are is oxidizing and decomposing in landfills. Baby pictures, love notes, travel memories, graduation videos, they're all just rotting away in unwanted phones." A Blackberry Pearl hinges on the glowing red end of her roasting stick. "When future generations dig our ruins, they'll think history stopped in the twentieth century with paper and pencil. They'll think we forgot how to write and paint and live. This generation is just an instant message in history. That's why we have to remind them of what happened here. Make sure they don't make the same mistake."

The bonfire's sputtering and starting to die out. A guy in sweatpants and a suede jacket to my right grabs a couple of iPhones from a giant trash bag and tosses them into the fire. He fans the flames with a handheld fan and says, "iPhones burn the fastest. This ought to do it." Fluttering his fan, he

turns his head my way and says, “Did you know that the instructions for the Apollo 11 computer module were literally hand woven?”

“What do you mean, ‘hand woven’?”

“The core robe memory was literally stitched to the module by a bunch of middle-aged women. It was long tedious work.” He points at the phones feeding the fire. “You see this flaming, melting, bursting iPhone? This thing is a hundred and twenty million times more powerful than the Apollo 11 guidance computer. Think about that, a fucking hundred twenty million times faster!”

“You’re telling me this tiny flaring thing with its dick pics and off-center selfies and cats in hats videos and dinner spreads could guide a hundred and twenty million Apollo rockets to land on the moon? Is that what’re you’re telling me?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying.”

I’m emoji’s speechless face.

I look up at the moon. I can see bright highlands, dark mares, traces of craters. The moon looks back at us from its space loge, watching this freak show with a soda can in one hand and a tub of butter popcorn in the other.

The divine comedy.

And Dante comes to my mind. *The man who lies asleep will never waken fame, and his desire and all his life drift past him like a dream, and the traces of his memory fade from time like smoke in air, or ripples on a stream.*

I dive into dead words from history books I no longer own, and the bunny pulls me back to history in real time and says, "How about you Tom? What are going to do after we reset the clock?"

My boots set neatly aside, I shuffle my toes in the sand, searching for what to say to her. I've been so busy brewing this revolution I've forgotten to plan for my own future. I sit with my feet buried in the cold sand, whiffs of phone smoke fill my lungs, and I think of Marty. I see Marty in my future. Marty and I side by side tending to social media smartphone addicts. In twenty-four hours, the whole world's going to turn into a gigantic rehab clinic, and Marty and her psychology degree will be worth her weight in gold, and we're not exactly talking stick figure Barbie doll weight here.

Drake said the Rebel Council would temporary seize power to insure a proper transition to humanity's new destiny. Drake said we'll need teachers and educators. Maybe I'll be a historian, walking future generations through grand libraries and museum squares. Walking kids through library halls telling them how their ancestors scattered their lives onto thin film coated glass screens, how their forefathers sniffed clickbait code for breakfast and their foremothers tripped on Likes in bed.

I'm emoji's excited face.

I tell her, "When the clock hits zero, I want to wake up and feel like Columbus walking on the beaches of a new world. I want to wake up and feel like Armstrong brushing moon dust off his boots in the Sea of Tranquility." I tell her, "When you stop looking down at your phone and look up at the world, you have nothing but possibilities."

And she says, "I know now why Drake likes you so much. You're both dreamers. You're cut from the same cloth."

"What cloth would that be?"

"The one cut from the capes of superheroes," she says as the moonlight bounces off her two perfect rows of little bunny teeth.

And I'm emoji's blushing face.

The ice cold barrel of a Beretta M9 presses hard against my frontal lobe. The frontal lobe is your brain control panel. Emotional expression. Problem solving. Memory. Language. Judgment. Motor function, sexual behavior, and oh yeah, pretty much all the dopamine receptors. The good news is, a bullet burrowing through your frontal lobe has a lesser chance of killing you. The bad news is, there is a good chance you'd wake up completely paralyzed thinking every day is Tuesday.

The ice cold barrel of Drake's M9 is drilling a nine millimeter hole in my skull. I'm pressed hard against the cold tinted floor-to-ceiling penthouse windows, and I pray whoever installed this thing between me and oblivion did their job right.

And the day started so well.

Daniel Drake's NFC virus worked like a charm. At exactly ten a.m. this morning, every smartphone in the world flashed the same picture, that blood red Joker grin emoji. The same one I saw on the basement projector from under my V4V mask. The bunny told me Drake wanted this to be the last thing people saw on their phones before they threw them away. Drake wanted this frightening evil face ingrained in their collective memory for generations. He wanted everyone to be scared shitless whenever they remembered these plastic cells they locked themselves inside.

That Joker face emoji was the trigger for Operation Clock Zero.

When that emoji flashed on phone screens, every man, woman and child in every town, village and farm dropped what they were doing, grabbed anything that could pass for a weapon, and went looking for a cell tower, telephone exchange, satellite relay station, server farm, or phone company building to set fire to and destroy. The urge to act was so strong, people walked out of showers, naked and dripping wet with a showerhead and bar of soap for weapons. Veterans on crutches put on their boots and went hunting for dark fiber. Pregnant mothers climbed up radio masts with their bare hands. Pilots landed planes on empty stretches of freeway, and crew and passengers jumped out on emergency slides hot for copper wire. Trains stopped mid-track, and passengers stormed out of railcars and dug under miles of track looking for fiber optic cables. American, Russian and Chinese ballistic missiles rained towards the sky from submarines and missile silos and crashed into satellites in three different orbits, blasting and bursting them into colorful crosettes, peonys and chrysanthemums like morning fireworks celebrating the birth of a new era.

This was an event on a biblical scale.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over Egypt so that locusts swarm over the land and devour everything growing in the fields, everything left by the hail."

Daniel Drake was the Lord, and everyone else was the locusts.

This was no Starbuck Revolts. This time it wasn't just sledgehammers and mallets and crowbars and baseball bats and kitchen knives and chainsaws and homemade flamethrowers. This time it was real firepower. It was guns.

Handguns, shotguns, rifles, and semiautomatic and fully automatic assault weapons. This time it was tractors, trucks, cars, buses, haulers, loaders, excavators, Humvees and tanks. Anything hard enough and fast enough to destroy, level or topple was repurposed and enlisted for the cause.

Not everyone knows how to build, but everyone sure as hell knows how to destroy.

Anything that resembled a telecommunication facility was shot, wrecked, hacked, chopped, burned and bulldozed to the ground. Soldiers and their tanks roved the city ramming into smartphone stores, and flattening street level cell towers to the ground like puny flower stems. Telecom company skyscrapers burned and sparkled like colossal Christmas trees. Satellite dishes were yanked from poles and tripods and piled up like flapjack stacks. Frantic crowds climbed up and reached for cell towers, World War Z style. Data centers staff turned their farms into pools of fuming acid. City work crews gutted sidewalks and asphalt looking for fiber optic cables thread. By lunchtime, Van looked like a scene from a Godzilla vs. Gamera movie.

This was no ordinary Halloween. No one wore masks. This time around, they burned them. They rose up and burned up all their social media masks. Their fake profiles. Their curated feeds. Their make-believe personas. This was the great unmasking. The big reveal. This was the Cult of Me committing its final act, a mass suicide.

By the time the sun went down, Van broiled and blistered with fires as far as the eye could see. Not a single cloud ventured under the smoke cloud cover. Vancouverites chewed on copper wires with their teeth. Steel masts

teetered and dangled from rooftops, and fiber cables curled like loose threads in a knitting boutique.

And I watched it all. I watched it all from the sixty-first floor of the Shangri-La sky castle. Marty and Daniel Drake and I watched it all with a perfect highball, crystal tumbler in hand. First row seats for the smartphone apocalypse. Backstage tickets to social media Armageddon. The city burned before our eyes like SimCity in a fire disaster. A city reborn. A city cleansed. Purified. Sterilized.

Even a reluctant Marty was impressed.

The Rebel Council ninjas buzzed about like worker bees, securing police stations, city halls, parliament buildings, key military installations. The Naval Radio Station at Aldergrove. The Armed Forces camp at Chilcotin. The Seaforth Armoury at Burrard Street and all the army bases in Comox, Chilliwack, and Esquimalt.

Drake planned this to perfection.

And not just Vancouver. This happened everywhere. Toronto, New York, London, Paris, Beijing, Rio de Janeiro, Washington, Johannesburg, Tokyo, Sydney, Moscow, Baghdad, Mexico City, Dallas, Calgary, Seoul, Cairo, you name it.

When the clock hits midnight. It will read ZERO, everywhere. History will RESET. We will walk FREE. Liberated. Unchained. Reconnected with each other.

And Daniel Drake presses the cold barrel hard against my language center. Against my motor functions. In his ash gray eyes, now turned silver, I see the flames flicker on the tops of buildings like the way birthday candles glow with the lights

turned off. Daniel drills hard into my emotional expression tissue and says, "If you'd have done your job right, he'd be alive."

With the back of my head flattened against the icy glass, I say, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

Drake and Marty and I kept vigil over Van from Drake's castle, straddling the sky with chilled highballs in our hands. The clock rounding up to zero in front of our three pair of eyes. It was so beautiful, I nearly cried. Everything was going so well. And then the barrel of an M9 stuck between my eyes. Everything happened so fast.

Halloween marks the day when the boundary of this world and the world of the dead disappears. This is the day when the spirits of the dead come undead. Seven billion of them. This is the day when seven billion awakened souls struck back.

Drake and Marty and I watched history being redrawn, and Daniel Drake pulls out an M9 and slams Marty in the face, thrusting her whisky and ice into the air and sending her flying across the room. She lies unconscious on the floor. I see what's happening from the corner of my eye, and before I can blink, Daniel Drake presses his gun between my dopamine receptors and my sexual drive and says, "I'm going to make you pay for what you did."

Everything happened so fast.

I've almost lost all feeling in my forehead, and my heart roars louder than the incensed crowds outside. My lungs melt and swell, Ambu bag style, and all I can see is Daniel Drake's glittering silver eyes drilling a hole in my head. His knuckles

curling around the black checkered grip of an M9 lodged between my eyes, and I say, “Daniel, what’s wrong?”

“If you’d have done your job, my son would’ve been on a plane to his mother in Seattle. If you’d have done your fucking job, my son would be alive.”

I’m drawing a blank. I have no fucking clue what Daniel Drake is talking about. “What are you talking about? What have I got to do with your son?”

The shine of searing radio mast steel bounces off Daniel Drake’s menacing eyes, turning them into two crucibles of molten silver. “My son wanted to fly out of London but couldn’t. You gave him the runaround and he ended up dead in Paris. Blown up to pieces in a concert hall.”

I’m starting to put two and two together. My now numb problem-solving center’s figured it out and my judgment neurons have issued an accelerated summary judgment.

Verdict: I’m fucked.

A cubic inch of bone can in principle bear a load of nineteen thousand pounds. Daniel Drake’s pressing his gun into me so hard I feel like my skull’s going to buckle. The wrinkles in my brain tissue feel like they’re starting to Supercrease. Any second now Daniel Drake’s going to pull the trigger, and my smoke gray neural tissue is going to spatter and spin and fly out the window into the dead of night.

I try to stall for time. “Are you saying your son was a Travel Go customer? Are you saying I messed up his travel reservation?”

He scoffs. "You're a smart one, aren't you?" His fake smile vanishes and he says, "Do you know how hard it is to look at your son's killer and pretend it's fine? Do you know how hard it was for me to hear your voice and act with restraint? I couldn't risk taking you down and jeopardizing this operation." He tilts the gun on my numb forehead left and right like a windshield wiper. "You think it's funny messing with people's lives?"

The searing steel skeletons of radio masts burn like wire wool. The crumbling skeletons of cell towers teeter and melt and twist and lean at a forty-five degree angle, peeking timidly from the edge at the crowds underneath like rookie acrobats on flagpoles. They snap. Guy-wires go loose and Silicon Valley's drug dealers slump, decouple, fly and drop into the wind. Sizzling and twirling like fire dancers on a wire, dropping and vanishing like scorched twigs into Lego-sized crowds.

Its almost midnight and Daniel Drake gun's sweeping my forehead and I say, "Daniel, how do you know it was me?"

"Everything is logged and indexed. Your little whore over there thinks she's erasing evidence. The zeros and ones in this world can't be nullified. I've hacked your systems. I've listened to everything."

Harry Harbord's last words before his execution were: *shoot straight, you bastards and don't make a mess of it!* I think of that and I chuckle. And it hits me, my bench plaque should read: "Tom Perkins 1988–2016. Sit straight, you bastards and don't make a mess of it!" I wish my sister was here to write this down.

Marty. I look over Daniel Drake's shoulders and I see Marty's awake and crawling towards the Toulon steel frame dining chairs. I'm thinking she's going to grab a chair and bash him. I laugh out loud to distract him.

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha.

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha.

He makes a fist with his left hand and punches me in the stomach and yells, "Shut the fuck up!"

I zip it. Don't piss off the guy with the gun. Marty's almost there.

"His name is Peter. His name is Peter, and you're dead because of him." Drake pulls his finger back to press the trigger when a steel chair comes flying and bashing and crashing into his vertebrae, and he goes jolting and convulsing like he's been tased. I leap down and tackle his legs as he fires four shots into the floor-to-ceiling window pane, shattering and blasting the soundproof glass into the burning night. Gusts of freezing wind come rushing and storming into the room, and grunts and groans from sixty-one floors below charge in full blast like Dolby Surround in a locked room.

Daniel Drake thuds and falls sideways and I mount him on his side. His chest and left arm are clutched between my thighs, his right arm and hand are loose, still clasping his gun. I reach down to grab his M9 and he rears and spins and twists like a rodeo bull, and his legs kick and punt and send shards of glass flying off the precipice below. Marty runs over to grab his gun, and just as he manages to buck me off, she slips on shreds of glass and flies over us and out the window into the

night sky. She grabs and holds onto a thin outer ledge lining the window frame.

"Oh My God!" she cries. "Oh My God!"

"TOM HELP ME."

"TOM HELP."

"HELP!"

Marty's cries send a shot of adrenaline through my veins, and I turn around and punch Drake with everything I've got, and my glass-crusted knuckles land on his face like a knuckle duster, and I don't let go. I climb over him and pound on his skull left and right against his herringbone parquet floor until my knuckles burn raw and his face is a bloody mess and his teeth tear a hole through his cheeks.

"HELP ME."

"I'M SLIPPING. I'M SLIPPING, TOM!"

His eyes are swollen shut, and he fumbles and gropes with his hands like a blind man, and before he catches a breath, I hammer my elbow into his chest and he coughs hot blood into my face. I keep battering his rib cage like a jackhammer until his ribs snap and he's frozen limp and the cone of my elbow's flattened and sore.

"TOM HELP."

"HELP."

"I'M SLIPPING TOM, HURRY!"

I jump up from Drake's cracked bones and leap to the window, and my eyes hit miles of void. I scour the edge and I see Marty's fingers, strawberry red with blood and swollen, she's barely holding onto the ledge. I stretch my right arm and seize Marty's forearm and pull, pull, pull, and she glides up inches higher and pull, pull, pull, a few inches more, pull, pull, pull, and now her head is level with the window sill, and her terrified big indigo eyes interlock with mine.

A spark of hope glitters in her eyes.

A jagged glass icicle slices the back of my hand wide open and my hand gives. I let go and Marty falls back down. She miraculously catches the ledge again, and we're back to where we started. Except now I don't have my good arm.

FUCK.

FUCK.

FUCK.

My blood gushes out all over Marty's face, and she's screaming and shivering and panic-struck, "OH MY GOD, TOM!" she yells.

"Don't worry, I got you."

I stretch my left arm and clench her forearm firmly with my left hand and pull, pull, pull, pull and nothing happens. Pull. Nothing. Pull. Nothing. I can't pull Marty up with my left arm. I try to stay calm.

I look ahead and see sweltering cell tower rods. I see red hot steel jump and dive in the cold night air like barbeque sparks.

Marty's dangling and clasping onto the edge for dear life with both hands. Her feet flap, looking for something to step on. A ledge, a window frame, a pipe, anything. But there's nothing below her floating platform boots but bottomless void and crisp, cold air.

"Tom, I don't think I can hold on much longer." She looks down over her shoulders and tilts her head back up, and with her snow white cheeks and her licorice black lips stained with my blood, she says, "It's so steep. It'll be like flying."

I pray and plead with God or whoever's in charge, and I gather my last ounce of strength and pull on her arm as hard as I can with my no good left hand. I can't lift her an inch. I know I'm going to lose her. Tears gush out my eyes and wash my blood off of her face. "Marty, you're thinking of angels."

With a twinkle in her eyes she says, "I love you, Tommy." And she lets go.

Falling, getting smaller, falling, smaller, falling covered in tears, smaller, falling like an angel with broken wings, smaller and gone.

Stairway to Heaven on impact kind of gone.

I'm on my knees in a pool of my own blood and tears at the edge of a new world. At the edge of clock zero. The cold crisp wind hits my face, warm blood oozing out of my palm, and a vista of broken cell towers parade and burn and bend in front of my blurry eyes, and victory never tasted so bitter.

BANG.

Raw shock. A numbing sensation of raw shock flows from my back, my whole body is thrust forward, and I leer downward over the window sill. Sheering cliff. I snap back from the edge and feel a burst of pain that rolls in waves. Blood pumps out from my chest and spatters like a broken bottle of wine. Hot. I've been shot in the back. I'm going to die. My ears hiss. I retch and gag and I want to puke. I look over my shoulder and I see him. A bloodied battered Drake leaning on his side and clenching his smoking gun. His incensed swollen eyes shoot more lead bullets into my heart and I collapse and fall out the window and down the Shangri-La cliff.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling and flying, bleeding and crying, chasing after Marty. I twist and turn with my back to the ground and I see stars. I see Capricornus. Pricus. Chronos. My life plays out like a social feed. I see birthday cakes, lips, smiles, eyes, tears, words, snaps, grams, flickering red lights. I see a baby in an orb floating in space. I see black. Pitch-blackness.

Am I dead?

I open my eyes. I can't feel anything. I see white walls. No windows. White bed sheets, white casegoods, folded linen. My reflection in a big blank flat screen at the edge of the bed stares at me. There's wires popping out of my head. And my hair's gone. Pinhead. I see drool looping and glistening down my chin from the cracked corners of my mouth. Drills whirr in the distance. I see flickering lights on machines on steel racks. There's recessed fluorescent lights in between the yellow-green stars dotting the dropped down ceiling tiles.

I hear a beep. There it is again.

Beep.

I must be in some kind of hospital room or medical lab. This must be where I am.

I can't move a finger or a toe. I'm completely frozen, except for my eyes. My eyes race left and right like a plastic baby doll.

Beep.

The door opens. A woman and a man come in both dressed in white. I've seen her before. Red hair. She comes close to me and tinkers with the infusion pump machine hooked up to my front arm, an inch above a red plastic wristband with a white label that reads "C23" scribbled in blue pen. She's wearing a nametag. Megan Cody. CML.

She says, "Hand me the morphine, will you?" She sounds British.

The man walks up to her and hands her a small vial from a metal tray in his hand. He's wearing a nametag, too.

Peter Jennings.

Beep.

"Time me," she says.

He pulls out a black Chrono stopwatch from his pocket.

I can't see exactly what she's doing. She's too far left.

Something pops.

Now I see a full syringe in her hand. She reaches for the tinted IV bag dangling from a nearby pole. She injects a clear solution into it.

"Done," she says.

No more beeping.

"Impressive! Twenty-seven seconds."

"Let's see if you can beat that next time," she says and giggles.

"That's not fair. I just started working here last week! You've got years of practice," Peter says as he walks to the other side of the bed, all the way to the bedside table where he put his tray. I can see dressing scissors, a thermometer, a tourniquet, gauzes, a medical mask, latex gloves, cotton balls, a blood pressure monitor, an array of vials and creams, and pills in tubes and amber bottles. Peter reaches over me and

starts fumbling with the wires coming out of my head. I can see his reflection in the screen.

A blustering charge of pain cuts through my head.

I blink.

He plays with the wires some more, and excruciating pain erupts in every part of my brain. I want to scream from the top of my lungs and shove him away, but all I can do is blink.

Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink.

“Be careful,” Megan says, “Drake is touring the Board of Directors today. Don’t break him.”

Peter grins and says, “You mean don’t break him more?”

“Well, it isn’t my fault they gave him LIS. I just fish them out, I don’t work on them.”

Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink.

“Where do you find these guys anyways?”

“Tinder.”

“No kidding!”

“I’m serious. I hook up with them on Tinder. Cancel last minute and hand them to Drake to do his business.”

Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink.

Needles pierce my eyes and knives cut through my frontal lobe and I blink, blink, blink. What the hell is this? Where am I?

Peter picks up a cotton ball, dips it in something, and goes back to working on my head. "How does Drake get them in here?"

"He gives them his clickbait generation speech. Spikes their drink, and before they know it, they're signing disclaimers at West Pender."

"Do they all end up like this?" Peter says as he lets go of the wires in my head.

"Don't sweat it. Drake calls it collateral damage." Megan shrugs.

Peter points up and says, "What's the deal with these glow in the dark stars all over the ceiling?"

"Oh that. They had a kid in this room a while ago. He was scared of the dark and Drake asked us to do something about it. The crying and whining at night was disrupting the sleep pattern of the other subjects. If they don't sleep right, it messes up their brain secretions." Megan takes out a small white towel and wipes the drool off my chin.

The door swings open and Daniel Drake walks in with a Hugo Boss suit, outer space black, four-button detail at the cuffs. Dogging his heels is Nordstrom's designer suit section: Armani, Versace, Lanvin, Z Zegna, and they all gather across from my bed.

Megan and Peter step back and Daniel Drake says, "Gentlemen, you stand today at the cutting edge of science. What you see today is going to put three commas in your bank accounts." He pauses just long enough for them to ponder that and grin. He resumes, "In collaboration with our

largest client, we've successfully tested the first direct brain to social feed technology. From now on, clients won't need to type or click. They just wear a little gadget in their ears and it'll project what they're thinking into their social feed while beaming back targeted ads right into their cerebral cortex."

Armani says, "Is it as addictive as what we have now? How are the dopamine and oxytocin readings?"

Daniel Drake replies, "Off the charts! This thing'll get you hooked stronger than heroin and coke combined. We've hit the mother lode with this one, and it's all legal."

"This subject looks catatonic. Isn't this a problem?" says Versace as he points at me.

"Locked-In Syndrome to be precise. This was a minor technical glitch. Nobody's attempted something like this before. We had to see if the technology worked and how far we could push it. We pushed a bit too far."

"Is it safe now?" says Lanvin.

"This is as safe as we can make it. I wouldn't recommend giving this to your kids for Christmas, but as far as commercialization goes, we're good to go."

"Excellent," says Z Zegna.

"Can we see this thing in action?" says Armani.

Drake looks at Megan and says, "When did you last administer morphine?"

"Just now, sir."

"Great. This test model only works when the subject's in a dream state. Give it a second for the morphine to kick in. When he closes his eyes, the brain sensors will pick up the signal and the flat screen will automatically turn on." As he speaks, my eyes start to feel heavy. I fight to keep them open, but a two ton anchor tugs at my eye lids. Morpheus is in the building.

The flat screen flashes in multicolor. I faintly hear, "Here we go."

I see hot sun. I'm ten years old in my parents' room with a lollipop in my mouth. I see endless desert. I hear a radio host warning that it's going to be a very hot day. I see a convertible dark blue 1974 Cadillac Eldorado. I see a colorful sleeve tattoo. I see a beautiful blonde in worn-out boots. I see the MTV logo in the top corner of the TV screen. I hear drums. I hear bass. I hear guitars and organs. I see a speedometer. I hear tires squeal. I see a freeway. And I float. I'm floating against the ceiling, and I'm looking at myself bobbing my head by the open window, sitting on my parents' bed, a breeze tousling my hair, and she sings,

*I don't know what you're looking for
You haven't found it baby that's for sure
You rip me up and spread me all around
In the dust of the deed of time*

And I float out the window, her voice starts to fade,

*And this is not a case of lust you see
It's not a matter of you versus of me
It's fine the way you want me on your own
But in the end it's always me alone*

Floating away and racing for the clouds, I can barely hear the music now.

*And I'm losing my favorite game
You're losing your mind again
I'm losing ...*

..
.

Total silence. Earth shrinks beneath me. Pale blue dot. I'm floating like an astronaut, and it's completely silent. I'm floating in the dark. I'm in deep space, floating like an astronaut with no suit. I see stars, constellations, dark matter, rocks, and I hear a disembodied voice. It's a sea-goat talking to me. It's the voice of Pricus.

"Come on here. I've saved you a seat."

The End