

Angela & John Forever

*Love in the No Man's Land Between
Personality- and Developmental Disorders*

by Sune

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Tuesday, March 26th, 2024

Glider's Society

Jacob enters the locker room of his local Gliders Society - a community of hobby glider pilots and enthusiasts - and immediately notices the young man sitting on the bench in front of the entrance. Jacob is about to ask the young man if he is lost - at 37 Jacob is the youngest member of the community that primarily consists of men over 50 with considerable liquidity to splurge on their hobby - but then notices the insistent and gloomy stare in the young man's eyes, and realizes what this is about.

JACOB: My tow-pilot could be here any minute

YOUNG MAN: Your T61F is motor-powered

There is no one within a 5-kilometer radius

Phone!

Jacob reaches into his pocket, pulls out his latest-edition iPhone, takes out the battery, and smashes the phone on the floor.

YOUNG MAN: Personal phone?

JACOB: Dual SIM

YOUNG MAN: Any other devices?

JACOB: No. I just came to glide

Was it the Hjort Hansen-job?

YOUNG MAN: ... [apparently considering, deadpan stare]

No

Trier Lundager

Jacob doesn't like the outcome of the previous exchange. He had hoped for a sign of inexperience, a sign that the young man might show a willingness to engage in conversation, and if not that: a sign that he would be wound up tight enough to try and play the silent killer type. Jacob just needs a little leverage, a small advantage he can use to turn the situation around, but so far nothing has presented itself.

JACOB: Yeah? [challenging the young man to expand on the matter]

YOUNG MAN: ... [considering, still deadpan]

Just bad luck [a very faint hint of compassion in his voice, otherwise emotionless]

I was vetting Herlevsen

JACOB: So what?

YOUNG MAN: ... [staring at him in challenge]

JACOB: Herlevsen is a business-associate. What's the connection?

YOUNG MAN: You were in his recent contacts

JACOB: Yeah...?!

YOUNG MAN: Had me looking into Trier's heart attack

It wasn't easy

but if I can make you for Trier, someone can start digging

JACOB: Jesus Christ!

You have no idea what kind of game you've gotten yourself involved in, do you kid?

If anybody 'starts digging' the Banshees will have the investigation shut down immediately

You do know what kind of people are behind this thing, right?

or do you think you are making the world a better place?

Did the over-representation of wealthy CEO's on the list ever make you wonder if there's a money angle to the whole thing?

YOUNG MAN: You knew the rules when you signed up [*tired smile to suggest that Jacob should stop trying to talk his way out of this*]

JACOB: If you could do it all over again, would you still join?
YOUNG MAN: ... [staring at him]
JACOB: I've given the subject some thought...
and on one hand, it gives you a whole other outlook on life...
I mean... you have a deadline in 10 hours, the boss is on your back
to close another client
your colleagues are ready to stab you in the back at the slightest
mistake
but it totally pales in significance when compared to last night...
when you broke into some guys home, shot him in the head and
dumped the body in the harbor
Who cares about a dip-shit boss getting upset?
Who cares about clients catching you in a lie?
if you slip up in that other operation, you're dead...
but I guess I don't have to tell you that... [vague smile]
On the other hand, it gives you a whole other outlook on life...
[repeating in a deeper tone of voice]
Make that deadline and make 'man of the hour'? Can't feel any real
sense of achievement...
Bang the young intern during lunch hour? Kinda fun while it lasts,
but you are too senseless to make it mean anything...
And at some point, the killing stops being the same... The thrill is
not the same, so you start taking unnecessary risks to get the feeling
back
... but I guess I don't have to tell you that
... [looking at the young man in challenge]
YOUNG MAN: ... [meeting Jacob's stare, then apparently relenting, relaxing his
composure a little]
I never signed up...
Someone made me for a drunk driver I did...
Guy killed a total of 7 people on 2 different occasions
JACOB: The Djernes case? That was you?!
The newspapers said he looked like he had run into a bear or a pack
of hungry wolves
What did you use? A bat? A lead pipe? I'm curious!
YOUNG MAN: I didn't use anything [deadpan]
JACOB: Holy Christ! You did that with your bare hands?
YOUNG MAN: When I got home, someone was waiting for me and gave me
the Banshee spiel
...
JACOB: Wait a minute, so you were doing this BEFORE Banshee? Freelance?
YOUNG MAN: I guess it was more of a hobby-thing
JACOB: Why?
YOUNG MAN: ... [giving it some thought]
Anger issues I suppose

JACOB: Christ! [in disbelief]

...

Well, even knowing what I know now, I think I would still sign up...
Make some stories, you know?

If the young man does know, he's not making any attempt to show it. Instead, he gets up and cracks his neck and knuckles.

JACOB: How are you going to do it?

A gun?

YOUNG MAN: I don't have a gun

JACOB: A knife?

YOUNG MAN: No

Suddenly, Jacob's outlook seems a lot brighter! 'What a fucking moron!' Did he really believe taking down Jacob would be like beating a drunkard in the boondocks? Jacob pulls up the bottom of his shirt and lowers his pants a little to reveal a tattoo that looks a little like a Karate-belt around his waist.

JACOB: ... [looking at the young man, questioningly]

YOUNG MAN: It's pretty [deadpan]

JACOB: Do you know what it means?

YOUNG MAN: That you killed someone who had one

JACOB: In a bare-knuckles fight. No weapons! [proud grin]

'Alright' Jacob thinks 'Test his striking game, and take it to the ground if you don't have superiority within the first 30 seconds'. Jacob sends a kick to the young man's thigh with his left leg, then follows up with two quick jabs, does a slight cross-fake and goes for a hook, when he feels the man's knife go through his throat.

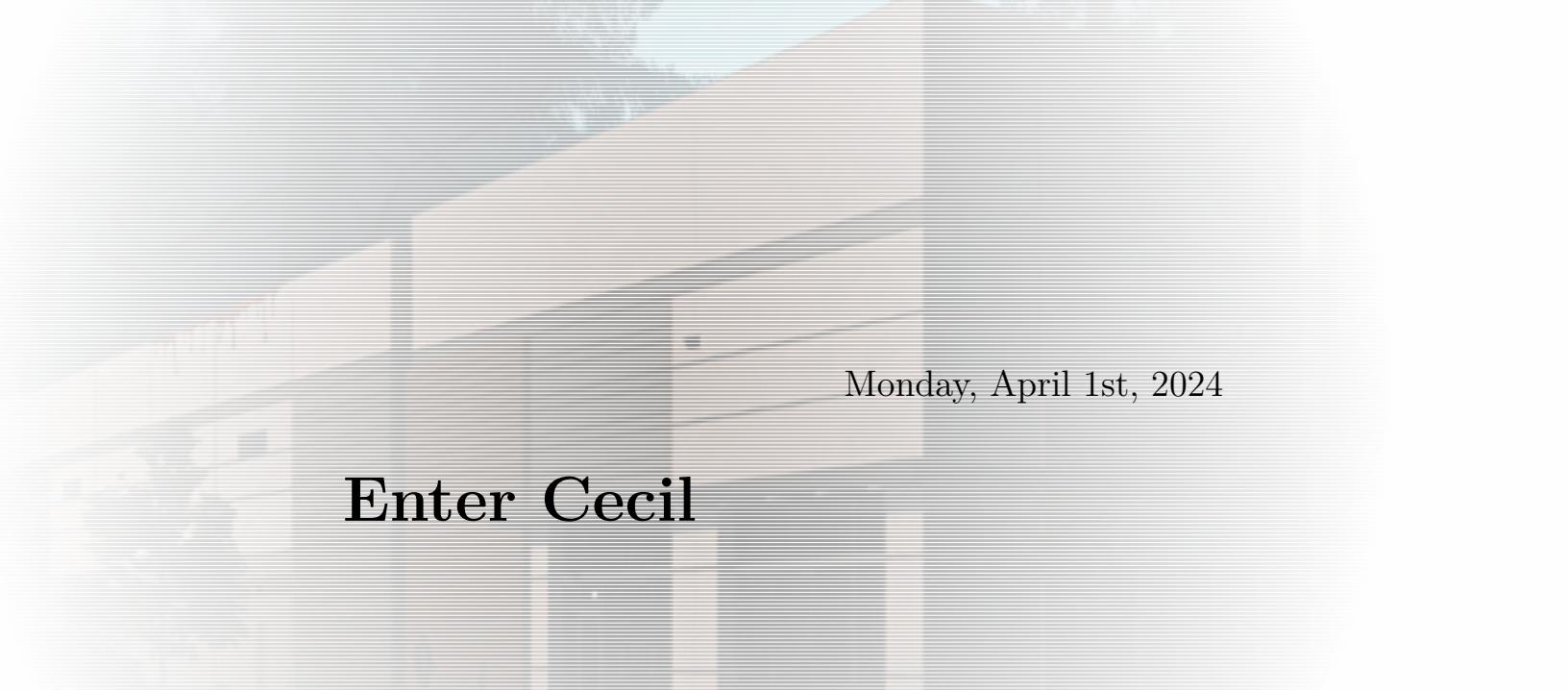
JACOB (thinking):

So, he lied... How did I not see that coming?

Jacob may be able to send off a few more strikes, but at this point, what's the point?

At least the young man makes it quick: when Jacob stops resisting, the young man sweeps his legs and drives him to the floor on his stomach, pulls the knife across Jacob's throat in one smooth movement pulling hard on the knife to make it go as deep into Jacob's throat as possible, maintains a hold of Jacob's hair pulling the throat apart across the seam to allow for maximum spillage,

and waits for Jacob to bleed out. He then pulls up Jacob's shirt to expose his lower back, carves '№BB02651' and covers the back by the shirt again. The young man leaves the knife on the floor, looks around the locker room to make sure he hasn't forgotten anything, turns off the light and leaves.



Monday, April 1st, 2024

Enter Cecil

FRANK: I know we covered some of this during the interviews, but let me start by giving you a brief introduction to what we do here at FinaLibre

CECIL: That would be great

FRANK: FinaLibre is first and foremost the leading fund administration company in the country. A position we have held for the last 5 years when measured by Assets Under Management, which today is no less than 200 billion EUR

CECIL: That's impressive

FRANK: Indeed it is, but we have no intention of stopping there
Although I am not able to share the specifics of our current RnD projects, don't expect to face unemployment anytime soon

CECIL: That sounds great [smiling]

Cecil isn't expecting to be facing unemployment anytime soon and he isn't expecting to be staying with FinaLibre any longer than necessary. Sure, the company had a reputation of being a good employer and had been pretty consistently represented in the top 3 financial services employers for the past many years and 'that's nice' Cecil supposes, 'if you're into that sort of thing'. And Cecil doesn't believe he IS into that sort of thing. He is simply too young for that!

Cecil wants back in the Major League! He had been well on his way to securing a place in the express lane to Investment Advisor superstardom, but then one little mistake on a ski trip a couple of months ago had sent him back in the 'poor bastards'-lane. Cecil had learned his lesson: dating the daughter of the person you expect to hold the express lane open for you is walking a tight line, and if something similar should befall him again, he needs to pay more attention.

CECIL: As I mentioned during the interviews, I have extensive experience with Investment Advisory...

FRANK: I'm afraid we don't provide Investment Advisory services...

We are strictly Fund Management

CECIL: Oh... So, what would you like me to do?

FRANK: Well, first off, we need to get you through the Academy

Everyone starts their employment with us in the Academy

This lets us ensure that every new hire understands what we do here
and that they have the skill set we are looking for

At the Academy you learn basic concepts about Finance... though
I'm sure there will be nothing new for you here [*smiling*]

And basic concepts of Computer Science and Programming

CECIL: Don't we have IT guys for that?

FRANK: About 40% of our employees are people with an IT background.

We train them to have the sufficient understanding of Finance required
to partake in designing solutions...

Having efficient processes is at the core of our operating philosophy...

And we simply can't waste time translating between 'IT-talk' and
'money-talk'

CECIL: Well, I guess that makes sense, but I should warn you: IT was
never my strong suit in college...

FRANK: You needn't worry... You are not the first... [*smiling*]

The Academy has successfully trained people from all walks of life,
so I'm sure we'll be able to train you...

... and if we can't...

we'll know at the 2-week or 3-month evaluation... [*smiling*]

CECIL: ... [*looking a little worried*]



Monday, April 1st, 2024

Cecil meets the Cool People

WOMAN: Hey try-hard, are you coming to lunch?
CECIL: Sure... I'm Cecil by the way
WOMAN: I know... Frank introduced you at the assembly... which you
should know... seeing as you were there and all
CECIL: ... and you are...? [Expectingly]
WOMAN: Hungry AF [Throws up loud laugh]
Just kidding... relax, it's all in good fun... I'm Carol
CECIL: Nice to meet you Carol
CAROL: I bet
CECIL: Been here long?... wait a minute... How long have you worked for
FinaLibre?
CAROL: Clever boy... I have been here for 6 years
CECIL: And what do you do here... or... What does your job description
entail?
CAROL: Alright, you can chill with that... I was just yanking your chain...
I'm not retarded
CECIL: ... [Smiles]
CAROL: I work in Staffing...
What you would probably call 'Human Resources' in most other
organizations...
Making sure that we have the required talent in the company, and
that you guys receive your paycheck every month
CECIL: I see... Looks like I want to stay on good terms with you!
CAROL: You better!
... but look... Cecil... You seem like a nice guy and all, but I'm not
going to have sex with you
CECIL: ... [caught off guard]
Damn, and just when I thought everything was going so well [recovering]
CAROL: Hmm...
There's my crowd...
Stay close to me, because this is the in-crowd
MAN: Hey Carol, who's the shit-bird?

CAROL: Cool people, this is Cecil... Cecil, these are the cool people
Specifically, in ascending order of length...

OTHER MAN: AND GIRTH!

CAROL: ... this is Karl, John, and Ben... Karl and John work in Client Management...

BEN: THE PHONE LADIES!

CAROL: ... and Ben works in Reporting and APIs

KARL: Ben is still waiting for his Sunflower Ribbon to arrive in the mail...
He isn't actually retarded... there's just something wrong with his brain

BEN: HEY! You can't spell 'Social Retardation' without 'Retarded'
... wait a minute

JOHN: Suicide by words... again! [*Grinning, shaking his head*]

CAROL: And this lovely flower is Susan

SUSAN: Nice to meet you Cecil [*Smiling*]

CECIL: Pleasure is all mine

BEN: So, is Angela joining us today?

3 FinaLibre employees out of the group of 6 turn and stare at him in amazement.
Only Carol walks on.

BEN: WHAT?

The group recommences its walk toward the lunch buffet.

JOHN: socially retarded [*shaking his head*]

SUSAN: Do you think it's too much to ask of your boyfriend that he goes with you to your father's 60th birthday party? I told Brian that we're going to my father's birthday on Saturday, and he got all upset and said he had made other plans, and when I questioned him about the issue, he got really angry and ended up basically shouting obscenities at me

BEN: OMG Susan! He's totally gaslighting you...

That's typical male toxicity for you...

You should dump him!

KARL: I don't think 'gaslighting' means what you think it means my friend!

But he does have a point Susan, you really need to re-evaluate your choice in life partner before the mating ritual gets serious...

I mean: you can do a lot better than a damn carpenter!

CAROL: And by 'a lot better' you mean a nice guy, right?

For instance, one employed in Finance?

Maybe one of her acquaintances here at FinaLibre?

BEN AND KARL: That's a great idea! [looking at each other]

CAROL: And how would your girlfriend like that setup Karl?

KARL: It would take some persuasion I concede...

She's got a point Susan, you should hang on to him until I make 'Chief'...

I can have 2 girlfriends by then...

But you would be my main of course [winking]

BEN: Why hold out for second best when the Alpha is available right now?!

JOHN: 'Alpha' [shaking his head]

KARL: How about you Cecil, do you have a girlfriend?

BEN: Or boyfriend... we don't judge

CAROL: You are about the most judgmental people I know....

but I can see why homophobia is not top of your prejudice list

JOHN: She's addressing your metro-sexuality

The whole table looks at Cecil in waiting.

CECIL: Wait a minute, did you guys rehearse this conversation just to pry into my personal life?

CAROL: Well SOMEBODY holds himself in high esteem

CECIL: My ex-girlfriend and I broke up 3 months ago, due to... ahem... 'creative discord'

CAROL: 'Creative discord' [shaking her head]

Let's leave these boys to it Susan, and see what we can do about your Brian situation [getting up]

SUSAN: Great performance guys...
as always [*getting up*]

KARL: So... 'Creative discord'?

CECIL: Well, I got 'creative' with her sister when I went with her family on the annual ski trip to France, and a lot of 'discord' followed

KARL: You dawg! Surely, she must have been able to recognize the artistic expression of your actions?

CECIL: Nope! Even tried the Shaggy Defense and all... no luck!

KARL: These are strange times my man! But glad to have you on board, looks like you are a great fit for the company, and there are plenty of fish in this pond... *[smiling]*

JOHN: Some are predatory though

KARL: Yeah, most of the chicks here are top-tier, but there's a few you gotta look out for... like Carol

JOHN: You could do a lot worse than Carol, but she does have a high body count... you'd have to bring a whole bag of coins for the office the next day

BEN: ...on the topic of things that smell like fish...

JOHN: What the hell would you know about that? *[grinning]*

BEN: I'm holding out for the right one

KARL: You are holding out for Susan!

Which of course is never gonna happen, tell you the truth. It's kind of a shame really, because you are not ugly 'PER SE'...

If you would filter out some of the mental fertilizer you spew, you could definitely hook up with like a 6 or a 7 from Recon...

BEN: Aawww... Are you coming on to me Karl?...

Look, you're a nice guy and all, but I just can't see you as anything more than a friend

CECIL: So who do I have to look out for?

ALL THREE: Angela!

CECIL: She skanky?

JOHN: I wouldn't say 'skanky'... *[pensive]*
though she may have been around the block a time or two, but I don't really know....

I guess you could say she's a different kind of fish

KARL: She's a damn shark!

CECIL: How so?

JOHN: That's a story for another day...
and I'm not sure I'm really the right person to tell it...
you definitely don't want to mention Angela around Carol just now
[getting up]

BEN: What happened?

KARL: You were there on Friday, weren't you?

BEN: Well yeah, but maybe I was in the bathroom just then

JOHN: Blowing your nose, right? 'Cause it was RUNNY on Friday

CECIL: You guys have a local hook-up in this countryside haven?

KARL: Man, they need to put 'FunBox TM' on the intro brochure!
Come with me to the supply room, and I'll show you...
but you are going to need to download an app
Do you have an XMR wallet?
CECIL: No... why?
KARL: Aww hell, if you wire me a 100, I'll get you set up, and then Ben
can hook you up with an XMR wallet later
BEN: Yessir Boss man... Anything else I can do for you fine gentlemen
while we are at it?
KARL: Hey Cecil, did Carol give you her 'I'm not going to sleep with
you'-spiel?
CECIL: I guess she did
JOHN: Don't worry, she doesn't mean it... probably
KARL: Just don't raw dawg it man [*smiling*]



Wednesday, April 10th, 2024

Angela's First Dream

Angela is sitting on the train, commuting to work, when suddenly the world freezes... Not in the sense of getting cold, but in the sense that the train's movement is completely halted from one instant to the next. At the same time, every passenger in the train becomes inanimate. It's as if someone clicked the pause button, but the world forgot to include Angela in the pause command.

ANGELA: I'm dreaming!

Wait... I said that out loud, didn't I?

And I'm allowed to say things out loud because it's my dream!

I like this... Maybe I should begin thinking out loud more often

Alright, so this is my morning commute, I recognize that

And, I can see from the progress bars, that we are 5 minutes off

Thousand Acre Forest (East), so I have a pretty good idea of the
'where' of this dream

Angela takes out her cell phone and checks the date on the display: Wednesday - April 10th - 2024.

ANGELA: That's today, isn't it?

OK, so the 'when' is today...or yesterday... How the hell do I determine
the time OUTSIDE my dream

BRAIN: Who cares?

ANGELA: OK... I kinda thought this was my show, but alright...

So... Here we are, in a situation I have recently experienced, and
you have brought me here...

You've brought me here because I missed something, right?

Because that's what dreams are about... The brain does a complete
garbage collection and cleans out any interrupted and/or unfinished
thoughts, and at this point of my day, I left something interrupted

Am I right?

... [waiting]

Look Brain, I don't negotiate with terrorists... Either you're in the dream, and you ping/pong with me and you get to have your little passive/aggressive outbursts, or you're out and you stay out

...

Alright, just remember that you asked for it...

DOES A TREE MAKE A SOUND IF IT FALLS IN THE FOREST
AND NO ONE IS AROUND TO HEAR IT? [shouting]

AND WHAT IF IT DOESN'T SO MUCH FALL AS GENTLY LAND
ON ITS BUTT?

DO TREES EVEN HAVE BUTTS? I KNOW THEY HAVE BUDS,
BUT DO THEY HAVE BUTTS?

AND WHAT IF THERE IS INDEED SOMEONE AROUND TO
HEAR IT, BUT THE PERSON IS DEAF AND...

BRAIN: Oh my God, what the hell is wrong with you?

ANGELA: Well, if Doctor Petersson couldn't figure that out over the course
of 5 years, do you think we're going to figure it out during this
dream?

BRAIN: What do you want from me?

ANGELA: A simple answer would be nice: Have you brought me here to
figure out what I missed?

BRAIN: YES!

ANGELA: Good! Now, are you in or are you out?

BRAIN: I'm OUT! Goodbye

ANGELA: Good riddance! I can't stand people - or brains - who think
they can have it both ways

Have your cake and eat it too...

Now, that gives me an idea...

I will close my eyes, and think about a chocolate cake with chocolate
frosting...

It worked! But look at that thing, not even in my dreams could I
win a baking show, huh? [dismayed]

But... who cares? This is about the science of it...

TONIGHT LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE WILL ANSWER
THE AGE-OLD QUESTION: [game show presenter voice]

'IF YOU EAT AN ENTIRE CHOCOLATE CAKE IN YOUR DREAMS,
WILL YOU WAKE UP AND BE FAT?'

AND... TO HELP US ANSWER THAT QUESTION, HERE IS
THE LOVELY AAAAANGEEELLAAAAAA [clapping]

AND NOW... IF THE AUDIENCE WOULD PLEASE SHUT THE
FUCK UP AS LOVELY ANGELA ATTEMPTS TO CRAM DOWN
THIS WHOLE CAKE IN ONE GO...

Drum-roll please... [drum-rolls]

... [practically shoving cake down her throat]

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, SHE'S

DONE IT! LET'S HEAR FROM THE LOVELY ANGELA HOW SHE'S DOING

ANGELA! HOW DO YOU FEEL RIGHT NOW?

Well Mike, I feel like I have just swallowed an entire chocolate cake...

And I don't even like cake... boo hoo for me...

I think I'm going to be sick!

ISN'T SHE JUST A TREAT LADES AND GENTLEMEN?!

WELL, THAT'S IT FOR TONIGHT, BE SURE TO CHECK IN AGAIN WHEN WE WAKE UP, TO DISCOVER IF 'LOVELY ANGELA' IS NOW 'FAT ANGELA'. UNTIL NEXT TIME!

ANGELA: Alright, with that out of the way, let's see what we have here

I remember that guy, but why?

Do I feel attracted to him?

No... He's certainly not the type of guy I would usually go for

But this is definitely about him

There was something about what he was doing... and what he was doing was...?

He was watching that guy over there

Uff! That guy looks like a complete sleazebag. Yuck!

He's got like a sex-offender vibe to him

I don't want him in my dream

EXCUSE ME, CREEP

CREEP: Who me?

ANGELA: How many other creeps do you see in this dream?

CREEP: There's at least...

ANGELA: That's enough FILTH out of your FILTHY mouth! Go stand in the other end of the train where I can't see you

CREEP: Or what?

ANGELA: Ooooh... magic time again

Now, we say 'abracadabra', and look what started crawling on your arms... Bull ants!

CREEP: Eeeew... That's disgusting!

ANGELA: Oh yes... very, but wait until you feel their bite! [sadistic smile]

CREEP: AAAAAAAAARRRRRGHHH! THAT HURTS SO BAD!

ANGELA: Yes... That's what I have heard. Now go stand in the other end of the train, and if you leave now, I'll make sure someone is waiting for you with a strong painkiller to take the top off

CREEP: ARRGGGGGGHHH [running out of the train car]

ANGELA: No rest for the wicked! The guy will be waiting for you with a nice shot of FENTANYL... Let's hope you get the dose right...

Muahaha

Alright... Back to the guy. He was watching the creep, but why?

What do you say we cheat a little Angela...?

Oh my, that's a splendid idea! Seeing as this is my dream, and I'm supreme ruler

- queen of the bull ants -

I could step a little closer and have a better look at the guy
Hmmm... Those are sinister eyes. Pretty color of blue, but they cover some nasty secrets, don't they? Intriguing!

Now... You were watching the creep. You weren't in love with the creep, and you don't look like you are about to burst out in a birthday tune for the loser, so why were you watching him?

Let me think...

Back in the real world...

The boring world...

The place where I cannot command bull ants... YET (!)

... you got off at the same stop as he did... because you were following him, but wait a minute...

You went for the exit before he did! Which means that you must have known where he was going, and when you got off the train...
...you were going to follow him and... kill him!

That's it, isn't it?! You were following him, and you were following him in order to kill him, and the reason you wanted to kill the creep was... that he's a creep!

... or that is at least what you tell yourself, but maybe that's just an excuse...

...because you are a very angry man!

And so you track down and kill creeps as an outlet for your anger!

Am I right?!

ANGRY MAN: You are right, but I'd like to think I'm also doing some good in the world

ANGELA: Holy shit! You talk!

How long have you been here?

ANGRY MAN: Well, the whole time

ANGELA: Yeah, but like, there's a lot of people here, but they're not really here...

Like, I could draw a whiskers on them and they wouldn't object...

How long have you been... sentient?

ANGRY MAN: It's kinda hard for me to say, but I think the whole time

I was there for the terrorist negotiation with Brain

ANGELA: Oh no... Then you also saw the cake-eating contest? [embarrassed]

ANGRY MAN: Yes, I found that bit especially...

ANGELA: embarrassing?

ANGRY MAN: charming [smiles]

ANGELA: Ooooh... I like you!

And forget all the stuff I said about me not being attracted to you

- I'm not saying I am or anything -

but I was just checking to see if you were awake that's all

ANGRY MAN: Hey, this is your show... Feel free to change my looks in whatever way you want [smiling]

ANGELA: Hmm... I think we'll stick with it for now...
Your look does have kind of a rough quality to it
It's probably just an acquired taste

ANGRY MAN: Have it your way

ANGELA: Alright... So I feel like I have solved the first riddle, but I bet there's more...
Am I supposed to guess the details of what that creep has done?

ANGRY MAN: Oh God no! I've read his file and it's not something I want to be reminded of
No, for now, you can relax
I have something I need to show you [*gets up and reaches into his pocket*]

ANGELA: Ooooh... Is this gonna be one of those dreams where I'm going to need a long hot shower when I wake up? [*biting her lower lip*]

ANGRY MAN: That wasn't the plan... Do you want it to be?

ANGELA: Hmm [dreamy]
Alright... No Mike, let's see what great mystery hides behind door number 1
But, before we continue, I need to give you a name...
It feels weird thinking of you as 'angry man'

UNNAMED MAN: Can I be Fernando Sanchez? I like that name

ANGELA: No... That you cannot
Because Fernando Sanchez is a silly name, which anybody who's anybody knows...
We'll call you John!

JOHN: John will do

ANGELA: Great... Now, let's see what you have there John

JOHN: ... [*pulls out a cell phone and sits down beside her*]

ANGELA: Can I hold it?
It's sort of a thing for me...
I like being in control...
I know... I'm working on it with Doctor Petersson

JOHN: I don't mind [*hands the cell phone over*]

ANGELA: You need a new phone!
Alright, no time to waste on that now, but let me at least fix the cracks in the screen like...so
Do you want popcorn?

JOHN: Sure, I could go for popcorn

ANGELA: Abracadabra: POPCORN!
And... We'll hit 'play' like so...

The cell phone starts playing a movie. The camera fades in on a young man and a young woman sitting in the clearing by a forest lake on a bright Summer's day.

ANGELA: Ooooh... Is that us?
JOHN: Not exactly, but then again...
ANGELA: Alright... Do you want to be the boy or the girl?
JOHN: I'd prefer to be the young man
ANGELA: Hmm... Alright... A little boring I suppose...
 But 'you shouldn't ask a question if you're not willing to accept the
 answer'
 Ooooh... look... I'm pretty ain't I?
JOHN: I think so
ANGELA: You are kinda handsome too!
JOHN: On behalf of the young man: thank you
 The dialogue is about to start
ANGELA: Point taken

YOUNG WOMAN: They want me to marry him
YOUNG MAN: Do YOU want to marry him?
YOUNG WOMAN: No! I want to marry you
YOUNG MAN: I also want to marry you [*smiling*]
YOUNG WOMAN: I don't think it's right that they get to decide
YOUNG MAN: It isn't
YOUNG WOMAN: Is there anything we can do?
YOUNG MAN: I think so, but we will have the whole world against us
YOUNG WOMAN: Well, if the world is going to go against us for not getting
in line with such a stupid demand, then let the world burn
YOUNG MAN: ... [*smiling*]
I love you, and I think I am always going to love you
YOUNG WOMAN: I love you more than life itself
Will you make love to me?
YOUNG MAN: I will
ANGELA: The screenplay feels a little cheesy doesn't it?
JOHN: Yeah, but it's supposed to take place in another day and age...
but even so, I'd have to agree with you that it could use a little...
spunk
ANGELA: Yes... spunk
Ooooh, look at them going at it...
This isn't PG-13 huh?
JOHN: You have the phone... You can press fast forward
ANGELA: No way! Look at that!
Look how clumsy they are!
JOHN: I think it's their first time... And this is supposed to be way before
porn was a thing
ANGELA: Yeah, but this is like the Viking age, isn't it?
Didn't they have like massive sex orgies and such?
JOHN: I honestly don't know
ANGELA: Ooooh... I just got to thinking...
This was before plumbing and regular showers were a thing...
JOHN: I know what you're driving at...
Let's be grateful for modern-day hygiene
ANGELA: Amen! Alright... I'm just going to fast forward a bit...
Now what do we have here...
Ooooh... there's our young couple again
They look mean! They are up to no good!
Oh... I think I know what's going to happen here...
I'm not sure I want to watch it
JOHN: ...
ANGELA: Alright... Let me at least turn the sound off
Oh, that's horrible! Those people don't stand a chance!
NO! If you touch that child, I'm not going to watch any more of
this!

JOHN: They don't touch the children. There are a couple of the grown-ups
that get spared as well

ANGELA: That's good!

How many do they kill?

JOHN: They sliced the throat of 38 people of the village that night, 35 of
which died

ANGELA: Because they wanted her to marry someone else?

JOHN: They were kind of insistent. Those were different times, and she
was just a property... He was as well

ANGELA: So, he couldn't just buy her free and work off the debt in the
kitchen, huh?

JOHN: I'm afraid not

ANGELA: But I bet you didn't come here to show me just that... There's
more isn't there

JOHN: Yes

ANGELA: Because the world is not going to just sit back and let them get
away with happiness, is it?

JOHN: And 35 murders + 3 accounts of attempted murder in the first
degree, but no, it isn't

ANGELA: And you want me to watch it, right?

JOHN: I'm afraid that's best

ANGELA: Will you hold me while we watch?

JOHN: I'd love to

ANGELA: NO NO NO NO YOU DUMB BITCH! DON'T GO IN THERE!
[shouting at the screen]

WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR DUMB BRAIN?

THERE'S ENOUGH SPEARS FOR AN ENTIRE ARMY LEANED
AGAINST THE WALL OUTSIDE, AND YOU ARE WILLING TO
BELIEVE THERE'S JUST A SINGLE FAMILY IN THERE!!!?

I almost don't feel sorry for you when you are that STUPID!

Please tell me that the man has a little brains

Yes... that's good... That's right Mr. Big Brain, it IS a trap...

Yes, just watch them and figure out a plan... Maybe you should jack
the spears, eh?

NO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

YOU ALREADY KNEW THEY HAD HER! JESUS CHRIST!

ALL YOU HAD GOING FOR YOU WAS THE ELEMENT OF
SURPRISE AND NOW YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE THAT...

ALL BECAUSE THEY WAVED A LITTLE KNIFE AGAINST
YOUR GIRLFRIENDS THROAT!

ANGELA: Oh no... Please tell me they aren't going to use that for what I
think they are going to use it for!

JOHN: I can't

ANGELA: Jeeesus! WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH MEN???

JOHN: I know! But look, it's not just the men

ANGELA: Aw hell! I take back what I said about the slaughter in the village!
They should have killed ALL OF THEM!
Well, not the children... even though they're probably going to grow up to be the same kind of bastards!

JOHN: Without surviving adults, the children would have been as good as dead come Winter

ANGELA: Thank you Mr. Sinister Realism! Let's do a RomCom next time... I want to see how you handle that!

JOHN: ... [smiling]

ANGELA: Wait a minute! What was that?! In the shadows
Let me just pause it... and enlarge...
That looks kind of like a man, doesn't it? A really evil man
Is that a man?

JOHN: The jury is still out on that one... some call him the Shadow-Man and think of him as kind of an orchestrator of these kinds of rituals, some say there isn't anything at all

ANGELA: Well, I'm on Team Shadow-Man! There totally IS a very evil man right there
Alright, let me just hit 'play' again
Oh, I forgot what this was
How long does this crap go on?

JOHN: For about an hour

ANGELA: Seriously?! What the hell is wrong with people?!
Do I have to watch the whole thing?

JOHN: No... The highlights are enough
There is a small part of about 5 seconds right before she dies where she looks longingly at the guy with sort of a 'I'll-see-you-on-the-other-side'-look that is really memorable, but I wouldn't advice on watching the entire thing just for that

ANGELA: Alright [*handing the cell phone back, and moving to a seat across from John*]
So. Why did I have to see that?

JOHN: To get an understanding of what's at stake

ANGELA: Cryptic... But I hadn't expected much more to be honest
Is the Shadow-Man real?

JOHN: I don't know

ANGELA: I have a feeling I'm barking up the wrong tree here...
There is a riddle in this dream... right here... for me. Right?

JOHN: I don't know

ANGELA: That's right... you are completely oblivious. I mean, not you as you're sitting right here in front of me... But as it played out on the train...
You were sitting on the train... Closing in on the prey... And your entire focus was on that!

And it wasn't supposed to be
You were supposed to notice me!

JOHN: I'm not sure there is any 'supposed' here... that would imply
predetermination

ANGELA: Potato, potahrto... But I get it...

Something else could have happened here...

And under almost any other circumstance, it would have, but you
were too focused on that creep to play the part right

UGH! I'm going to BURN that creep!

Angela closes her eyes and looks concentrated, and then a loud scream is heard
from the other end of the train.

JOHN: ... [*smiling, while fading away*]

ANGELA: John! Where are you going? John!

The entirety of Angela's dream world dissolves into nothing, and Angela is
gripped by the feeling of falling through endless darkness. Angela wakes up in
shock! As it turns out, she does have to take a shower because she is drenched
in sweat. But she is not fat.



Wednesday, April 17th, 2024

Cecil Goes Spelunking in the Basement

KARL: Hey Shit-Bird! Whatcha doin'?

CECIL: Ugh! I'm trying to understand this CCP Swap setup. I understand the whole CCP ordeal and all, but who the hell came up with THIS?!

KARL: Don't I just know it man! It's been that way at least since I was in the Academy... We all got slaughtered on the test!

Look, we're not supposed to help you guys out, but some of these tests they throw at you are about more than just what's on the screen. We need people who'll see the shortest path to victory and take it, not sheep who will march off to the slaughter neatly in file...

Do you follow? [tapping the side of his nose with his index finger]

CECIL: Well, yes and no... What's the angle?

KARL: The documentation of the CCP setup is PURPOSEFULLY incomprehensible because you won't find the key to the setup there

You have to go directly to the source!

CECIL: Alright, I hear ya... And the 'the source' would be?

KARL: 'The One Below'... The man who lives outside of time... 'The Inventor'

CECIL: Alright... I may need you to be a little more specific...

KARL: I'm not sure of his name, because Management tries to keep him a secret for the need-to-know

...you know: so we don't disturb him all the time

This guy is involved in all of the high-profile projects, and you know the craziest thing about it: he's actually a super chill dude...

Or so I've heard. [lowering voice conspiratorially]

As I said, my entire class at the Academy struck out on this assignment big time and I haven't found a good excuse to see him since, but this is the PERFECT opportunity for you

CECIL: Shit yes brother! How do I find him?

KARL: His office is in the north side of the basement, so the easiest thing is to take the stairs next to the Fund Accounting team
I knew a dude who used to smoke reefer with the guy, and from what I understand, you can't miss it, especially since that part of the basement is mostly supply rooms and such

CECIL: I owe you man! Cover for me?

KARL: It's not a prison my man. You don't need me to cover for you
But if anyone asks, I'll throw them off your scent long enough for you to take 1st place on the CCP assignment. Deal?

CECIL: Fuckin' A brotha [gets up and walks briskly towards the hall]

JOHN: Yo, what's the hurry with Shit-Bird?

KARL: He's off to see a man about a CCP setup [grinning]

JOHN: You fucking didn't! That's low man... He's only been here a couple of weeks!

KARL: Relax, what doesn't kill him only makes him stronger

JOHN: You pissed yourself when they pulled that stunt on you!

KARL: Shut up asshole, that was just a wild rumor
Look, don't tell anyone about it - especially Carol - until he has completed his rite of passage... Alright?

JOHN: I ain't no rat, but this is no goddamn 'rite of passage'... It's just cruel!

At the bottom of the stairs, Cecil opens the solid fire door into a hallway of about 20 meters. Throughout, small stacks of unused office furniture is stored at either side of the hallway. When Cecil has gone 3 steps along the hallway, one of the overhead lights begins to flicker, and within 10 seconds, another light joins in the flickering, creating an eerie atmosphere. Cecil is not immediately troubled, and pulls on the handle of the first door on his right, to discover what appears to be a pretty crammed storage room for more office supply. As he steps back into the hallway and closes the door to the storage room, the two lights closest the entrance to the hallway, give out. Except for a dark corner at the other end of the hallway, it is still reasonably lit, and Cecil continues along. Cecil passes another room with cleaning supplies and a washroom - or so at least the signs on the doors will have him think - and decides to take the signs at face value. As he takes one more step along the hall, all of the lights go out and he is left in complete darkness.

The human mind is such a funny thing, with all of its little weird ways: it's capable of deciphering hidden messages in chaotic images of seemingly random shapes and colors and can send us traversing across the ever-growing canyon of time between our Now and Christmas Eve when we were 7 years old by just a whiff of cinnamon, but present it with a single contradictory piece of information to the otherwise convincing story of who we are and what we are doing, and it is ready to tear itself to shreds in sheer panic. If for instance, Cecil's mind did not have this tendency to question reality by a mere change in lighting, it would have easily convinced itself that:

- he is situated in a building with about 100 other people within a radius of 50 meters
- no serial killer - no matter how crazy and blood-thirsty he may be - would choose this time and location to single out his next target
- the Swiss-army knife of useful utilities in his pocket had more than enough battery that he could use its flashlight to peruse this hall for the next hour with more than enough light to keep him from bumping into things

But well... such are the ways of the mind, and when 2 lights at the other end of the hall start blinking, Cecil practically runs towards them, smashing his foot against an office chair about halfway there. This is no time to pause or slow down, but DAMN that hurts! When he is safely within the flickering light, Cecil gathers his composure by drawing in a couple of deep breaths and wipes a little moisture from the side of one eye. The sign on the door to what could very well be an office reads: 'Sune'. The door is slightly ajar, but Cecil doesn't feel right about just barging in. "This better be it" he thinks, and is about to knock on the door, when he is interrupted by a loud voice from the other side of the door.

VOICE: What the fuck do you mean you don't feel right about this?
 ANOTHER VOICE: You can't tell me you like these jobs!

There is something about how hoarse and angry especially the first voice sounded that terrifies Cecil, and for the time being, he opts to remain on his side of the door.

VOICE: Like has nothing to do with it! You're paid handsomely to do a goddamn job soldier... A job that lets you sit around and watch TV most days, as long as you perform when the firm needs you, and now it needs you, so quit your fucking whining and load up!
 OTHER VOICE: Christ! What is it this time? Liver, lung?
 VOICE: Nope! It's the big one: a heart

Even though Cecil cannot see the two men, he is absolutely certain that the last part is said with a satanic grin.

VOICE: Yep, we gotta be real careful we don't accidentally kill him... He has to be kept alive and routinely 'exercised' until the operation...

OTHER VOICE: At least stop sugar-coating it and call it what it is: torture! You're going to torture the poor guy until the doctors are ready to transfer his heart to some fat Chinese bastard with a fuckton of embezzled money, so he may be able to live 5 years longer when we - assuming these dicks haven't thrown US into the feeding pit - get to hunt down the next poor soul, dumb enough to seek their destiny in this sham of an operation

VOICE: Just be glad you're on this side of the hunt holding the assault rifle! Wouldn't want to be this Cecil-guy now would you...?

At the mention of his name, Cecil's mind suddenly regains its grip on reality, and finds the hidden message in the dark and twisted imagery: RUN! It must have somehow forgotten about one very important condition of the current scenario though: more than 2 meters away from the flickering lights, the hallway is completely dark. What his mind has forgotten, Cecil's body reminds it of as it first crashes into what might be a desk, then loses its balance on impact with something that may be the same damn chair he hit going the other way, and as a result hereof, does a nose-dive against the floor. Pretty much every part of Cecil's body has a message for Cecil's brain, but the latter is in no mood to argue and merely insists that the body fulfills its duty, gets off the floor and goes back to that running bit it failed so horribly at just a moment ago. Cecil is thus hurdling his body towards the exit into the stairway when he hears a loud shout:

VOICE: THAT'S HIM... GET HIM!

and the hallway is lit up by a flashlight pointed directly at him from the other side of the hall. Cecil feels no need to turn his head to get a better look at his pursuers and maybe give out a little "tooteloo" but rather seizes this new-found light to sprint through the stairway door, barely stopping to open it.

As the door of the stairway next to the Fund Accounting team bursts open and a panic-ridden young man with streaks of blood running down his face spawns from it, it causes an abrupt pause to all activity in the vicinity. A mute and dumbstruck group of employees watches the young man continue his sprint through the building towards the main exit, trying to decipher the meaning of the poor guy's shouts, which make mention of 'harvesting' and 'bloody murderous bastards' but are otherwise utterly intelligible. Only a single person does not seem at all surprised by the scene. He actually seems to be rather enjoying himself, as he takes out his cell phone to record the grand finale featuring the horror-stricken young man running across the parking lot outside the building, in some direction where he prays to God the organ harvesters won't find him.

JOHN: You are such a fucking asshole man! You better call him yourself and make sure he doesn't do something stupid, 'cause I'm not taking the fall with Carol for this one!

In a - now once again well-lit - hallway in the northern part of the basement, a middle-aged man puts the last piece of fallen furniture back in its right place before he walks back to his office.

MAN: What an idiot! [*muttered to himself, shaking his head*]



Thursday, April 25th, 2024

Angela's Second Dream

Angela steps into her apartment, tired from a long day at work. She closes the door, takes off her footwear and tosses her keys over her shoulder. When she doesn't hear the expected rattle from the keys hitting whatever is back there, she gets suspicious. She peels the curtains of one window to the side to look at the traffic on the street below and determine if it is standing still or not, and reaches a conclusion.

ANGELA: I think we need to make a little adjustment here [whispering]
Abracadabra [snaps her fingers]
That'll do [while looking down at her body, now - rather poorly - dressed in a
man's clothes]
OH OH OH... WHAT A LONG DAY AT WORK. I'M SO TIRED
NOW [yelling in the deepest voice she can muster]
IT IS SO HARD WORKING AS A CREEP ALL DAY... WORKING
AS A SEX-CREEP
ALL THAT RAPING AND MAKING RUDE AND MYSOGO...
MAKING RUDE COMMENTS AND YELLING 'SHOW THEM
TO ME BABY' MUHAHAHAHAHA
I SHOULD REALLY GO INTO MY BEDROOM AND HAVE A
REST!
I JUST HOPE THERE AREN'T ANY PSYCHO VIGILANTE KILLERS
WITH ANGER ISSUES IN THERE!
THAT WOULD JUST BE SOOOOO SAD FOR ME, THE SEX-
CREEP.... BOOO HOOOO
AAAAAWWWWWW... I'M SO TIRED! I'LL JUST STAND HERE
IN FRONT OF MY BED AND STRETCH FOR ABOUT 20 SECONDS
WITH MY EYES ALL CLOSED [arching back, closed eyes]

An arm reaches under Angela's left arm from behind, and quickly grabs a hold of her right shoulder, locking her in from the front. At the same time, she feels someone moving in on her from behind, pressing their body against her back. Another arm, wielding a knife, goes around her neck from the right side and lays the knife to rest against her throat.

ANGRY VOICE: Listen, and listen good!
If you don't do exactly as I say, I'm going to fuck you up really bad
If you try to fight me, I'm going to cut off your creepy sex-offender
balls before I give you a very slow and painful death
Do you understand the instructions I have just given you?
ANGELA: Oh no, not that [squeaky little girl's voice]
[clears throat]
I TOTALLY UNDERSTAND ANGRY STRANGER [deep voice again]

BUT I HAVE ONE QUESTION...
WHAT IF I DO THIS..

Angela draws her right elbow forward and drives it back, hitting the angry stranger in the stomach.

ANGRY VOICE: Aaaaarrrrgggghhhh

Angela now curls herself forward, resulting in a beautiful hip-throw, sending the angry stranger onto the bed in front of them. Angela quickly capitalizes on the stranger's brief disorientation, jumps on top of him and starts pounding the side of his face with full-swing overhead slaps alternating her left and right hand.

ANGELA: SAY YOU YIELD YOU SICK MURDEROUS PSYCHOPATH,
OR I WILL SLAP YOU SILLY
YIELD TO THE CREEP!
SUBSERVIENT VOICE: I YIELD, I YIELD... You are the greatest opponent
I have ever fought... I'm so sorry!
ANGELA: NOW PREPARE FOR THE SHOCKER YOU SICK PSYCHOPATH

...
I'm a girl!
You have just been beaten by a girl!
SUBSERVIENT VOICE: But not just any girl mind you...
There's no shame in losing to the LOVELYYYYY...
ANGELA: ANGELAAAA!!! [raising her arms in victory, still sitting on top of the
angry stranger]
Oh John... You were wonderful! [leaning over and kissing John]
JOHN: And you were... LOVELY!
And what a hip throw!

ANGELA: Thank you darling [getting up, pretending to receive an award for her convincing performance]

I've missed you John

JOHN: And I've missed you Angela [smiling]

ANGELA: But now... It's down to business I suppose

JOHN: I'm afraid so...

ANGELA: I don't want to do it here... If we're going to watch anymore of your horrible movies, I want to go to the drive-in

JOHN: That works for me [smiling]

ANGELA: What kind of car do you want?

JOHN: I'm not really a car guy...

But if you don't have any wishes, I think we should go in one of those Cadillac convertibles you always see in Hollywood movies

ANGELA: Excellent choice John!

Angela snaps her fingers, and they are now in a packed drive-in on a warm Summer's night, in a Cadillac Convertible with the top rolled down. There is a buzzing in the air. Angela and John look at each other.

ANGELA: Let me darling!

Angela snaps her finger, and the buzzing in the air stops, as hundreds of mosquitoes drop dead all around the drive-in.

ANGELA: So what macabre special do you have planned for us tonight my love?

JOHN: It's a romantic drama from high society St. Petersburg in middle 19th century Russia

ANGELA: And let me guess...

He is a noble Baron who falls in love with the kitchen maid, but his cruel mother forces him to marry this bitchy Countess...

which he refuses and tells his evil witch of a mother that he would rather live poor on the street with the woman he loves than do her bidding...

and then the old witch orders her brother, who is heavily indebted to her since she paid off his gambling debt, to kill the poor pretty kitchen maid...

and of course, the slimebag uncle agrees, and when the handsome Baron finds the love of his life stabbed to death on the kitchen floor...

he sets off in uncontrollable anger and kills the uncle, his bitch mother, and every servant who knew about the plot to kill the woman he loved and did NOTHING...

and when the police come to arrest him, he attacks them and is put down like a mad dog...

Right?

JOHN: ... [shocked]

Well...

It's a Baroness and a poor stable boy, but aside from that...

ANGELA: Oooh... Maybe...

if we can just fast-forward to the part where she goes Gung Ho with the sword then...?

JOHN: Of course... [snapping his fingers at the screen, making the movie jump to the requested spot]

ANGRY VOICE FROM A CAR PARKED A COUPLE OF ROWS IN FRONT: HEY!
WHO DID THAT?

ANGELA: SHUT THE FUCK UP YOU FAT LARD AND ENJOY THE FREE MOVIE! [Yelling at the top of her lungs]

JOHN: IF I HAVE TO STEP OUTTA THIS CAR AND COME BY FOR A PALAVRE, YOU'RE GOING TO BE ONE SORRY FAT FUCK!!!
[yelling at the top of his lungs]

BOTH: ... [listening for a reply]

ha ha ha ha [looking at each other and laughing]

ANGELA: Oooohhh... Look at the moves I've got! I'm the Brave Baroness by the way

JOHN: Of course you are [smiling]

ANGELA: Alright... What else is on tonight?

JOHN: I have a Bonnie and Clyde type drama from the Dust Bowl in 1930's Mid West USA...?

ANGELA: Young woman supposed to marry big evil conglomerate King Pin, broke farmer being driven from the family farm...

They meet...

instantly fall in love...

King Pin is boo hoo so sad and swears to take brutal revenge on the girl who has irreversibly broken his heart and the filthy young farmer...

Which of course he gets... insert brutality... murder... more murders... goodbye to our young lovers...

JOHN: ... [saying nothing, gesturing 'what can I say?']

ANGELA: You know what John...

I think I'm getting the picture...

Or I will, when I have thought about it some more...

Tonight, I'm in the mood for something different...

... [snaps her fingers, Cadillac is replaced by a king-size madras, movie changes]

JOHN: Speaking of brutality! [looking at the screen, slightly shocked]

Do women really like that?

ANGELA: Hmm... Sometimes...

But that there might be a bit much

JOHN: What do you say we do something about all these people?

ANGELA: Oooohhhh... What did you have in mind? [*biting her lip*]
JOHN: Follow my lead...

John gets up and runs behind the hindmost row of cars to the left-side corner, with Angela following him.

JOHN: You take this corner [*runs across the lot to the right side*]

John snaps his fingers, producing an assault rifle. Angela catches his drift, and produces an RPG and a 6-shooter in the same manner. John starts firing into the air.

JOHN: DEATH TO ALL YOU INFIDEL PIGS AND YOUR DIRTY MOTHERS

ANGELA: ... [*sending a grenade off, blasting the screen to pieces*]

I AM A SEX CREEP AND WOMEN DON'T LIKE ME SO I'M
GOING TO RAPE EVERYONE HERE!!! MUAHAHAHHAHA [*in
her deep sex-offender voice, shooting her 6-shooter in the air*]

JOHN: I'M A VIKING WHO HAS COME FROM THE PAST TO PILLAGE
AND KILL!!! [*also making a deep voice*]

BOTH: ... [*walking towards their madras as cars flee the drive-in in panic*]
hahahahaha [*laughing their asses off, rolling on the madras*]

ANGELA: Now, where were we Mr. Viking

JOHN: I think I was about to be molested by a sex creep

ANGELA: muahahahahah

Some time later, Angela and John are lying on their backs, looking up at the stars above.

ANGELA: What are you John?

JOHN: I don't think I can answer that any better than you can

ANGELA: Then, thinking out loud...

I think the John who is out there, is kind of like you...
And you are just what I think of when I think of him
Yet, I KNOW he is kind of like you...
I haven't figured it out yet

JOHN: ... [*thinking hard on what to say*]

ANGELA: I've been looking for you...
or him...

I think I'll designate him YOU... for now at least
You are hard to find...
You are clearly used to staying hidden
Are you in some kind of trouble?

JOHN: I'll survive
ANGELA: Yes... That's what you would say
The kind of guy who would risk death for love, right?
JOHN: ... [looking at Angela... smiling]
ANGELA: But you KNOW what that leads to...
That's what every one of your movies is about, right?
JOHN: I believe they are about more than just that
ANGELA: ... [pensive]
Yes, I DO believe that
Oh John, will you hold me until I sleep... squared, I suppose [smiling,
closing her eyes]
JOHN: I'd love to [holds her]
ANGELA: John... Are you asleep?
JOHN: I'm not
ANGELA: Would you rather be 'Fernando Sanchez'?
JOHN: No... I like John
ANGELA: I like John too [kisses his arm and snuggles in tighter]

Thursday, May 2nd, 2024

Enter Mike

Mike joins FinaLibre the month following Cecil's first day and is - like Cecil - given the general layout of the organization along with a tour around the building.

FRANK: How much do you know about what we do here at FinaLibre?

MIKE: Not a lot to be honest

FRANK: About half our new hires don't. Do you have a pension plan?

MIKE: I don't think so

FRANK: Alright, but you may want to someday, you know: save a little money for your retirement, and in that case, you could choose to stash away a bit of money each month in a bank account. One of the problems with that approach is, that banks don't pay a lot of interest and due to inflation, your money is likely to be worth less at the time of your retirement than the sum of the deposits made to your bank account. Do you follow so far?

MIKE: I do

FRANK: Great! Preferable to storing your money in the bank, is something yielding a higher expected rate of return

Something that will earn you more money in the long run, so to speak

Buying common stock - or equities - in successful businesses has historically proven to be a preferable alternative, yielding a much higher EXPECTED rate of return, but of course, it also comes with a risk: there is a chance that the businesses you invest in will go bankrupt, in which case you have lost all of your invested money

MIKE: Oof!

FRANK: Yes... but there are ways to mitigate the risk by spreading out your investments over different companies in different sectors, subject to different risk- and growth- potentials, such that SOME of your investments may end up worthless but the probability that ALL of your investments become worthless is negligible, that is, you hedge your bets so to speak by spreading your eggs across different baskets

MIKE: ... [starting to look a little drowsy]

FRANK: Alright, this is a fairly large domain and you can read up on all the formal stuff on your own time, so for the purpose at hand, let's abstract to the point where we conclude, that as a normal person that just doesn't want his savings to rot away on a bank account, you are faced with the choice of either:

- coming to terms with the domain and hand-picking your investments
- letting specialists handle the investment of your savings for you, in exchange for a small periodic fee

FRANK: This presentation is of course a little over-simplified and may seem biased towards the second option, but in all fairness I have worked with a lot guys of normal or higher intelligence who suddenly realized that outside of work, they had way too much time to spend on their wives and children, and thus embarked on their own Project Buffet, and ultimately ended up at least solving the problem of having too much time on their hands

Do you follow?

MIKE: Yeaahhh.... [clearly not following]

FRANK: At FinaLibre we offer investment products that bundle together the savings of many investors in a cost-effective manner

MIKE: I get it... We buy and sell finance... thingies... on behalf of these investors, right?

FRANK: Well, not exactly... but it's in the right ball park

You might say we handle pretty much everything OTHER than actually investing the money:

- Accounting: Legislation requires at least 1 annual audit of all investment funds, to ensure that all valuables are accounted for
- Investment Compliance: We offer a lot of different shared investment products, that differentiate themselves from each other and the rest of the market, by having different investment strategies, guidelines and restrictions. Some funds invest in Asian companies, some funds invest in debt certificates issued by large European banks and our Investment Compliance unit makes sure that the people actually responsible for making the investments, follow these guidelines and restrictions along with any relevant legislation
- Reporting and APIs: We service shared investment vehicles for both small private investors as well as huge pension funds, and especially the latter has a tendency to want very frequent updates on the status of their investments
- Settlement and Reconciliation: So I mentioned that we aren't actually the ones to decide WHAT to invest in, but even with the decision being made by an outside party, we still need to make sure that the transactions

execute as expected, such that if the Investment Advisor or Portfolio Manager has decided to buy 10.000 shares of some common stock, paying 102,76 EUR per share, that we actually receive the 10.000 shares in our custody, and that no more than 10.276.000 EUR is withdrawn from our bank accounts

- Then there's also all the legal stuff, and publishing Net Asset Value per fund throughout the day, but I think we'll save that for another day. Are you with me so far?

MIKE: Weeelll.... I think I kinda understand, but I wouldn't like to be quizzed on this tomorrow

FRANK: Don't worry... We won't quiz you for another 2 weeks [*smiling*]
But I advise you to read and understand the intro material...
When push comes to shove, there's really no way around the necessity of having a solid understanding of the domain of Finance if you want to be effective and productive in this field

MIKE: Thank you [*displaying the broad smile of a man about to sign a contract with absolutely no understanding of its content*]



Thursday, May 2nd, 2024

Mike Meets the Cool People

CAROL: Hey Poindexter, wanna join the rest of us for lunch?
MIKE: That sounds nice... thanks
CAROL: I'm Carol
MIKE: Mike... glad to meet you

Mike has previously held part-time jobs in retail during his early studies but this is his first time working corporate, and as they walk in silence towards the cafeteria, he has plenty of time to wonder about etiquette for these quasi-1-on-1-situations and if maybe he is expected to say something.

CAROL: Most people fill the void with pointless blabber about the latest in corporate politics, SFW details of their personal life, and so on, but I don't mind the silence
MIKE: Was it that obvious?
CAROL: Yes. It was very obvious, but we've all been there [*smiling*]
And here is a free tip for you: if you're scared of awkward silence and/or would like to engage in a little man-on-man-flirtation yet would like to stay on the safe side of the unwritten laws of heterosexual and only slightly homophobic behavior of heterosexual males, you can always pick a soccer-team to route for and join in on the verbal orgy
MIKE: Well, I like Chelsea [*lighting up in a maybe purposefully too bright a smile*]
CAROL: Riiight...
Look Mike...
You seem like a really nice guy and all, but I'm not going to have sex with you
MIKE: ... [*Contemplating*]
CAROL: ...
MIKE: ... OK

CAROL: OK? That's it? OK? What the hell kind of a response is that?

MIKE: About the only sensible response as far as I can see [*smiling, once again in a bit too broad a smile*]

CAROL: No getting down on your knees and begging the 'most beautiful woman you have ever met' to please, please, please reconsider?

Or throwing your hands in the air and go: 'tsk tsk tsk... LIKE I WOULD EVEN WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU'?

MIKE: Maybe I'm doing that first thing on the inside, but you have clearly stated that THAT is not an option for you, so it would be a little respectless of me to just ignore that fact and 'plow on' - no pun intended - and as for the second option... that's just plain childish

CAROL: hmm.... [*thinking*]

Well, you could say: 'I can respect that'

That explicitly expresses respect and is A LOT better than plain old 'OK'

At this, Mike stops walking and as Carol does likewise, he looks her sternly in the eyes. No broad smile now.

MIKE: Look Carol, I'm picking up sort of a... vibe from you...

You SAY you don't want to have sex with me, yet I can't help but feel like this is just a ploy to somehow lure me into bed so you can have your way with me

CAROL: I DO NOT WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU! [*equally stern*]

MIKE: I can respect that [*nodding, resumes walking*]

CAROL: ...slick! [*approvingly, under her breath*]

Oh, there's the in-crowd... I'll introduce you

BEN: So Mike, how are you liking your new job so far?

MIKE: Oh, it far surpasses my expectations...

not that I really know what I had expected come to think about it...

maybe that I would feel at least a slight sting when they removed my soul, but I haven't felt a thing except for this immense joy when I think about making a lot of money

CECIL: Let me guess: you just finished some kind of degree in Computer Science...?

At this, Karl extends a punch to Cecil's chest across the table.

CECIL: Ouch! What the hell did you do that for?

BEN: Get with the company spirit, Cecil!

'We are all flung from the same dung heap!'

CECIL: Point taken... jeeez

JOHN: Well, now that he mentions it, I don't remember being properly compensated for my soul! Surely, there's gotta be something wrong here

KARL: I guess it depends on whether or not you had one when you started here which - speaking as your undoubtedly best friend and closest confident - I know that you did in fact NOT, so..

JOHN: Wow, wow... ease down buddy... there were all kinds of things wrong with that sentence, but just to stay on topic:

I have never closed any deal with the Devil

I may have flirted... sure

I'm not ruling out light petting and a trip to 1st base, but I have not gone all the way with him

KARL: Which one is 1st base again?... [whispering to Susan]

Is it the one where your mouth goes here... [pointing at a part of himself below table level]

and my mouth would go there...

or is it the one with the midgets?

SUSAN: ... [shaking head in a grin]

JOHN: Seriously, hear me out...

When it comes right down to it, I don't even think that I would sign with the Devil...

When compared to God, he is definitely the weaker of the two..

KARL: BUT, strength-stats aside, God doesn't really have a good track record for dishing out from his stash...

Look at what he did to his own son for crying out loud [purposefully over-dramatic]

Naahah... That horned MOFO is my DAWG!

He is always down to spread the dough on his friends!

JOHN: ... until you read the fine-line right, and then what the hell is the point of cashing in, if you gotta spend an eternity deciphering lawyer mumbo-jumbo just to make sure he's not screwing you on the deal

BEN: Well, I'm with Karl on this one. Team Red Demon +1

MIKE: Oh Lordy! I don't mind saving my soul and signing with the Almighty

SUSAN: Ditto... I'm too risk-averse to bet an entire eternity

CAROL: Aw heck guys, that means the gang is going to have to split up [*looking longingly at Karl and Ben*]

BEN: Quit it Carol! There's only a 0% chance of you NOT being in the dark and steamy dungeons trying to get your hands on fresh meat when the rest of us arrive

CAROL: It does sound a little like my trip to Italy, Summer of 2019 [*concedes*]

JOHN: And now, let me tell you why you are all damn fools!

You guys want to sign with Big Spikey [*pointing at Ben and Karl*]
who is of course known for always honoring an agreement
but how much do you honestly think he'll pay you for it?
You're thinking you'll be able to get at least a couple million EUR,
but who are you fooling?
Speaking as your 'close confident' I know for a fact that even the combined sum of your souls isn't worth the time we have spent on this discussion so far...
but more importantly: HE KNOWS...
... he absolutely KNOWS he'll get them either way, 'cause it's been your life-long dream, so why would he pay any more than a quarter for the pair?
And as for signing with Old Thundering Voice In The Cloud...
with the whole Prodigal Son fuck-up, he made it absolutely clear that he isn't handing out early-sign-on-bonuses

KARL: Wooooow, wow, wow... wait a minute, I see what you are trying to do here, and even though it was not explicitly agreed upon at the onset of this discussion, it was implicitly understood by all parties, that the discussion was strictly on the topic of the Christian alternatives... if you start throwing in Zen or Ahmed or whatever, you are clearly in violation of the rules

JOHN: But that is not where I'm going!
What I'm saying is, that you should play those fuckers for all you can!
Keep close contact with Team White and check in frequently, but make sure that you're seen chilling with your Horn-Dawg once in a while
Drive the price as high as you can, and only cash in on the best offer at the very last minute

SUSAN: Well, I think that settles it in John's favor. I'm with you! [*nodding approvingly as she gets up*]

CAROL: Yeah, I think I'ma jump ship and join Team Coy as well [*also gets up*]

BEN: Carol the Coy! Like that's going to happen!

KARL: Weak! The whole damned bunch 'o you

JOHN: No Karl...

You are just damned!

4... evah.... [*also gets up*]



Wednesday, May 15th, 2024

Angela's Last Dream

ANGELA: I know it all now John

JOHN: I know

ANGELA: What would catch your eye most efficiently:

'Jess needs help catching Shadow-Man?

or 'Girl from Lake needs help to catch Shadow-Man?

JOHN: Girl from Lake

But are you sure you want to mention the Shadow-Man?

ANGELA: I don't want to, but I fear we'll only have one shot

We'll go with 'Lake-Girl'

but I don't want to talk about it anymore now...

or think about it

Would you hold me through the night John?

JOHN: I would love to

ANGELA: ... [*laying in John's arms*]

I hope I see you again soon!

JOHN: You know I feel the same

ANGELA: I do

Friday, May 17th, 2024

Young Man Lost and Found



YOUNG MAN (thinking):
When did I begin feeling so old?
I'm not sure 'old' is the right word
'Tired' maybe, but it's not really my body, is it?
It's my soul...
... I don't really know about 'soul'...
So, the part of me that thinks... 'Mind' is OK. Think of me as mind
My mind is tired. But from what? Living?
Is it that I lack goals?
I really do lack goals!
Racking up virtual points on a website isn't really a goal, is it?
Do I even care about the damn points?
I don't think so...
But of course, it's a little hard to just stop...
... at least... it would require some work...
A preemptive strike!
And it would have to be damn quick and damn preemptive!
The guy... Jacob!... Don't start forgetting their names!
He was probably right about someone working a money-angle
But didn't I always suspect that?

The young man had been sitting still in front of his computer for about 10 minutes. This was the routine part of tonight's job that he always struggled to do. It wasn't that it was dreadful as such, it was just so damn unrewarding, in the immediate sense. Most of us have gotten so used to responsive websites and immediate gratification when we tap or click something on our device, that this type of use of electronics can't help but feel... well, unrewarding. First, he had to boot up the Tails USB he had received when he was 'offered' entrance into the Banshee Bulletin Board. Then he had to make sure the Tails installation was up-to-date to avoid intruders during his session on the board. He had on more than a couple of occasions ordered substances through dark web markets,

and over time he had taken a somewhat lax approach to the security part of the operation; even if the authorities were able to somehow intercept his doings, they'd still have to prove it, and he had always figured that mailing some sad sap's drugs substances that were clearly for personal use... well of course, during the last part of that part of his life, his orders may have been large enough to be charged as 'for distribution' even if they were for personal use... but still: why would the authorities bother with making the case, when you had people ordering coke from their personal Facebook accounts? What type of composition of mind would be required to see the straight path and the path that involved going through various layers of encryption and probably own up to the fact that some kind of international privacy law had been broken along the way, and decide that the latter sounded most intriguing. Not a very typical one he had always supposed. But things were different here, or well... the stakes were higher. Which he knew all too well. So he kept up to date on the latest security recommendations and kept his setup up to date. And then came the whole logging-in process. He had to go to the main site to initiate the sign-in, then go to another site, input the ID's of his latest 3 assignments, and finish the verification process. All in all, the procedure called for alertness he was finding it harder and harder to raise because failure to sign in and complete a job at least once every 3 months meant that your user would be set to 'Banned' and as he knew all too well, the distance from 'Banned' to 'Terminated' could be as little as a couple of hours.

YOUNG MAN (thinking):
Maybe that's what I need...
Like Captain Ahab and that damn whale...
something worth going under for...
Taking down the Banshees would be a nice whale...
There's gotta be at least 1.000 active users...
I think I only really care about the kill...
Is it really the kill? Or the fight?
I guess it's the destruction
So does that make me a sadist? To some extent, probably it does
But there needs to be the fight as well...
The chance of losing. Dying
Do I want to die?
Am I afraid to die?
Not as much anymore, but I do still feel the adrenaline, so I guess there is something in there... in here... that wants to live
When did I get like this?
Was I always this gloomy?
Rehab did a number on me
Well, it's unfair to say rehab; it was the drugs that came before that took away something I guess...

Intensity of life maybe

Maybe it was the decision to live, because it would hurt others if I died

I always did have a contrary personality

Someone would say: you should go left, and I would go right

You don't want me to die, well guess what I want to do now...

But there is something more than sadism and the chance of dying

I didn't really enjoy killing that guy... Jacob... It was just something that had to be done

I could have hurt him more, at least at the end. But I didn't feel any need to do so; it was just a clean-up

OpSec

But I like beating the shit out of drunk drivers and child molesters. So maybe it's something else

So what's it about?

I've always laughed during movies when the evil shit got what he deserved

So am I doing this out of a need to protect something good in the world?

Am I hiding behind a numb facade because I am afraid to admit to myself that I want what is good and right in the world to win?

Because there is so much shit!

But why couldn't I just tell myself that Jacob was a piece of shit child molester or drunk driver?

Because I would know it wasn't true

I do that all the time: I restrict myself, even my thoughts

'Remember the name of the people you've killed'

'Don't say 'soul' because you don't know if you have one'

'Don't say 'hate' or 'love' because you don't know if you are capable of feeling anything that goes slightly beneath the surface'

But alright, let's play a little game

You've earned it... 'I've earned it'... CHRIST, I'M DOING IT ALREADY!

I can use whatever words I want and think whatever I want. Go nuts!

And then a strange thing happens: the young man's mind goes blank, which is probably a pretty good summary of the thoughts that had run through his mind for the past 10 minutes: he is lost and has no idea where to go. And then, as he had done on so many occasions before when he felt lost, he continues in the direction he is already going, gets started on the damn update-check (all up-to-date), completes the unrewarding task of signing in and gets to the part where he marks the job as 'Completed', and then he has to provide 'Proof of Execution': something that only the person who carried out the job would know; information that couldn't have been obtained by hearing about the job or having been at the scene and once again curses himself: this is another part of his routine that he has gotten sloppy about. For the first 5 jobs he did, he had actually left something for the investigators in or under the body. Then there had been a period of delivering an in-depth crime scene report. That was probably his most

'professional' period. Now, he usually resorts to just describing what had gone down, and hoping the coroner's report would be consistent with what he put in. So, what had gone down tonight? Pedersen - man 32 - had parked his car in the parking lot of the social housing area where he lived. The young man had been waiting in the stairway on the landing above the door to Pedersen's apartment and attacked him with the crowbar as he opened his entrance door. Had it been 5 or 6 blows to the side of Pedersen's head with the crowbar? He puts in 5 to be on the safe side, and then thinks that there isn't really a safe side, and knowing himself, it was probably more likely 6. He corrects it to 8. And then he had used the sharp end of the crowbar... and had made a mess... but at least it did leave some details around the entrance that should suffice as 'Proof of Execution' and the young man submits the information to close the job. Now, the young man does something that sets him apart from a large portion of the human population. Feeling tired and burnt out from their main occupation - and this had been the young man's main occupation for more than a year now - having money to get through life for at least 6 months and 3 months until he had to mark the next job as completed, most people would probably have thought along the lines of: 'well, that was a nights work well done' turned off the computer and found some activity they might find rewarding or relaxing. Get their mind off their work, so to speak. But that's not what the young man does, and if you had asked him why, or if he had thought to ask himself why, he very likely would have had a hard time coming up with a sensible answer. 'Because that's what I do'. And thus, he went on the site's forum, which was primarily used by the users of the site to exchange information on jobs they were considering (with a lot of paranoid smoke screening and misleading information guaranteed) or to obtain information that would help them submit a job. The jobs themselves were posted on the main bulletin board, but it paid off to keep up-to-date with the forum since it usually contained information about the jobs that wasn't available on the job descriptions themselves. And it was here, that the young man came across a post that made his heart stop for a second. The title reads:

'Lake-girl seeks 23928-hero to track down Shadow-Man'

It's a title that would probably be filtered out from the contact ad part of any respectable newspaper as pure nonsense, but it doesn't stand out on the forum of the Banshee Bulletin, where users use all kinds of in-the-know slang and abbreviations to get their point across. The reason it stands out to the young man is partly due to the number 23928... The ID of a job he had recently completed. But combined with the use of 'Lake-girl', which has a very personal meaning to him - and not one he believes he has ever told anyone about - it feels like a personal message directed at him. 'And why does 'Shadow-Man' ring a bell?' He clicks the post to see the details:

'I saw you John, but you didn't see me. If you had gone on for one more stop, we could have gone together. Please do the interview with Frank ETD + 42d 5h, and please do good. I'll find you. I miss you John'

He absolutely knows that this is for him, and it doesn't take him long to look up when job 23928 had been, and arrive at the conclusion that wherever

'Lake-girl' wants him to be, she wants him to be there at 14:30 on Tuesday, which gives him more than enough time to figure out the other details.

YOUNG MAN (thinking):
Forget about the damn whale!
This feels like a shark!

Tuesday, May 21st, 2024

On Weddings and Psychopaths

KARL: ... and can someone please tell me, WHY it's considered OK for her to want to spend 30.000 EUR on a fucking wedding... because she's 'always dreamed of being wedded like a fucking princess'...

but it's NOT alright for me to spend 30.000 EUR after the wedding on stunt-men and extras so me and the boys can reenact The Battle of Falkirk from Braveheart...

that was MY childhood dream? [challenging the rest of the group]

MIKE: Well, it's your money [folding]

CECIL: You do you, man [folding]

CAROL: You know Karl, it wouldn't hurt to give her this one thing, she is, after all, going to be married to YOU for the rest of her life

BEN: There wasn't even a pot, man... Take it [folding]

JOHN: ... [holding a hand up, dismissing getting involved in the dirty affair]

So Mike... Are you still finding the exciting world of financial services to your liking?

MIKE: I sure am boss [broad fake smile]

In honesty... I like it here and all...

But... I don't know how to explain it...

Maybe I'm feeling a little 'underwhelmed'

I guess I'm glad the financial sector didn't live up to my expectations...

but I came in expecting pots of coins at the entrance for people to throw around in decadence...

people snorting cocaine off the butts of hookers while 'landing big deals over the phone' [gestures holding a telephone receiver between head and shoulder]

and out-of-touch professional psychopath management driving stock of replaceable labor over the Cliff of Exhaustion in suicide!

CAROL: Would one of you guys please show Mike around to the Employee Fountain of Nickles? ... tsk, tsk tsk

BEN: I'll get you set up for FunBox TM Mike [winking]
JOHN: Now we just gotta find you a boss psychopath for Mike and he'll
be a happy camper [smiling at Mike]
SUSAN: We've got Pissy Frank come Audit time... Will that do?
KARL: ... [in deep contemplation, apparently brooding over an idea]
You guys know what?
EVERYONE ELSE: ...
KARL: I don't believe in psychopaths
BEN: Good for you my friend, psychopaths are known to lie [flashing fake
smile at Karl]
KARL: I'm serious... I think this whole spiel about 'psychopathy' is just
something the square Johns have come up with to make sure the
world stays a boring place [challenging]
CAROL: ... [looking puzzled at John]
JOHN: ... [shrugging shoulders as if to say 'Hell if I know, let's see where this takes
us']
KARL: Look at the traits commonly associated with a 'psychopath' [making
a big show about putting quotation marks around 'psychopath']
- lack of empathy
- impulsivity
- aggressiveness
Yeah? Really?
You know what I call someone like that? A WARRIOR [drawing out
the pronunciation of the word 'warrior']
BEN: Are we back at Falkirk Karl?
KARL: Funny! Real funny!
But honestly, if the Russian Bear decides to get up and go for a little
snack run around Europe
What type of people will we be looking to to ward off the foreign
threat?
That's right... The so-called 'psychopaths'
We'll want people who are not afraid to act and who are willing and
able to act violently against other people
Think of Gilles de Rais: outstanding military career during The
Hundred Year's War, returns home, and is declared a 'psychopath'
MIKE: THE GUY WAS A FUCKING PEDOPHILE WHO MURDERED
MORE THAN A HUNDRED CHILDREN!
EVERYONE: ... [looking accusingly at Karl]
KARL: Alright, alright... I'll fold on Gilles...
I didn't think any of you knew any history ... [half muttering to himself]
BUT! My point still stands: what we think of as a 'psychopath' is
someone who would be a real hero during times of war
CECIL: I'm not so sure about that...
Didn't you guys see that Ted Talk about the guy who trained Navy
Seals?
He made a big deal about how social skills are like the absolute most

important skill a prospective Navy Seal can have
Maybe in the days of madly charging the enemy while you are
swinging an ax above your head, the type of self-centeredness you
associate with psychopaths was OK...

but in modern-day warfare where each soldier represents a large
investment, you need someone who will look out for more than #1

KARL: You guys are missing the point!

But we'll go about it another way...

If I started punching you guys randomly throughout the day... You
might call me a psychopath, right?

JOHN: I don't know about 'psychopath' but we'd definitely think you were
and asshole! [conceding]

BEN: Which really isn't that much of a stretch to status quo to be honest
[smiling]

KARL: But what if I came from a place where that was the norm... Say, I
had 3 older brothers who used to punch me whenever I let my guard
down

You guys might 'think I was an asshole' [looking at John]
but would that make me a psychopath?

EVERYONE: ... [puzzled, not really getting what Karl is driving at]

MIKE: Karl, did your father do mean things to you when you were a child?
[touching Karl's hand with a concerned expression on his face]

KARL: Shut up!

AAlright...

You remember Jacob, right John? [looking at John]

JOHN: Of course...

Jacob was our colleague in Client Management up until a couple of
months ago and then he just disappeared [explaining to Cecil and Mike]
There were rumors that he eloped to Brazil on embezzlement charges,
but nothing official has come out

KARL: Well, check this out...

Jacob is dead!

I know someone who knows someone in the Police, who said he was
found murdered in his plane or motor glider or whatever...

Shot 10 times in the head!

But that the case is COVERED in red tape!

Buried!

And there's more... [leaning forward, whispering in secrecy]

One time, some of us from Client Management went out drinking...

And after the strip joint, when it was just me and Jacob having
drinks in a last-ditch bar

we get to talking, and he tells me about this super-secret online
society he's a part of

... where they KILL people... [whispering, but still managing to stress the
word 'kill']

So, if you're a member, you can put up a 'mark' and a reward, that

'I would like to see this or that guy disappear'
... say you have a real issue with some dude in your everyday life...
But you can't just kill him, because everyone would know it was
you, and then here comes the 5-0...

Then you put him up as a mark on the list, and then you can make
sure to be at the amusement park having your picture taken on the
Devil of Red Hot Death...

While some guy who doesn't have any connection at all to the mark,
will be putting bullets through the back of the man's skull

CECIL: But why?! What's in it for the guy? [clearly not believing Karl's tale]
KARL: He's rewarded in this virtual currency, that he himself can spend
on the site...

MIKE: That sounds a bit... made up...

I'd like to think that our police force would shut such an operation
down...

KARL: Yeah well... There's a bit more to it...

You can't just put anyone up there...

Submissions are screened and you have to submit evidence that the
person deserves to be... [makes shooting gesture with his hand]

Jacob believed that some pretty top-ranking police officers are in on
the deal

EVERYONE: ... [looking at Karl, a little uncomfortably]

JOHN: So... It's a kinda 'Hobby-Killers Craig's List' combined vigilante
forum?

KARL: Yes!

MIKE: But that brings up the ever-present paradox of vigilantism: that
the vigilante is as bad as the people they kill...?

KARL: Yes! And I'm glad you said that...

Because it ISN'T a paradox... Not in this place at least...

When you are a member of the society, you are automatically on the
list

On the website, you're just a randomly generated ID...

But if anyone is able to uncover your real identity...

They can kill you!

CECIL: Which of course they could do under any circumstance. I mean,
you can always decide to be a murderous bastard, right?

KARL: Yes AND no... Because the murders that happen under this operation...

They are magically forgotten about!

In the way that 'nobody's seen Jacob but he's probably living the
sweet life in a favela in Brazil, when in fact he's buried in an unmarked
grave somewhere'

EVERYONE: ... [looking at Karl puzzled and a little worried]

KARL: So, now... [sitting up straight and raising his voice]

Society as a whole would label anyone on that list a 'psychopath',
right? [once again, emphasizing the quotes]

EVERYONE: ... [*a little uneasy*]

KARL: But I call bullshit!

They just have another frame of reference!

The ability to track someone down and murder them isn't a malevolent trait that some off-breed less developed cast of society has...

Like the square Johns will have you think

It's just that you have accepted that the same thing might happen to you... You are playing for bigger stakes so to say

And I think that you can generalize this perception...

In movies and books, the murderer is often treated as someone almost from another universe, because he is able to do the 'unthinkable deed'

I think it's just a matter of these people having learned throughout their life, that society will do the same thing to them...

They are playing the game of life on a higher skill setting

BEN: Well, I think psychologists generally agree that psychopathy is the result of a mix of nature and nurture, but...

KARL: BUT NOTHING!

Can't you see: this is 'stay-in-your-place'-ism in its worst form

Because the rich assholes that are presently in power, do not want us to play any game that might jeopardize their superiority...

... so they make up a whole load of bull shit terms like: 'psychopath' and 'sociopath'...

notice how they can't even agree on whether those two are the same damn thing!

and every fucking square John happily skip along to the beat of these assholes:

'we must not be psychopaths', because it makes the ASSHOLES in power feel uneasy

... [*now standing, looking around the table, challenging the others to retort*]

CECIL: I'm feeling a little uneasy myself... But I've got nothing... [*folding his hand*]

MIKE: That was a lot to take in... I can't even... [*folding his hand*]

BEN: ... [*shrugging his shoulders, folds*]

EVERYONE: ... [*looking at John in expectation of his move*]

JOHN: ... [*staring at Karl*]

Do you know what I really hate about working with you?

KARL: ... [*looking at John, defiantly*]

JOHN: I get to know really intimate details about your girlfriend based on when you set off on one of these manic rants...

Details that I don't want to know!

EVERYONE: ... [*looking puzzled*]

CAROL: THAT'S RIGHT!

What was it... about 3 weeks ago you went off on that mad Winnie

The Pooh is a sadistic rapist non-sense

KARL: That's beside the point!

SUSAN: And the day before that, you went off on the Lizard-people theory
CAROL: I think you need to see someone about your fear of blood, honey

[*toucning Karl's arm comfortingly*]

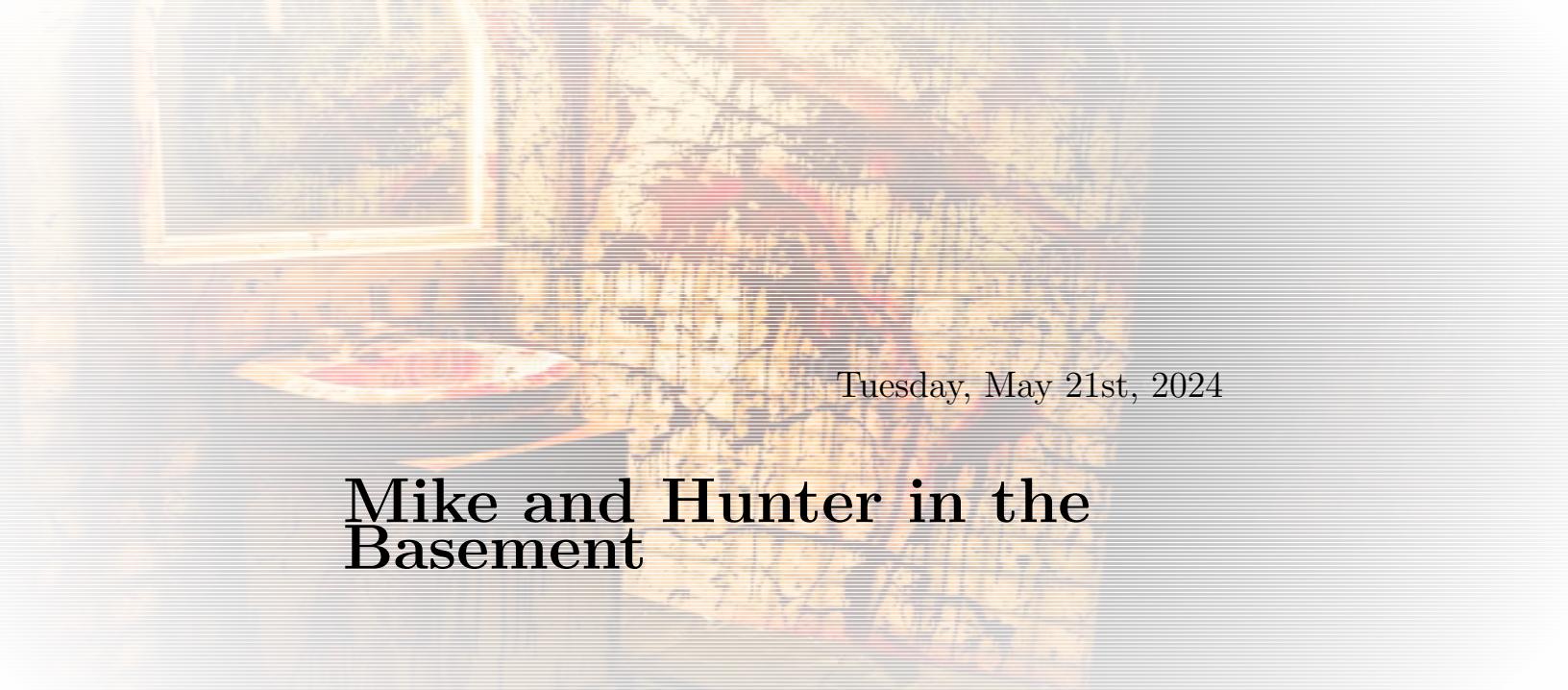
KARL: Look! It's not about that! [frustrated]

Everybody except Karl gets up from the lunch table.

KARL: Not ALL about that anyways... [*muttering to himself*]

MIKE: Was that whole thing about a secret society just something he made
up? [*whispering to Cecil as they leave*]

CECIL: I'm not sure man, but I may just stick to 'not-killing-people' to be
on the safe side [*smiling, a little uneasy*]



Tuesday, May 21st, 2024

Mike and Hunter in the Basement

KARL: Nerdy McNerd! Just the man I was looking for
MIKE: Always good to see you Karl. What can I do for you?
KARL: I need a favor... But first, you gotta promise me to keep what I'm
about to tell you between the two of us...? *[looking serious]*
MIKE: Of course... Tell me
KARL: I've just been given my chance of making it BIG!
There is this top-secret project about launching an HFT-fund out of
FinaLibre...
MIKE: HFT?
KARL: High-Frequency Trading... You can look it up on your own time...
As I said, this is my big chance...
My make-it-or-break-it...
I just cannot fuck this one up, or I'll be answering phones for the
rest of my life
MIKE: Well, at least until that job is automated by AI... *[pensive]*
KARL: Dude! I DO NOT NEED THIS RIGHT NOW!
MIKE: Sorry... go on...
KARL: My success hinges on this one dude at the company, and the thing
is: the guy fucking HATES me!
I think the missus left him a couple of years ago, and he has just
become this miserable old guy, and for some reason, he has directed
all his passive-aggressive anger towards me!
I don't even know his old lady!
... the only thing I can think of is, that I don't speak Nerd...
But it's not fair for him to jeopardize my career because of THAT,
is it? I have other qualifications...
MIKE: Yeah... You got the best 'G'day sir, how may I help you today?'
out there...
KARL: ... *[looking suspiciously at Mike]*
Are you fucking with me?
MIKE: Sorry man... Please... continue

KARL: Look... You speak IT, and I have a feeling he'll like you like some real workplace father/son shit...
Hell, if he does take to you, you'll be on the fast track to all sorts of insights into what is moving on the technology side of things...
He is like the nexus of any project even remotely technical in nature

MIKE: Awesome!

KARL: And right now, I just need you to go have a short chat with him... Introduce yourself, shoot the shit about Japanese AI chicks or whatever the fuck gets you IT guys damp... and then just ask him for an update on the HFT-algorithm... He's probably going to go off about what kind of useless shit I am, and you can just throw me under the bus with some: 'Yeah, what do we even need these soulless FinDevils for, but don't shoot the messenger, I'm new here'-spiel... I just need to report back to project management with a status for now
Can you do this for me?

MIKE: Sure... It actually sounds kinda fun

KARL: Thanks... I owe you one

MIKE: So where do I find this wizard?

KARL: ... [face expresses 'seriously?'] You know the stairway by the Fund Accounting team...? Well, go down the stairs to the basement, and then when you are almost at the end of the hallway down there, there's a sign that says 'Sune'... That's the place!

MIKE: Well, there's no time like the present...
I'll get on it right away [*shoots dual-wielded finger guns at Karl*]

Mike sets off down the hall in a cheery little skip, and almost bumps into John as he rounds the corner.

JOHN: Wooow... Easy there buddy! What are you so cheerful about?
MIKE: I'm off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz [*continues along the hall. Skipping*]

John looks around the hall to see if he is somehow the butt of some candid camera setup when he notices Karl sitting at Mike's desk in the adjoining room, with a huge grin on his face. As he realizes that yet another poor young soul has just been laid sacrifice on the alter of office stupidity, he seriously considers going after Mike and giving him the low-down on this stupid ritual, but somehow he knows, that would be too outside of the expectation of his role at the company, and resides to just send Karl a 'this-is-all-you-and-no-me'-look.

Mike opens the door at the bottom of the staircase and immediately notices that something is off in the basement hallway: all the ceiling lights are flickering, and a bunch of the boxes of whatever is being stored down here lay scattered on the floor. And then there is a sound... A deep humming... like those drowning engine sounds they use in the horror movies... and what the hell was that? It sounded like a scream, but too high-pitched to be human. The outlook of meeting the IT Wizard of FinaLibre had seemed really enticing to Mike just a few minutes ago, but right now, he could do without anything the old man might be able to teach him to just be back at his desk. But of course, he had made a promise to Karl. It's not like he's so oblivious to Karl's character that he has any illusions that Karl wouldn't have stiffed him at the first sign of trouble had things been the other way around, but Mike is a firm believer in being the change you wish to see in the world, and thinking about changing the world is what propels him - granted: rather slowly - forwards. Mike is 100% focused on what is at the far end of the hallway and is therefore caught off-guard when a hand grabs his shirt and drags him into the washing room.

MIKE: What...? [shocked, scared]

ANGRY MAN: Shut up! Do you want those damn things to eat you? [looking intensely at Mike]

Let me tell you: you don't want that... whatever else... you don't want that [stare becomes more distant]

... They hammer those fangs through your eye-sockets and ears and... Oh God... those screams... [trailing off]

MIKE: ...? [bewildered]

Who are you?

ANGRY MAN: Who the fuck do you think I am?!

... [looking at Mike as if waiting for the penny to drop]

I'm Hunter for fuck's sake!

Did you bring the guns?

MIKE: What guns?

HUNTER: The M10s and A15s... for fuck's sake! Why else did you come down here?!

MIKE: ...I... I just came to see the wizard... this guy... Sune...

HUNTER: Jesus Christ! Management hasn't reacted yet?!

Are you telling me that the people up there don't know that... they are on the loose...?

How could you not have heard?! The yelling! Those horrible screams...

Oh God [trailing off again]

MIKE: I don't know... I don't know any of this... [voice breaking... close to crying]

HUNTER: Jesus Fuck! That's why Management ordered 'maintenance' those months ago! They are burying this whole operation and every living soul in this building along with it

MIKE: What are you talking about? [almost yelling, tears rolling down his cheeks]

HUNTER: Alright son... I want you to consider something... [cold and bitter expression]

How would you rather die: over the course of 15 minutes as extremely potent poison from genetically engineered bats spread through your blood, making it feel like every part of your body is being burned at 1000 degrees Celsius, or actually burn to death in a building that has been shut down to cover up the evidence of a sick experiment gone horribly wrong...

all while the greedy, no-good board of directors get rich off military subsidies and YOUR death!?

MIKE: I DON'T WANT ANY OF THAT! [in a scream that clearly expresses that he doesn't think it's fair he should even have to make that choice]

HUNTER: Alright... Then we have to act fast...

We don't have time for me to explain the details...

We have to warn the people upstairs...

Even if it ends up being the death of us. Are you with me?

MIKE: I guess, but... I don't want to die!

HUNTER: ... and I don't think you'll have to...

I'll do a countdown and then you need to head for the stairway as fast as you can

I still have two shots left in this old thing... [holds up a gun]

and I know where to aim them...

I know just where to aim them! [sadistic grin]

I can cover you long enough for you to reach the stairs, and then it's up to you...

Can you do this?

MIKE: I think so

HUNTER: That's not good enough! Promise me that you will save those people upstairs

MIKE: I promise! I really do! I promise

But what about you?

HUNTER: If I can make it, I'll come after you as soon as you've cleared the door...

but even if I do...

I don't know if I can keep on living with the things I've seen down here... the things I've done!

Oh God! How could I let this happen?

... I know how: greed! Stupid greed! That's all it ever was [looking despaired]

Alright... Time to move! [opens the door to the hallway, and peeks out]

Clear!

On the count of 3, I step into the hall, and then you come out behind me and sprint for that door! Got it?

MIKE: I got it! [looking determined]

HUNTER: Good son! You've got spirit! Just remember to keep your head down... They attack high!
3...2...1... GO GO GO

Hunter jumps into the hallway and aims his gun at whatever is waiting out there in the flickering dark. Mike takes off sprinting for the door, and as he is about halfway there, he hears a loud scream of despair and 2 shots being fired.

HUNTER: Aaaaaarrrgggghhh! What the fuck are you doing son! RUN FOR FUCKS SAKE! COMPLETE THE MISSION!
Oh God, that hurts!
Oh fuck... THE SPIDERS ARE OUT! DON'T LET THEM GET INTO YOUR EARS...
WHATEVER YOU DO SON, DON'T LET THE SPIDERS GET IN YOUR EARS
Aaaaarggghhhh.... [screaming, fading to a rattle]

Mike is an enlightened person, and though his main interests lay within the realm of Computer Science and Technology, he doesn't shy away from also consuming highlights from a variety of other domains, like for instance Psychology. Mike therefore knows quite a bit about the complex relationship between the human body and mind, and knows that you can't talk about one without the other. It for instance, makes no sense to imagine a mind producing conscious thought without a body to power the operation, yet were you to ask Mike at this specific moment, he would have sworn - against better judgment - that his mind and body had gone two separate ways when the screaming began. One part of Mike - his mind - knew that he should help the poor guy, if for no other reason than it was the RIGHT thing to do. His body however, had no intention at all of sticking around to see just how genetically engineered bats actually go about the business of killing with their fangs and - seeing as it was Mike's body who was in charge of charting out the course at that moment - Mike's mind had to content itself with fleeing the scene at high pace. Luckily for Mike's mind, it got something else to worry about instead of diving into the bottomless pits of guilt it might otherwise have thrown itself into: 'did he say spiders? Oh God... I HATE SPIDERS... What was that... Did I just feel something in my hair?'.

As the door next to the Fund Accounting team is swung open and a young man comes screaming out of it, John is talking to Carol.

MIKE: Oh fuck... Oh God... Is there anything in my hair?
CAROL: ... [looks skeptical at John]
JOHN: No you're fine... Look, there's something I gotta tell you

MIKE: WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THAT NOW!
THEY ARE ON THE LOOSE!
THE BATS AND THE SPIDERS AND GOD ONLY KNOWS WHAT
OTHER MONSTROSITIES MANAGEMENT HAVE KEPT HIDDEN
FROM US DOWN THERE
WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW, BEFORE
WE'RE LOCKED DOWN AND MANAGEMENT BURNS THIS
PLACE TO THE GROUND!
LISTEN UP EVERYBODY!
I KNOW THIS IS GOING TO COME AS A SHOCK TO A LOT
OF YOU, BUT YOUR VERY SURVIVAL DEPENDS ON YOU
DOING EXACTLY WHAT I SAY NOW:
EVACUATE THE PREMISES RIGHT NOW! DO NOT WASTE
TIME SALVAGING ANY PROPERTY, JUST GET THE FUCK
OUT OF HERE NOW!

The entire office looks in puzzlement at Mike.

MIKE: DO YOU WANT TO DIE??!! JESUS CHRIST! HAVE IT YOUR
WAY THEN!

Carol, these people don't want to listen... Fucking pandas... I can't
lose you... Please, please, please... I'll explain it all to you but would
you please just come with me and not waste time asking questions?

CAROL: ... *[looking judgmentally at John, then looks at Mike]*
Of course Mike... Take me out of this dreadful place *[reaches out hand
for Mike to lead her out]*

Mike grabs her hand and takes off running towards the main exit.

John looks after them, shaking his head, as Karl joins him, capturing the
dying seconds of this epic scene on his cell phone.

JOHN: Well... You might just have lucked out on this one...

I'm guessing Carol will fill him in when she's done with him...
Unless she seizes the opportunity to take him for some twisted
Bonnie and Clyde spree, in which case Management is probably
going to want to talk to you! And the Police!

KARL: I'm just a minor player in this game... What about the freak in
the basement?

JOHN: Yeah, like that's going to happen!

Wednesday, May 22nd, 2024

John's Job Interview

FRANK: John, do you know what we do here at FinaLibre?

JOHN: You are the biggest fund administration company when measured by Assets Under Management... sir

FRANK: That is factually correct

And with the risk of sounding like an interrogator, could you - in your own words and by a level of details of your own choosing - describe what a Fund Administration company does?

JOHN: It handles various - primarily middle- and back-office - operations related to offering collective investment vehicles, including - but not limited to:

- Settlement and reconciliation of cash and security custodians against holdings in large financial institutions
- Accounting
- Investment compliance
- Client and regulatory reporting

FRANK: Alright, that's enough. John, are you wearing headphones or another kind of technology that would allow someone listening in on this meeting to supply you with audio input?

JOHN: No sir

FRANK: Then help me understand how you are able to rapidly respond with a series of very domain-specific terms, in a way that almost convinces me that you have some vague understanding of what they mean?

JOHN: ... [thinking]

I don't know sir

FRANK: Alright, let's try this: just moments ago, you named 4 terms related to Fund Administration. Do you remember those 4 terms?

JOHN: Yes sir. They were:

Accounting
Client and regulatory reporting
Reconciliation and transaction settlement
... [*thinking*]
...and Investment Compliance

FRANK: Nice, and this time listed in a slightly different order... and reworded a little

JOHN: I was hoping you'd notice sir [*smiling*]

FRANK: I want you to pick one of these terms, and explain in more details what it means

JOHN: I choose Investment Compliance sir

The young man who had presented himself under the name of John knew perfectly well what the guy was driving at: that no more than 5 minutes ago, he had explicitly stated that he had no formal education or any type of relevant job experience in Finance Services, nor had he ever had any specific interest in it. John also knew that he could save the man and the woman sitting in front him time and mental strain by just coming right out and answering the question they were really asking: 'WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE JOHN?', and he didn't actually mind answering that question - with the answer basically boiling down to: 'I don't know; I got a message that suggested that I come, so I came' - and with the exception of a few minor details - such as how he had received the message and its specific content - he had no intention of keeping any details secret from the two, but for now at least, this approach was a lot more fun.

JOHN: Investment funds - as well as other collective investment undertakings I suppose - are subject to a series of regulations, requirements and restrictions regarding the type and quantity of their investments...

It is at this point during the meeting, that all of the lights in the room cut out, and they are left in complete darkness.

CAROL: We're terribly sorry about that. It's not something I've ever experienced before... here at work at least [*sounding a little off-balance and worried*]

JOHN: That's alright ma'am. I have a flashlight in my cell phone that can be used as light source. Should I turn it on?

FRANK: That's alright John, I've got it [*sounding considerably more in control of himself, now again becoming visible in the light streaming up from his smart phone, which he places on the table in front of them*]

JOHN: Some of the aforementioned regulations, requirements and restrictions are formalized into laws, while others are formulated in the official document - the so-called prospectus - that FinaLibre publishes to allow potential investors to see just what type of product they are looking at. Examples of guidelines include: ...

CAROL: I'm going to go check what is going on with the power [*stands up and proceeds towards the door*]

JOHN: ... is the 5-10-40 rule that stipulates that no investment in any single asset may exceed 10% of the total portfolio - when comparing the size of the investment to the total value of...

FRANK: Alright, you've made your point!

Now please stop talking! [*visibly tired, rubbing his temples*]

What the hell are you doing here John?

JOHN: I am applying for a job, sir

...

3 days ago, I received a message that strongly suggested I show up at FinaLibre at 14:15 today and interview for a job.

At this point, the light in the room turns back on.

FRANK: And how did you receive this message?

JOHN: I am not going to tell you. I am also not going to tell you the few specifics I have from the message. These are the only 2 pieces of information I will under no circumstances yield

FRANK: ... [*staring at John in an expression that manages to combine anger, frustration, wonder and fatigue*]

JOHN: ... [*meeting Frank's stare with an eerie and almost frozen calmness*]

The door opens and Carol - now visibly more out of it than when she left the room - steps back in.

CAROL: We have to stop now Frank. They're saying that we all need to come to the auditorium RIGHT NOW [*scared, shaking, visibly on the edge of breaking down*]

FRANK: Alright

John...

We won't offer you a job, but I suspect you already knew that I don't know what this stunt was all about, and as you have just heard, it ends now in any case

I'll call the receptionist to come and escort you back to the main entrance

Before you leave, I want you to please leave your address and phone number with the receptionist, in case we - or more likely the police -

needs to get in contact with you, in the event that we come to have specific suspicions of malicious intent as motivation for your coming here today

JOHN: Yes sir [*professional smile*]

FRANK: What the fuck was that all about?! That guy was a fucking psychopath!

CAROL: I don't know Frank... I'm really scared [*crying, hands and chin shaking*]

As John exits the main entrance, he thinks to himself that:

- without knowing what exactly he had expected when coming here, this wasn't it
- he probably wasn't the only person surprised by how this played
- this probably wasn't his last visit to FinaLibre

No more than 18 hours later, John finds himself walking back into the FinaLibre building, to discover just how right he was about the latter.

Wednesday, May 22nd, 2024

Official Announcement on Email Fraud and Angela

DONNIE: Thank you all for coming on such short notice!

...

I understand that you have all received an email from Frank at 14:03 today

stating that FinaLibre is looking at a catastrophic quarterly earnings, with downsizing measures an unavoidable result

I want to be 100% clear:

- Frank did not send that email! Our IT service supplier has established the origin of the email to be somewhere in Siberia
- Our quarterly earnings are looking as good as ever
- We will not be downsizing in the near future; on the contrary

DONNIE: We don't know why the email was sent, but we are looking at measures to tighten security around our mailing setup as we speak

...

And now for the horrible news... [looking grave]

...

This announcement is the worst I have had to make during my years as CEO of FinaLibre [looking sad]

...

At 14:38, our colleague Angela was found dead in the Northern-most bathroom of the 2nd floor

The police were called immediately and we expect them to be here within 5 minutes from now

I have seen the scene myself, and I can say with great certainty that Angela did not die of natural causes

I therefore expect the police will want to talk to everyone here

...

I request that all personnel remain in the building until the police

allow you to leave, or you are otherwise instructed by me or Frank personally [*nodding at Frank*]

If you have any guests with you in the building that for some reason have not been registered upon arrival, please come talk to me so we know that every person present is accounted for

Let me be clear:

I do not specifically suspect any of you of any crime, but given the gravity of the situation, I hope you understand our motivation for detaining you:

to ensure the police have the best possible conditions for solving this
I know that many of you have families to attend to...

We request that you do what you can to arrange alternative accommodations, but if for some reason or other this cannot be done, please come see me personally and we will try to find a solution that works for all parties

You are of course welcome to use your telephone to call friends and family

For the few people among you that have details about Angela's death other than what I have just mentioned - I ask that you do not share these details with anyone but the police, since doing so might hinder the investigation

Does anyone have any questions?

Thursday, May 23rd, 2024

John is Hired

JOHN: I'm here to see Donald
RECEPTIONIST: It's not an abbreviation...
He is actually named 'Donnie'
He is waiting for you in his office. Follow me [*courteous, smiling*]
... [*knocks on the door to Donnie's office and opens it*]
Donnie... John is here to see you [*leaning head inside office*]
DONNIE: Please show him in Janet
JANET: He'll see you now [*to John*]

The large office is about what John had imagined the office of the CEO of the countries largest fund administration company would look like, complete with giant windows with a view of the forest and a whole bunch of furniture that looks old and expensive. Behind the desk of his very large desk, what John assumes to be the CEO is all suited up and ready for a game of Corporate Hardball.

DONNIE: Have a seat, please
JOHN: Thank you, sir
DONNIE: To start with, I have two questions for you John
JOHN: ... [*nods in approval*]
DONNIE: During your interview yesterday, you mentioned 4 services typically provided by a fund administration company
JOHN: Yes, sir
DONNIE: If I were to ask you which of the 4 services typically deals with balance sheets, would you answer that question?
JOHN: I would, sir
DONNIE: ... [*stern*]
JOHN: ... and I believe I would have a 25% chance of getting the answer right [*slight sideways nod with head to signal minor concession*]

DONNIE: ... [nods, slight smile]

Second question: Can you tell me the name of either of the two people who interviewed you yesterday?

JOHN: ... [closes eyes, movements behind the eyelids]

Their names were Dan and Maria [sternly]

DONNIE: Convincing! [nods head]

And 100% wrong. But I guess the odds for this one were also a lot worse than 1:4 [smiling]

Can you tell me what my name is John?

JOHN: I think we both know that indeed I cannot... sir

DONNIE: That's what I thought! [smiling]

Now for something a little more serious

I need you to have a look at these 4 photographs, and tell me if you know the young lady - Angela - in them [lays out 4 photos of Angela]

JOHN: ... [leans forward and studies the photographs intensely for 15 seconds]

I don't believe that I do, sir

DONNIE: Most people would have responded with a simple yes or no...?

JOHN: I certainly don't know her personally...

DONNIE: but...

JOHN: I don't know...

She looks familiar... [pensive]

Like maybe I have seen her somewhere...

But I don't recall where that might have been

DONNIE: That's alright John [leans forward in his chair, looking John sternly in the eye]

This is Angela again...

as she looked when she was found on the bathroom floor in this building yesterday a little after 14:30... [showing John a 5th image]

JOHN: ... [nods slightly in acknowledgment, otherwise no reaction]

DONNIE: You don't seem the least bit shaken nor surprised from seeing a woman who has been stabbed more than 30 times

Why is that, John?

JOHN: I have a pretty strong stomach when it comes to gore... and...

I got the clear impression yesterday, that something very grave had happened

and cozy as this conversation is...

I didn't think you asked me to come here at 8:00 to discuss my cognitive shortcomings

When you leaned forward in your chair I assumed you were about to show me something bad and wanted to study my reaction to it [becoming more consumed by the murder scene photos while speaking]

DONNIE: ... [pensive]

JOHN: I'm guessing there is no reason to say that I didn't do it, as I'm sure you know that I was engaged in a job interview at the time in question.

DONNIE: Mmmmm

Well, actually...

The police believe that the murder occurred somewhere between 14:10 and 14:35...

The part of the building where Angela was found, is mostly used for meetings...

...

At 14:03 yesterday, every employee at FinaLibre received a fraudulent email, that had people centered around their desks at the other end of the building...

The police haven't ruled out that the two events are connected...

But they have very few leads to go on, in terms of discovering the actual sender of the email

... *[pausing, looking at John]*

JOHN: So I assume you want to know if I may know anything about the email and the murder...? *[now lifting his eyes to meet Donnie's]*

DONNIE: Hmmmm... *[pensive]*

No. I can't see why you would, to be frank...

and Janet has informed me that you were in the lobby from around 14:10, which pretty much rules you out as the killer

...

No. I want to ask you...

During the interview yesterday...

You were unable to say who had asked you to apply for the job...

In light of what you now know, has your position on the topic changed?

JOHN: No. I am sorry, sir. I would love to help out in finding whoever did this, but I can't...

DONNIE: ... *[waving dismissively with his hands]*

I didn't think so...

...but I want you to please consider the following question very carefully before answering...

JOHN: Of course...

DONNIE: As I said, the young woman in the photos is...

WAS named Angela, and she was 27 years old when she was murdered yesterday

She worked in the Fund Accounting Team here at FinaLibre and she was brilliant

She was by many - myself included - considered to be the brightest person here...

but she was also a controversial person, and there was a tendency for people to consider her...

insensitive... bordering on anti-social

I'm not aware that anyone in the company would want her dead, but then again... *[gesturing at the photo from the murder scene]*

I have a theory, that Angela was the person responsible for summoning

you to the interview yesterday
for reasons probably only she knew
Neither Carol nor Frank remember scheduling the interview...
If I were to name three people within the company as most likely to
do something like that
I would say Angela 3 times. Without hesitation!
Now for the question:
based on the message you received the other day and what I have
now told you about Angela, can you say with any certainty that she
was or was not the person behind the message?

JOHN: ... [*nodding slightly, pensive*]
I certainly cannot rule it out
In fact, based on what you have told me about Angela, I think it is
very likely that she was the person behind the message, sir...
though I haven't the faintest idea WHY she would send the message,
nor what she may have stood to gain from me working here...
She must have known that the chances of me actually getting a job
based on my qualifications were slim

DONNIE: Yes...

JOHN: ... Is there anything else I can do to help out in this situation, sir?
As I have said: I really don't know anything other than what I have
told you, but I'll help out if I at all can...

DONNIE: I am glad you feel that way John... [*smiling*]
Because I am going to offer you a job, similar to the one you were
interviewing for yesterday

JOHN: ... [*showing slight surprise*]
DONNIE: You will enter the company in an entry-level position, and will
spend the first period of your employment in our Academy...
Normally, participants are expected to show progression and are
evaluated at the 14 days and 3 months mark of their employment...
Frank, the man who interviewed you yesterday, will be let in on the
actual purpose of your employment...

- which I will get to in a moment -
and I will ask him to make sure that we 'have our eyes on the bigger
picture' during your exams...
For the purpose of not causing any more alarm among the staff than
what the events of yesterday have already caused...
I would like for them to believe that your employment here is on
standard terms...
but what I will actually have you do, is ask around and uncover:

- who was responsible for Angela's murder
- if Angela's murder was part of a greater conspiracy against the company

DONNIE: but I would like you to prioritize the latter over the former

...

How do you feel about the offer?

JOHN: Hmm... To be honest, I feel...

A bit suspicious... sir

From what you have just told me, the offer hinges on your belief that Angela asked me to come here...

I'm not sure your reasoning for letting a total stranger into the company at this time based solely on that resonates with me... sir

DONNIE: Ah, yes... *[smiling]*

... *[thinking]*

Let me tell you a story, John

About a year ago, I was approached by a journalist from one of the major TV networks...

Who wanted to do an interview with me regarding the 'rampant drug problem at FinaLibre'...

The story he had lined up went something like this:

He had video evidence of 5 of our young employees snorting coke off strippers in a private room at a downtown strip joint on 3 separate occasions

Which I imagine isn't really a breaking news story in 2024...

Or at least, I would say that the problem isn't really a FinaLibre-problem as such
but more of a youth-problem

JOHN: ... *[shrugging in agreement]*

DONNIE: but the guy had linked the events to operational mistakes that occurred on the days immediately following each of the 3 occasions and the 'pension funds for blue-collar workers lose money from decadent behavior by FinaLibre employees' wasn't a good look for us

He hadn't run the story yet, but it seemed evident that he was only wrapping it up before going national with it

I told a few people at the company about the situation:

Angela, Carol, Frank, and our PR team

After a week, I got a call from the boss of the journalist, telling me that the man had been fired

And that the story had been dropped

In a tone of voice that suggested that he had held up his part of the bargain...

Now, you might be thinking:

'Alright, but what does that have to do with Angela?'

JOHN: ... *[conceding with a shrug]*

DONNIE: And you would be right to think so...

But this wasn't the first time Angela had pulled a Hail Mary for us...

It was in fact the third time...

So I immediately went to her and told her the good news...

and asked her what she had done...

...

In an 'I certainly didn't do anything, but let's HYPOTHETICALLY assume' kind of way, she told me that

- so-called FunBox TM boxes had begun appearing in storage rooms and other secluded areas of a list of major financial- and news-media institutions within a couple of days of when I was contacted by the journalist
- these FunBox TM boxes released an amount of substance - cocaine, benzodiazepines or medium-strength synthetic opiates - on the user transferring an amount of Monero to the address on the box
- SOMEONE was in possession of urine samples from up to 20 employees of each company, and that someone may be inclined to release said samples for public scrutiny if we were to have a big public debate on 'rampant drug problems'

DONNIE: ... [*looking sternly at John to make sure he understands*]

What I'm saying is:

If Angela wanted you here, I know enough to indulge that wish

...

How does that resonate? [*sympathetic smile*]

JOHN: Well... It sounds...

Impressive [*nodding in approval*]

... [*pensive*]

I accept the offer

It sounds like a big whale [*smiling slightly*]

DONNIE: If you want... [*packing away the photos of Angela, not looking at John*]

We can call you Ahab [*smiling*]

... we checked, and we know that the 'John'-identity is fake, so for all I care, you can go by whatever you want ...

JOHN: ... Hmm...

I do like 'Fernando Sanchez'...

But I'd never swing it with my complexion

John will do, sir [*smiling*]

DONNIE: Then John it is [*smiling*]

...

I hope you don't take this the wrong way...

but you don't like the people we normally employ

JOHN: I look like I just got out of prison [*conceding*]

DONNIE: ... [*smiling*]

...so... [*takes out a Sunflower lanyard from the drawer of his desk and tosses it to John*]

you are now the first hire of our new Sunflower program: 'Bringing FinaLibre into the neurodivergent age of 2024'

which should buy you some leeway especially with the people coming

from a financial background...
who tend to believe that 'programmer' is its own sub-category of
behavioral disorders [*smiling*]

...

I would like you to report directly to me at least once a week
If I'm not in here, feel free to wait for me here...
Though, I'd advise you...
If you use the sofa over there...
You may want to wash your hands afterward, as I think Carol uses
it for some of her '1-on-1's [*shrugging in a "what can you do" manner*]

JOHN: ... [*shrugging in a "sounds reasonable" manner*]



Thursday, May 23rd, 2024

John (and John) and the Cool People

CAROL: Hey psycho-boy... Do you eat?
JOHN: When I'm hungry I do
CAROL: Wanna join the cool kids?
JOHN: Sure

As they are walking in silence towards the cafeteria, Carol - without any apparent instigation - says:

CAROL: John, you seem like a nice person, but I'm not going to have sex with you
JOHN: I'm sorry to hear that, might have been fun [*looks at her while talking, expressionless, never stops walking*]
CAROL: Well...
JOHN: ... [*looks at her, raises eyebrow*]
CAROL: ... [*deciding against a retort*]
CAROL: Uuuuh... There's the gang... I'll introduce you
Hello gang, say hello to John
THE GANG: Hello John
CAROL: And John, this is Susan, Ben, Mike, Cecil, Karl and... John
BEN: Look, I can already tell this isn't going to work out... You guys are going to have to duke it out about who's John and who's Not-John

Without moving, John does a bottom-to-top scan of... John, then looks at him and shrugs his shoulder in the universal 'You wanna go?' -gesture.

OTHER JOHN: You know what, why don't you be New John and I'll be Old John...

That works for you?

NEW JOHN: ... [shrugs shoulders in the universal 'works for me'-gesture]

KARL: Dude, that guy looked like he was ready to go a 5-rounder with John... and for 'John' [whispering at Ben]

BEN: Who's gonna win the weekend?

MIKE: I've got a party at my old dorm tonight... If the place is anyway like it used to be, that party could go on until Sunday

BEN: That's not bad...
not a sure winner, but not bad...
of course, it depends on whether or not YOU go on until Sunday

MIKE: I probably won't...
I'm getting old

CECIL: I'm going to the new Club Coka tonight...
That's almost guaranteed to be banger!

BEN: Holy hell! I'd say he has you beat Mike...
What about you Karl?

KARL: I'm benched this weekend...
Girlfriend wants me to go with her to her niece's birthday...
Like... the fucking kid is turning 2
what the fuck will she care if I'm there or not...

CAROL: But of course, you could see it as a chance to spend quality time with your girlfriend and her family...?

KARL: I like spending quality time with my girlfriend, but it involves me railing fat lines off her lower back, going at it like little furry creatures with rabies
and certainly does not involve her family sitting around eating cake and talking about plans for the Summer!

OLD JOHN: I see you are a man of culture as well

SUSAN: I don't know about the 'railing fat lines'-bit, but I'm with Karl on this one:
why does quality time have to involve their family?
Brian just sprung on me yesterday that he expects me to go to his mom's 70th birthday celebration tomorrow!
Like, sure... It's not like I would like to have a life of my own

KARL: Listen to this...
This woman is spitting pure truth and nothing but the truth!
We should elope together...
Freedom from tyranny...
We'll be naked! [*whispered at Susan with a blink and the shot of a finger-gun*]

OLD JOHN: Wait a minute! Isn't it only a couple of months ago, that you sat in this exact spot and complained about how Brian was objecting to going with you to your dad's birthday party?

SUSAN: That is different!
His family is different!

KARL: ... [*mouthing the words 'working class'*]

OLD JOHN: And your family isn't different to him?

SUSAN: Brian loves my family!

OLD JOHN: Are you sure he isn't just being nice?

SUSAN: Of course not... And my family is lovable and fun

OLD JOHN: Sure they are, but honestly:
why should he come to your dad's birthday celebration if you shouldn't come to his mom's?

SUSAN: Well, I didn't say I absolutely wasn't going to go, but you know...
[looking at Carol for backup]

CAROL: I don't have any hand at all...
It's been a long time since I've had a boyfriend...
Sorry honey [apologetic at Susan]

KARL: Much as I'd hate to admit it, Old John does have a point here
I'm not saying this is the case with you guys Susan...
but in general terms, it's alright for the woman in a relationship to decide an activity is stupid but when a man does it...

CAROL: Oh no! Stop that!
Did we not agree that we wouldn't be having THAT discussion again?

SUSAN: Yes we did!
Because you guys always end up sounding like a pair of whining bitches whenever we discuss this like the world is run by evil women who's only pleasure comes from killing your fun!

KARL: That's crossing a line, but since it's coming from you... [shrugs]
But alright, let's de-personalize here:
Do you guys agree or disagree that in general terms, in this society we live in now, it's usually the woman who is in control of what activities the couple participates in?

SUSAN: Disagree... It can be either one!

CAROL: I kinda see where you're coming from Karl, and I'll concede, that if we speak strictly statistics, the woman is the one in control in most relationships

BEN: I agree

CECIL: Me two

KARL: Mike?

MIKE: I don't know the data here, but I'm guessing someone has done some kind of research on the topic, and surely the findings are out there on the internet.
But I'll turn it around a little and go with: 'In any relationship, it's the one that is least emotionally involved in the relationship who is in control'

OLD JOHN: Thank you r/RelationshipAdvice... Straight from the hive-mind
You know, it must have been less than a week since that sentiment was last expressed there
and I always have this kinda 'close-but-no-dice'-feeling about it
It may be right most of the time, but I think the essence is, that it's the one who is willing to risk the relationship who is in charge

BEN: Potato, potarto! I don't see a big difference here...
wouldn't the person least emotionally involved in the relationship
also be the person most likely willing to risk it?

OLD JOHN: Yes, speaking in general terms, that would be the case, but
there is a huge difference in the implications

BEN: Go on...

OLD JOHN: In the case of the former, the implication is, that you have
to choose between being with someone you really like or having a
'cozier/easier' life
assuming that being in control in a relationship leads to that
In the latter case, there's a third option:
you can be with someone you really like without getting pushed
around
you just have to be willing to risk it every time you fight!

SUSAN: Hmm... You have at least gone above 'women evil, poor men'...
You have my vote

CAROL: The notion does kinda resonate, and I have to agree with Susan:
any theory is better than man-whining
What's your take on all this New John?

NEW JOHN: I don't know any of the couples

CAROL: Don't let that hold you back
This is just friendly collegiate bonding...
real people do that, you know

NEW JOHN: Well, if you don't want to go to your boyfriend's mother's
birthday party [*looking at Susan*]
you should stay home
and if you'd rather stay home and snort cocaine, then that's what
you should do [*looking at Karl*]
Anybody being dragged to something they don't want to go to is just
going to kill the mood, and that affects more than just the couple
As for being in control in a relationship...
I don't think it really matters to me...
If I'm not happy in a relationship, I should end it...
as I would expect her to do if she wasn't happy

CAROL: So I don't know if I agree or disagree with you just yet, but allow
me - in the spirit of collegiate bonding - to play devil's advocate

NEW JOHN: Go ahead [*smiling*]

CAROL: Not only would you be OK with - but actually have it as a
requirement for a relationship - that she might up and leave you
tomorrow?

NEW JOHN: I hope she leaves a note, but essentially: yes

CAROL: And you would be OK with the constant uncertainty? ... Not
knowing if what you'll have tomorrow is what you have today?

NEW JOHN: What do I have today?

CAROL: Her!

NEW JOHN: You can't have another person

I know what you mean, that you have her in the sense that if she says she loves you today, she is also going to love you tomorrow
But nobody can make such a guarantee, because they would be making it on behalf of someone else:

the person they are tomorrow

We say: sleep on it, and it will all seem better tomorrow, but usually, it's not the world that changes, it's us:
we become someone different, but then how can we issue any types of guarantees about how we will feel in the future?

CAROL: So what does that leave us with in terms of love and romance, if you can't make any plans for things to do together...?

NEW JOHN: Just the here and now... Which is all we are really ever guaranteed anyway [smiling]

SUSAN: Alright, of course, what you say is all fine in theory and I'm sure Buddha is sitting somewhere nodding along...
I know my yoga teacher would love it anyways...
but in real life, where people buy cars together, take up mortgages to buy houses together and start families together, you HAVE to make long-term commitments, and that means making promises that extend a long way into the future

NEW JOHN: Family life is not for me

SUSAN: Alright, and that's good for you I suppose, but if we were to generalize here, and see if we can't find a set of principles that appeal to more than the die-hard romantics...
how would you reconcile this understanding of love as something that can be here today, gone tomorrow, with having the buying power to acquire the things needed to secure a safe environment for raising children?

NEW JOHN: I wouldn't

SUSAN: ... [looking expectantly at New John]

NEW JOHN: Buying cars and taking up mortgages is not my strong suit, but if we generalize to:

how would two people go about entering into long-term legally binding commitments...

I'm thinking: just do it!

Nobody can tell the future, and if you are comfortable with taking up commitments with someone else, then by all means

But I think you would make things a lot easier for yourself if you keep whatever compels you to enter into said commitments separate from love

KARL: I think I like this idea...

Then I could appease the missus and play along with her nesting thing on more of a contractual basis, while you and I could snort fat ones and go at it like wild animals on Saturday afternoons [nodding at Susan]

SUSAN: Yeah, that would make me quite the winner, wouldn't it? [eyes expressing ironic intent]

CAROL: Of course you like it, contracting family life while maintaining a buffer for acting retarded...

It's such a 'guys idea' if ever there was one!

KARL, BEN, OLD JOHN: Ooooohhhh!!! [pointing at Carol]

KARL: Now why do you have to go and make this discussion about gender all of a sudden?!

I thought we were better than that

CAROL: Alright, I'm man enough to admit when I'm outnumbered...

John and John: I concede to your fine points, whatever they may have been [getting up from her seat]

SUSAN: This was not your best show guys...

Do better next time, alright? [also getting up to follow Carol]

KARL: So would you really be OK with your girlfriend deciding to up and leave you tomorrow for another man?

NEW JOHN: It would probably make me sad, but it's better than being with her and trying to figure out what is wrong [gesturing 'what can I say?']

KARL: That's tough man! [getting up]

Everybody else gets up from their chair as well, but Old John motions for New John to stay seated. When everyone else has left:

OLD JOHN: Who are you really?

NEW JOHN: I'm John

OLD JOHN: Aside from that

I've worked here for 3 years, and during that time, we've only ever hired from the following three categories of people

- The IT-nerds
- The douche-bag Finance folk (which I, unfortunately, consider myself to belong to)
- The crazies ... the people that don't have to fit into one of the above, because they possess some crazy amount of skill that makes it profitable to bear with them and their weird ways

OLD JOHN: Your whole personality is way too dark and gloomy to fit into either of the first two categories and...

no offense...

I'm having a hard time seeing you as the unpolished jewel of the financial sector

Add to that, that our most prominent representative of the latter

category was just found murdered yesterday, I can't help but suspect said murder to be related to your employment here at FinaLibre
Or am I missing something?

NEW JOHN: That's very perceptive of you [smiling]

I received an anonymous message suggesting that I show up for a job interview here yesterday, which I did

I think I handled the job interview just...

horribly, and the guy even said as much to me before he practically kicked me out

Then late last night I got a call from the CEO, asking me to be here at 8:00

so I was here at 8:00

All in all, I think he was on the up and up with me:

he thinks Angela sent me the message about the interview...

and then he offered me a job to do some snooping around about Angela and who might have killed her

He asked me not to stir up any panic, and to keep my assignment to myself

so I will in turn ask you to keep this talk between the two of us

OLD JOHN: I'm no rat... I'll keep it tight

If at all possible, see if you can avoid Karl and Ben finding out about anything, because if they start to sense that something is up, the rumors are going to spread like a wildfire

NEW JOHN: That's good advice. Thank you

Did you know Angela well?

OLD JOHN: I can't say that I did

To be honest, she always scared me a little

There was absolutely no doubt that she was brilliant, but she also gave off this vibe of being...

completely unbounded!

She was the kind of person I would suspect capable of anything if she found it beneficial

NEW JOHN: Anything... like what? Murder?

OLD JOHN: If she believed it to be for a good cause: totally

Don't get me wrong, I don't have any reason to suspect that she's murdered anyone...

but do I believe she COULD do it?: absolutely!

Do you remember that one guy from the Bible, where God told him to kill his son to prove his love for God?

Well, Angela would have sliced the kid's throat before God had even finished the sentence

NEW JOHN: Hmm... From my experience, those types of people have a tendency to attract enemies

Do you know of anyone who would stand to benefit from her death?

OLD JOHN: As I said: Angela was brilliant, and a true asset to the company, and given the kind of corporate structure we have here at the company...

I mean, FinaLibre is not perfect, but in my experience, it is almost always the case that what benefits the company also benefits the employees in some tangible way...

usually through bonuses at year-end

In that sense, everybody stood to lose from her death, and it probably doesn't sound like much, but I actually think it means a little more here, than it would most other places

You may want to have a casual 1-on-1 with Carol

She and Angela had sort of a love/hate relationship, though there was certainly more cool air between the two than there was warm winds

I don't think they have spoken much since Angela hooked up with this one guy Carol was low-key in love with a couple of months ago...

And let me just be clear about this: I know Carol, and I know 100% that she is not responsible for Angela's death

She hides behind this tough, promiscuous attitude...

and she's certainly been around the block, but once you get to know her you get a sense it's just a hard cover to protect a soft core

I really can't see her ever killing anyone, let alone out of a heartbreak
But you should talk to her yourself

I don't know if you noticed it, but she was kinda looking at you during lunch today

I think you could probably get her to open up to you during some pillow talk

NEW JOHN: I'm not going to use sex to get her to talk

OLD JOHN: I respect that...

It's mostly just the tone here...

But, there's no reason why you can't get her to talk AND show her a good time

NEW JOHN: I agree...

Though she did explicitly tell me that she wasn't going to do that on the way down here

OLD JOHN: She does that with everyone...

It's a kinda gimmick she has...

I've never known her to actually live up to it

NEW JOHN: ... [smiles]

Anyone else might know something important about Angela?

OLD JOHN: Well, I think you were on the money with your assessment of our CEO, Donnie: I also mostly think he's on the up and up with people

Did he tell you about his own personal dealings with Angela?

NEW JOHN: No

OLD JOHN: You may want to ask him at some point

There were rumors going around at some point, that he was seeing Angela a lot outside of the office, and that she was a very frequent

guest at his and his wife's home
There is nothing totally out of the ordinary with that...
He has been known to go to soccer matches and other such activities
with employees outside of work...
but with a pretty young woman like Angela...
Well, the office rumors of course had to turn it into something sexual
Personally, I don't think there was anything to those rumors
First of all, I don't see him as the type of person who would cheat
on his wife with an employee half his age
Secondly, I saw their relationship more like a father/daughter relationship...

he and the missus don't have children of their own...
In any case: you should ask him about her [*smiling*]

NEW JOHN: I'll do that [*smiling*]
You mentioned that Angela was the kind of person capable of murdering
for the right cause
There are people who believe that getting rich is a good cause...

OLD JOHN: She wasn't like that...

Quite the contrary...
She was an idealist if ever there was one
She didn't care much about fancy clothing or any other high-life
accessories, and I don't think she had any other expensive hobbies
Her goals were usually altruistic at the core, but in a way that was
strange and dangerous to most people
One day during lunch, we had a round-the-table discussion about
ethics

You know, the old problem of: would you rather that 1.000 people be
killed in some far away outskirt of the world, or that a close family
member dies...

You know: the type of problem designed to make you realize your
own bias, as you unavoidably opt for the death of 1.000 strangers
Well, that wasn't Angela's take; there were absolutely no grounds
for discussion: the lives of 1.000 strangers were more important than
even the closest family member, and at one point...

I can't remember who said what...
but someone said something along the lines of:
'So if I gave you a gun right now and told you that 1.000 people in
Asia would be saved if you shot one of us...'
and a collective chill went down our spines as we realized that she
was evaluating the options of who to shoot while we were talking....

...
For what it's worth, I think she might have been the kind of person
to shoot herself in the head...
I don't want you to get the picture that she was the kind of person
who lived in her own spaced-out world and only looked out for #1
In fact, I think she saw the world much clearer than most other

people

but knowing how much shit goes on in the world that the rest of us
are able to block out in some way...

the fact that she took it all in...

It seems kinda scary to me in it's own right

NEW JOHN: ... [*slight nod to one side gesturing 'you are right about that!'*]

OLD JOHN: Psychopath or extremist or whatever or not; the way she was
done in wasn't right

I think I have told you everything I know that could be of relevance
to you, but if ever there is anything, feel free to reach out

Take care John

NEW JOHN: You too

Monday, May 27th, 2024

John and Carol Exchange Stories

John is sitting at his desk, struggling to keep awake for the lesson on Interest Bearing Instruments.

CAROL: Hey Jail John! Looks like you could use a pick-me-up...!

JOHN: It shows? [looking at her with an exaggerated tired face]

CAROL: Only completely [smiling]

Tell me a story about yourself

JOHN: We can go tit-for-tat?

CAROL: I love tit-for-tat!

Carol doesn't give John a chance to respond to this, before she pulls her shirt and bra over her head, fulfilling her side of a bargain John had only proposed as an innuendo. John looks at the spectacle with a stern face, without moving a muscle. About half of the people in the office stop what they are doing and stare in amazement... The other half is sort of used to Carol by now.

CAROL: Oh well... that fell flat! [Pulling her shirt back down, and adjusting her clothes]

JOHN: ... [still looking at her with a stern expression]

Certainly not flat!

It was really good

And the timing was perfect... I didn't see it coming at all

I'll admit to the innuendo, but you really caught me with my pants down on the execution

CAROL: Speaking of which...

JOHN: Yeah, about that... I will hold up my end of that bargain, but I'm not sure it would sit well with the other people in this office that I deliver just here and now
especially now that you went first... [exaggerated embarrassed look]
If you insist, I'll do it...
but if it's all the same to you, may I suggest we finish the deal somewhere more private?

CAROL: Well, I don't see how suggesting it could be a problem...

But I'm not buying. Off with 'em Sunny

JOHN: Sure [*stands up and begins to unbuckle his belt*]

CAROL: Alright, you can stop now

I believe you were actually going to do it...

and I like that

Here's my address...

maybe you could stop by at 21:00 tonight?

JOHN: I'd love to [*smiling*]

CAROL: Now that THAT is out of the way, get with the story

JOHN: I really only have three stories worth telling

CAROL: Not quite 1001 night, but let's worry about that some other day

John's Story Part I: Childhood

My mother died when I was 4 as she was hit by a drunk driver at 15:30 on a Wednesday afternoon in May, walking the 300 meters from the bus stop to our house. It's hard to say HOW it affected me, but it definitely had an impact. In terms of everyday tangibles for one: my mother had worked part-time, so my father could put in more hours at work, and now he was left alone in charge of raising me while also having to make ends meet. It was a good thing my mother had been financially responsible enough to insist on life insurances for both of them, since it allowed us to keep the house and let my dad work less, so he could dedicate himself to what he now considered his only important responsibility: making sure I got through to adulthood. I guess I'm the only person that can really evaluate his performance, and it may be said that he was competing in a field for which he didn't have much natural talent, but in terms of effort he broke the scale!

I was a weird kid and didn't make a lot of friends growing up, and it didn't take the other kids in my class long to figure out that I was a pretty shitty playmate when I started elementary school. For the first couple of years, the state of affairs of my social life was kinda bleak: I seldom played with the other kids neither IN school nor AFTER school, but they also pretty much left me alone. That changed sometime during 3rd grade, where the social atmosphere of the classroom turned sour; hard to say why, but a gang of 4 shitty kids was at the center of it and it didn't take them

long to single me out as the weakest of the herd.

During the course of maybe 3 or 4 months, they escalated the attacks from infrequent verbal bombardments to outright punches and kicks when they felt they could get away with it, and it really came to a head a week or two before the end of that school year, as they jumped me on my way home from school, and really went to work on me, continuing the assault when I was on the ground. I don't know if they stopped out of their own volition or if maybe someone happened to walk by, but when I came to they were running away and were already some 100 meters away. I felt guilty as I was walking the rest of the way home, determined not to let my father know, feeling like I should have been able to win that fight. But, of course I couldn't... keep it from him; he took one look at me and asked me what the hell had happened, and I just broke down, and he picked me up and held me and I cried and tried to tell him about it but couldn't because I cried so hard and he comforted me and I cried until at some point I was done.

When he heard my story my father did what I am sure a lot of fathers have done both before and after him: he tried to glue the shattered remains of my world together, by telling me that he loved me and would do anything to help me. And then he did what I doubt many fathers have done: he showed me just what he meant by that.

He helped me analyze the situation. We drew diagrams of the 4 boys, who their friends were, and what we knew about their families and plotted out different strategies for handling the situation. Some of the suggestions were the usual 'have a talk with the parents', 'talk to the school' and that type of thing, but we also visited some more extreme suggestions. Things like: if I threatened this kid with a knife and my father bashed in the brains of that parent, what is the likelihood of the police or the child protective services getting involved? I guess it's the sort of thing a parent may indulge a child in for them to 'get it out of their system' but I'm pretty sure he was 100% serious. I think he would have killed himself when my mother died, had it not been for him feeling obliged to stick around to raise me, and on that day, he seemed as much at a loss as to how to handle the situation as I was.

In the end, we made the decision not to make a play right now, and instead spend the Summer in preparation. My father had a heavy bag that he would go a couple of rounds on every evening, and he had often asked if I would join him, which I had always declined. During that Summer I put in at least 2 hours a day, either on the bag or in one-on-one drills with him. How much of his teachings had a genuine source in a recognized martial arts lineage and how much he just came up with on the spot I

have often wondered, but I never asked him about it. As I got ready for my first day back at school, I felt really good about my chances of beating those 4 punks, even if I ended up having to take them on all at once, but as it turned out things played out very peacefully. I'd go so far as to say: anti-climatic. The parents of the worst of the 4 punks had split up during Summer vacation, and both had moved out of town and this was apparently enough to completely change the dynamics of not only the group of the remaining 3 punks but pretty much our entire class. A couple of weeks into the new school year, I got what was probably a very questionable excuse at best for starting a fight with one of the remaining punks during recess, and I really let him have it! I know for a fact that I knocked out 3 of his teeth as I threw punches, elbows, knees, and kicks to his head, and I am honestly not sure I would have stopped short of killing him, had I not been dragged away by the two teachers on patrol during recess. In the end, the whole ordeal got me 2 weeks of suspension, a daily habit of working out, absolute confirmation of the length of my father's support, and most importantly: a whole new outlook on the world. Before that talk with him, I saw the world as something being run mainly by adults, just tugging me along. I now understood that I was an operator and that I could set a course for my own ship. It may be that my vessel was small and moved at a slow pace, but I could set a course and propel myself along the course.

CAROL: John... I've done this with other men before [*looking at him, questioning*]

JOHN: ... [*waiting*]

CAROL: And that one... was... new!

I just have one question...

JOHN: shoot

CAROL: Do you love your dad... or 'father' as you say?

JOHN: I don't know. I've asked myself that same question, and I don't know

I certainly don't harbor any negative emotions towards him, and I am grateful for all that he has done for me

I usually enjoy talking to him, although he has gotten a bit slow these last years

Maybe I feel guilty because he dedicated his life to raising me after my mother died...

I think he got kind of a bum deal in life...

losing his wife and then having to raise me, and I feel like that's something I can't pay him back for

Maybe some of that guilt sort of overshadows my feelings of love for him, I don't know

My 3rd story is about a woman named Louisa I was with for 6 years, and I remember thinking that I felt a lot stronger for her than I ever did for him

CAROL: I think it's normal for infatuation to run at higher degrees than
the love you feel for your parents
And it's good enough for me. You are not an 'empath', but I'm
convinced you are not a psychopath either
Let's say you have 'emotional blind spots'

JOHN: I like that [smiling]

CAROL: Well, that was a lovely story, John
Strike that...
It was a very exciting story, and I thank you for your openness...
I always like it when we can cut the bullshit and go straight to the
good stuff
And I did agree to go tit-for-tat...
story-wise...
so let me just run to my desk and get my photo-journal 'Carol - age
0 to 10', and I will take you on a chronological tour of the 'Amazing
life of Carol'

JOHN: Well... [*raising his hand to object*]

CAROL: Relax John... I'm joking
You want to hear about Angela...

JOHN: ... [smiling]
Were you close?

CAROL: Mostly not. But our relationship changed a lot over the years
We both got onboard in May of 2019 and went through the ranks of
the Academy together...
only...
she of course did it in half the time
Which was totally fine by me
I had a pretty good idea that I wanted to work in Staffing, and I
considered the Academy a good chance to see what this company
was all about, but that was it you know...
It didn't matter to me if I completed in 3,4,5 or 6 months
I'm not sure completing the Academy meant a whole lot to Angela
either, but her mentality was just so different from mine
It was like we were placed at the bottom of this giant heap of
knowledge, and she just couldn't help herself from sprinting up the
heap as fast as she could
It wasn't even like she would dance around victoriously on top of
the heap...
She would just throw herself at whatever next unsurpassable challenge
she found
Alright, let me do a small detour at this point, and tell you a story
about Angela, that has become somewhat of a legend in the company

Angela Does FIRE

So, in the Fall of 2019, business was going at a steady pace, but management felt like we had capacity for more, which I suppose we did, but Marketing and PR wasn't really nailing it in terms of coming up with a catchy campaign. So, there was an assembly in Mid-September where Donnie basically promised that if any of us could manufacture a good campaign targeting the FIRE movement - short for: 'Financial Independence, Retire Early' - we could cash in a bonus of 50% of the expected cost of hiring in an outside PR company.

There were a lot of teams that took a stab at it, and I know that I am biased because I generally like people here, but I think there were a lot of really good campaigns among the suggestions I saw. A professional probably could, but personally, I wouldn't be able to pick them out of a line-up with 4 campaigns made by a real PR bureau. They were really good ... but also conventional. At the end of the day: very 'inside-the-box'.

And then there was Angela, who had graduated from the Academy 3 months prior. Her basic idea was, that you won't reach a movement of people who are 'fighting to liberate themselves from the tyranny of indebtedness' by throwing a bunch of conventional PR bullshit at them. She observed 2 things:

- their whole lifestyle is built around analyzing markets and making decisions based on that analysis
- like any other quasi-organization loosely gathered around a semi defined agenda, they receive a lot of their pre-analyzed conclusions (the term she used) from just a few oracles

In regards to oracles, these were mainly YouTubers and influencers on Facebook and Reddit. She reasoned, that if she could have the news of our great product broadcast through this small set of oracles, it would spread the message better than any structured campaign, but the catch of course is, that influencers are used to making their money off sponsorship's, and are therefore relatively expensive. What's worse is, that people have gotten used to this, and instinctively know what information to filter out as paid advertisement. What we really wanted, was for these so-called oracles to broadcast to the world just how great a product we had but on their own accord. And so this is the strategy she set about implementing. She had gotten a hold of a lot of raw data on how different people were connected through Facebook, LinkedIn and Reddit, and to what extent

they interacted with each other's posts, and based on this, she was able to construct a super elaborate graph of interrelations in the target demographic. She analyzed the data for interesting vertices on the graph, and in doing so pinpointed 15 regular Joe Schmoes, whose impact on the oracles of the community she conjectured would be enough to sway them in our favor. Normal, everyday people, working everyday jobs and leading everyday lives hoping to retire maybe 10 years ahead of time. People you wouldn't recognize if you saw them on the street, but who would spend 2 hours in dedication to 'the cause' every day, either analyzing on their own behalf or sharing content in closed social network groups. She took a week off from her job and went to work on these 15 people, visiting each and everyone; sometimes under the guise of being a fellow aficionado, sometimes just 'happening to bump into them'. And she made herself liked! And more importantly, she got them sold on just how amazing a product portfolio we have here at FinaLibre. On a few occasions, the targets expressed that they found our platform lacking in terms of integration, and she would reply along the lines of: 'Oh Gosh! Aren't you just right... and such a darn shame, because I like everything else about them. You know what, let's write them an email' and then she or the target would write an email to a fictional guy at FinaLibre, who would then reply within the time it took for her to get onto the FinaLibre VPN, something like 'Good Golly! That's a great idea. We'll have it in production within the week', and you know what? She did have it in production within the week, either by doing the feature request herself and then convincing the relevant Product Owner to approve it for deployment, or just straight-up convincing the relevant team to implement and release the feature.

A week! She spent 7 days going around the country talking to people and doing follow-ups, until the ball got rolling, and it was a giant boulder heading downhill FAST! I remember being at work on a Tuesday at the end of September, when someone came rushing in, threw up a YouTube-clip on the monitor, and told us: 'you are not going to believe this'. In just 3 days, every major influencer within the community was talking up FinaLibre with phrases like: 'EVERYBODY IN THE COMMUNITY KNOWS ABOUT THIS COMPANY, BUT IN CASE YOU'VE BEEN OUT OF THE COUNTRY...'. 15 people is what constitutes 'EVERYBODY'. Our customer-commitment and AUM grew by a factor of 3 within 10 days, a growth we have never come close to neither before nor after. And the atmosphere at the office was electric! We were blowing up! And of course everybody wanted to know who or what was behind this sudden interest in our product, and management held assemblies where they told anyone in possession of knowledge of how this had come about to step forward and be rewarded, and when nobody stepped forward no matter how insistently management asked them to, everybody just assumed that it probably was

just a really lucky strike, and that Lady Fortuna was just rewarding us for having a really great product.

That is: almost everybody. Donnie and a few of the people from Marketing and PR - the people who are used to measuring PR exposure - knew that this kind of exposure does not come by accident, and Donnie somehow managed to figure out Angela's involvement in the case. And so he approached her, and congratulated her on a job well done, and told her that he had this 1 million EUR pot of money that he would basically reward her with. And she declined. And she kept declining and insisted that she be paid for the overtime she had put in and be refunded her vacation-days and the money she had spent on transportation, but that she did not under any circumstances want to receive any other payment for her work on the campaign, and eventually Donnie relented to her demand, and so she received a total of 7.600 EUR for the campaign. She also asked that her involvement not be known within the company, and Donnie agreed to this, but these kinds of things have a way of making themselves known whether you like it or not, and if Angela had wanted to remain 'a regular old employee like everybody else', she achieved the exact opposite as rumors raised her to legendary status.

CAROL: Now, I was just as much in the dark about all of this as everyone else at the time

I knew from the Academy that she was really talented, but other than that, I had no idea

She told me her side of the story only a year ago when I knew her better

And when I asked her why she had refused proper compensation, do you know what she said?

JOHN: She wanted to know if you could implement a winning PR-strategy on 7600 EUR

CAROL: That's right...

which is a little eerie...

you know, you kinda remind me of her in some ways [*looking at John in a scrutinizing manner*]

You vibe some of the same intensity she did

Did you know her?

JOHN: Not at all... Only heard about her this morning

But that's what I would be thinking...

That I would want to live in a world, where I could have massive impact on a budget of 7600 EUR and good reasoning

CAROL: Yes... that's of course very much in line with your story...

But still a little eerie [*shrugging it off*]

Well, anyways, whether she liked it or not, by the end of 2019 she had already risen to stardom within the company, and her job on

the campaign got her out of the Transaction and Settlements Team where she had originally landed after the Academy

Organization-wise she was officially placed in the Fund Accounting Team, because their team lead is the only one who at this point felt comfortable having HR responsibility over her...

he's this funny little guy who is used to working with special-needs people...

...though there were concerns about the possibility of crude behavior on his end when alcohol consumption was involved... [*trailing off*]

Luckily, we never heard of any incidents in Staffing but... [*getting back on track*]

unofficially, she was pretty much free to work on whatever she wanted

JOHN: How was your relationship with her at this point?

CAROL: It was strained

I didn't talk to her much

It's not that I avoided her per se, but we usually didn't have any reason to talk to each other, and so we usually... didn't

And what made matters worse, was the subject of Frank

Frank is the guy from the interview yesterday, in case you had forgotten

JOHN: Indeed I had... Thank you [*smiling*]

CAROL: I don't know if you've noticed, but most women - and a couple of men - here at FinaLibre have a major thing for Frank

Frank was always extremely charismatic, and had this 'knight-in-shining-armor'-glow to him, even before he went middle management

JOHN: I find that surprising because that's not how he came across to me yesterday

He seemed kinda hostile, and not super charismatic

CAROL: Well, in your case, it may be a case of 'what-you-give-is-what-you-get'...

or maybe he was just stressed out...

I'll concede, that the years have taken a hard toll on him, and it may be, that some of us still see him in that glow of the past

But anyway: Frank hadn't made middle management back in 2019, but he had made a name for himself, and practically everyone liked him

Personally, I liked him a lot

To be Frank (pun intended): I was head over heals with him, but Frank only had eyes for one person - this was before he met his wife - and can you guess who that was?

JOHN: I'm going to go out on a limb here, and say Angela...?

CAROL: BINGO!

And the tragedy to it all: Angela practically didn't know he existed She certainly didn't see what all the hype was about

And unbeknownst to me at the time, this was the start of a miserable

tradition of men I was in love with falling head over heels in love with Angela

JOHN: And this made you hate her...?

CAROL: Objection your honor, the interviewer is leading the witness!

JOHN: Granted, I withdraw the question [*smiling*]

CAROL: Thank you

No, I didn't hate her

I don't think I ever hated her, though I certainly was angry with her at times

No, at that point, I just felt ... defeated, I think

As it happened again and again it really got to me and my self-esteem and at times I felt pretty useless

And then at some point, I decided that I was through sulking, and that I would do something about it instead, and so I decided to figure out what it was about Angela that had us playing out this same drama over and over

And so I approached her and told her something like:

'Hi Angela, my name is Carol, and though you may not be aware of it, I took up employment here at FinaLibre the same day as you, back in May of 2019

Since then I have on 3 separate occasions experienced falling in love with a man who has later gone head-over-heals with you, and I need to break this pattern

I want to get on friendly terms with you to get a better understanding of our differences and hopefully be able to break this unhealthy cycle in my own life

And do you know what her response was?

JOHN: No... Not really... But she can't have been upset by that proposal, right?

CAROL: That's what I figured as well, and she wasn't upset, but I was a little upset by how naturally she accepted it and just moved on, seemingly without giving the matter any further thought

Her response was something like: 'Oh, hi Carol... I remember you. Sounds like a great plan. I'm in!' and then she continued what she was doing.

And with that, we were friends... sort of

The thing about our friendship was, that it was...

kinda one-sided... to an extent at least

I want to say, that the initiative was always on me, but that wouldn't be entirely true

I would be the one to suggest trying out new activities, like going to bars and going to the movies and when she knew that I liked something, she might write me on Thursday nights and ask:

'Do you want to go to Willy's after work tomorrow?', but...

I don't know, it was like, if I hadn't worked to maintain our friendship,

then...

she would have happily moved on and forgotten all about me

JOHN: To be fair, you were the one who wanted the friendship to begin with...

CAROL: Yeah, but she agreed to it so she shouldn't just lean back and me do all the heavy lifting!

... I don't know... you are right of course, but Angela just seemed so damn selfish at times

JOHN: It isn't really for me to say in any case, and she probably was selfish... [smiling]

Did she care about you? Did you have a feeling she valued your friendship?

CAROL: ... I guess that's the 1 million dollar question, isn't it...?

I often asked myself that, and I'm still not sure

I think she liked me, to the extent that she liked having friends, but I just don't think having friends was on her top 5

I think maybe she thought about me the same way you think about your father...

I mean, of course, you and your father is different, but the feeling you have, that feeling of gratitude and 'not harboring any ill will', I had a feeling she felt like that...

as far as friends go, I was alright, but her mission was more important than having friends

JOHN: What was her mission?

CAROL: I guess you had to ask...

I don't know... And I'm not sure she did either

But if I had to guess, I think she was searching for a cure for her loneliness

It was a sense I got near the end of our friendship, that that's what it was all about: curing her loneliness

I had a mental image of her as The Little Matchgirl...

looking in from the cold, and that image explains - to me at least- most of her unusual behavior:

she would fall in love with someone, and then go all-in emotionally...

she'd lay herself bare and just dish out her soul, like:

'these are my bad habits, these are my bad experiences' and so on...

and just naturally assume the same openness and when the other person would inevitably fail to live up to her expectations...

she'd lose all interest and send them on their way

She had a thing going with one of the douchebags from Client Management back in 2021...

It was one of those things that no one really understood...

but well, they got together at a party on a Friday, and when he came into the office on Monday he was very clearly on top of the world...

Some of these douchebags have a way of objectifying romantic endeavors...

It's not like keeping score or anything...
or well, actually I wouldn't put that past them either, but anywho:
he was very clearly the shit, because keep in mind, Angela was
somewhat of a local celebrity here, and they started hanging out
together and this jerk did a 180-personality change...

like all of a sudden he had a soul, and it was like talking to a real
human being with real human emotions when you talked to him...
and then after 3 weeks, Angela had apparently had enough, and
dumped him

And the guy fell apart

I was half expecting him to revert to his old douchebag self and
conclude that this sensitivity bullshit was not for him, but he didn't
do that

He just fell apart, and for each day that went by, he looked more
and more miserable, and after a month of watching this man slowly
deteriorate, I think all of us were WISHING for him to revert to his
old douchebag ways, but he didn't

He quit the company soon thereafter, and I was legitimately worried
that he would kill himself

I wanted to reach out, but I was afraid that with me being a woman
and all, that he would fall in love with me and cling to me for
salvation and I couldn't do that

JOHN: I think your assessment was pretty solid for what it's worth [*smiling*]

Didn't some of his male friends reach out?

CAROL: I think a few did, but I don't have any details on that

In any case, he's engaged now and his fiance is expecting and he is
working as an accountant in the public sector, so I guess everything
turned out alright for him in the end, but I'm not sure it's any thanks
to Angela...

Or maybe it was entirely thanks to Angela and he needed that wake-
up call, but then I can't help but feel that she was sort of gambling
with the man's happiness

JOHN: Hmm... I'm not sure if it's an opinion I can defend, but it seems
to me, that whether or not she was in love with the guy makes all
the difference...

CAROL: I know where you are coming from, and for the record:

I agree with you to a large extent, but this was neither the first nor
the last time it happened

I can justify falling in love and inadvertently hurting someone in the
roaring storms of infatuation...

once, twice, thrice, but at some point, it becomes a pattern that you
have a responsibility to be aware of

JOHN: Like a cocked gun; loaded with love [*smiling*]

CAROL: Yeah, something like that I guess... [*smiling*]

JOHN: For reasons that we can come back to another day, this specific moral problem interests me, so out of curiosity: how do you think Angela should have gone about handling her 'gun-of-love'?

CAROL: I'd like that John... [smiling]

Well, if we keep to the analogy of the loaded gun, I think she could at least have taken it to the countryside, away from people in general...

JOHN: This is probably a dumb question because there are a lot of details about this story I don't have, but is it possible that that is what Angela was doing when she took her 'gun-of-love' to the soulless outskirts of Client Management...?

CAROL: Hmm... I never really thought about it like that

But I need to remind myself that Angela and I had very different views of the world...

I never really saw the guy as soulless... just extremely immature...

If Angela interpreted his behavior as a lack of soul...?

Well, I guess it's possible

It makes as much sense as any explanation I have been able to come up with myself, so who knows?

There are a lot of other examples, and most of these guys were definitely NOT soulless bastards...

but there could of course have been some other triggering trait...

It's an interesting idea: that she chose to fall in love with someone based on specific traits...

but also somewhat of a chilling thought...

That just makes her seem even more calculating

JOHN: ... or desperate?

CAROL: I suppose...

Desperation was definitely a huge theme in her life

Besides from pursing romantic love, she also pursued what you may call 'universal love'...

She regularly engaged in altruistic causes...

anything from raising money for victims of war and natural disasters to doing visitations at hospices, and to the best of my knowledge, she was the perfect volunteer:

worked hard, kept her head down, and never asked for anything in return...

well, not anything tangible anyways

We talked about it one time we were out on the town and she told me about the different types of volunteer work she did, and I said something like:

'That must be really fulfilling' and do you know what she said?

JOHN: She didn't feel anything...

She had hoped to feel a connection to the greater body of humankind, but she felt nothing [*seemingly far away in thought*]

CAROL: That's close enough to be kinda scary...

Is there something you are not telling me?

JOHN: No, but I know the sentiment
I'm going to go out on a limb and take a wild swing:
'At some point she became resigned, withdrew to some extent and
took on an air of the Sisuphys struggle'...
She gave up her frantic search for love, and tried to find peace in
just going through life...?
CAROL: Yes John... That's more or less what happened
John...
I've gotta be honest with you...
when we agreed to meet up tonight...
I was just looking for shits and giggles
JOHN: I know
CAROL: Now I have this feeling like it may not be all fun and games with
you
JOHN: You may be right
CAROL: Are you going to hurt me?
JOHN: ... [*pensive*]
I would never physically hurt you...
unless you went crazy and became a major threat to public safety
of course [*vague smile*]
I won't intentionally hurt you emotionally, but I don't play on a full
scale of emotions
It's like the middle half of the keyboard is missing
Do you want to cancel tonight?
CAROL: ... [*thinking it over*]
... No
If nothing else, I may learn something from this [*smiling*]
JOHN: I'm happy to hear it [*smiling*]
I should probably get back to this assignment if I want to have any
hope of making it through to the 2-week mark, but I'm really glad
you shared your knowledge of Angela with me [*smiling*]
CAROL: You know what: so am I!
But I don't want to talk about her tonight, alright?
JOHN: Yes
CAROL: Then I'm looking forward to seeing you tonight John [*getting up*]
JOHN: ... [*smiling*]
CAROL: Oh, one more thing...
I think something happened during the last couple of weeks of her
life...
We weren't really talking at that point, but I heard on the grapevine
that she had become sort of 're-energized'
JOHN: Had she started seeing someone?
CAROL: I really don't know, I'm sorry
But I'll let you know if I hear anything [*smiling*]
JOHN: Thank you

Tuesday, May 28th, 2024

John and Carol Have Breakfast

When John opens his eyes, Carol is sitting - already dressed - in the bed next to him shaking him gently to wake up.

CAROL: Are you awake?

JOHN: I think so [rubbing his eyes]

What time is it?

CAROL: It's 6:55

JOHN: Alright

CAROL: Look John, I don't usually let guys sleep over...

JOHN: OK

CAROL: but you almost passed out yesterday...

afterward... [smiling]

JOHN: Oh, I'm sorry

CAROL: It's alright... It looked like you needed it...

But it leaves us with a predicament...

Between now and when we step through the doors of the main entrance of the office, we are going to make the transition from being two people who are naked together to being two colleagues...

JOHN: And you are doing good at that I see... [pointing out her state of being already dressed]

CAROL: and you are still naked

JOHN: ... [looking down at his own body, then nods in agreement]

Well, on a wild dare, I think I could pull a single day like this in the office...

In the Summer at least... [smiling]

CAROL: Well... We could do that...

It would certainly make for an interesting morning at the office...

And it's been at least a year since the last guy attempted that...
[giving it some thought]

But I am still going to suggest that you hit the shower and get dressed while I get started on breakfast, and when we sit down for breakfast, we are back to being colleagues and you can give me part II to The Story of John

... That way, we don't have to explain to people we might meet on the way to work why I'm accompanying a naked John [*smiling*]

JOHN: That will work for me as well... [*smiling, gets up and walks to the bathroom*]

... but I would like to hear how you'd do it... [*still walking with back to her*]

CAROL: Do what John?

JOHN: Explain about the naked John in your company

CAROL: I'll think about it [*smiling*]

Hey John...?

JOHN: Yeah [*turns around*]

CAROL: Is there anything you don't eat for breakfast?

JOHN: Yes... [*pensive*]

Lots of things

CAROL: Eggs, bacon, and bread?

JOHN: I can eat all of those things for breakfast

John walks into Carol's combined kitchen/dining room/living room 25 minutes later.

JOHN: This looks really good [*smiling*]

CAROL: Well, thank you, John

I would say that you have a crazy ex-girlfriend, and when you came home last night she had been in your apartment and had burned all of your clothes and your bed, and not knowing what to do, you called the only person you thought might be willing to help you in such a vulnerable situation: your compassionate colleague Carol

JOHN: And the naked part?

I mean, I must have been wearing clothes when I came home last night, right?

CAROL: Yeah, but you can't wear the same clothes to the office for two days in a row

The women in the office would understand [*smiling*]

John is about to ask why he couldn't just have borrowed a set of men's clothing from Carol - he had himself been close to picking someone else pant's off the floor looking for his own - but figured this might be a sensitive subject to Carol and let it slide.

CAROL: What would you say?

JOHN: I thought about that while in the shower

And... it would be hard to explain...

I would say something like: 'Why do YOU think I am riding naked with Carol to work?'

'Is there something I'm not getting here?'

'I'm not trying to be a smart-ass or anything, I just hadn't thought for a minute that there could be more than one reason for it...'

'But from that smirk of yours, I'm guessing there's something I'm not seeing here'

Then look them straight in the eyes

'Honestly man, what am I missing here?'

If we're lucky, the situation will be awkward enough for them to want to bury the whole thing, or they are going to provide me with an out, like: 'Oh, yeah it must have been because your dog ate your clothes' or whatever, and I'd play off that...

and if they plow on with some innuendo, I would take both of their hands in mine, look worried at them, and say:

'One of us is extremely sick, man'

And if they haven't folded at that point, I'd stay the hell away from

them, 'cause any dude that will sit through a naked man grabbing their hand out of worry, probably is crazy...

CAROL: And what if it's a woman?

JOHN: ... Then I wouldn't try for any of that...

I'd just cry

CAROL: And what would that achieve?

JOHN: That same level of discomfort I suppose...

I mean, a crying naked man is something that any person would want to rid themselves of as fast as possible...

But, I could picture a group of dudes in the locker room shooting the shit and someone is telling the story like:

'and John and Carol were on the train, and John was naked, and when I asked him why he was naked, he started crying'

and someone follows up with: 'what the fuck is wrong with the guy?...

...but anyway, why was he naked with Carol, are they doing it?'...

That is, crying wouldn't disqualify us as a target for slander...

I think it would be harder for a woman to slander without being seen as cold-hearted...

CAROL: Well, if you knew how many crazies a young woman has to deal with during the course of any normal week, you'd know that a naked crying man more than justifies getting off your seat and going to another cart

AND slandering him afterward

JOHN: ... [pensive, nodding]

I'll buy that [smiling and gesturing forfeit]

CAROL: Alright Mr. Sensible...

before we get started with the sequel to The Life of John...

I need to tell you something so I don't forget.... [smiling]

I asked around the office yesterday...

about Angela...

and you may want to have a chat with Albert from Investment Compliance...

my source wouldn't tell me why, and she didn't want to give me much context, other than he and Angela may have known each other at one point or another...

in the biblical sense...

JOHN: Alright

CAROL: Albert's a little... special....

you may have to speak in 'capital letters'... if you know what I mean...?

JOHN: I think I understand... [smiling]

On the subject of Angela...

CAROL: Yes...?

JOHN: What's the story with... [checks phone]
Martin...?

CAROL: You've heard about that...?

Well, I guess you would...

A few months ago I had a thing with Martin from Accounting, and then one Friday at a party, Angela comes to our table, sits down next to him... Martin...

... They talk about History or some such nonsense and next thing I know, they are going at it on the dance floor...

All but getting undressed and doing it right there in front of everyone...

They at least had the courtesy to go into the bathroom to do that... and there I was...

helpless to do anything about it...

Technically, Martin and I weren't exclusive...

But we were at that stage where everyone around the office knew about it, and Angela sure as shit must have known...

I know that doesn't really help my case about my innocence in her murder...

but, at this point...

I guess I was past any sensible state of emotion about the Angela-situation...

Do you know that feeling, when you are walking somewhere and it looks like maybe it's going to rain, but you think you'll be able to make it before the rain starts...?

and not long after, you find out you were wrong as a drizzle starts...? and then the rain starts for real...

and then it's just straight up pouring down, and you curse the God damned rain...?

but you reach a point where you are completely drenched, and you figure 'what does it even matter'...?

and you decide to find out 'how wet can I get'...? [looks at John, waiting]

JOHN: I know how wet you can get [affirmative smile]

CAROL: ... [looks at him, deadpan]

JOHN: ... [looks at her, deadpan]

CAROL: ... right...

You wanna know the most surreal thing about the whole thing...?

Before I even got started with the guy, I had asked her about him...

... to figure out if she might be interested...

Can you imagine how weird that feels:

'Hey Angela... Do you by any chance happen to have plans to have a swing at Martin from Accounting...?

...because I'm thinking about falling in love with him, and I just want to make sure you don't come around and swoop him'

JOHN: ... [giving it some thought]

I'm not sure I can...

CAROL: I guess that's only for the best [smiling]
but... It doesn't change what I said yesterday:
I didn't hate her...

JOHN: I believe you... [smiling]
Also on the topic of Angela:
How was her relationship with her family?

CAROL: I have to assume that it wasn't good
but she never said that...
not in so many words at least
I did on a few occasions open up the subject of family, but she closed
it again immediately

JOHN: Hmm... [pensive, worried]

CAROL: Honestly...
It could have been anything...
Maybe her family was super-rich and it interfered with her image as
a self-made success-story
Or maybe she just wasn't a family person... You know? [looking a
little accusingly at John]

JOHN: Hmm... [relenting the subject]

CAROL: And now John: get with the story!

John's Story Part II: High School

JOHN: Do you remember the first months of high school?

CAROL: Vaguely I'd say...
There were a lot of new people, new ways to attend school, a lot of
parties...

JOHN: And a lot of being the new kids at school...

CAROL: But wasn't that mostly the 1st day though?

JOHN: It was definitely worst on the 1st day
On the 1st day, you are greeted with 'Only good freshman is a dead
freshman' and so on
But you know about this beforehand so you know to just keep your
head down and let them throw sunflower seeds at you or whatever
And for 97% of high schoolers, that's that...
And then you have the upperclassman losers who experience a little
taste of power or worth for the first time, and just cannot let it go...
CAROL: Sure, they must be in every school...
And workplace for that matter...
But you can usually ignore those people, because as you say: they
are losers...

JOHN: And that was the general consensus at my high school as well...
But there were these three seniors who would just not let it go...
And of course, they targeted me...

CAROL: And did you at this point stop to think WHY they targeted you...?

It wasn't exactly the first time...

JOHN: I don't know if I at that point was conscious about it, but I might have been

They targeted me because I was willing to be targeted...

I was ready to let it piss me off...

Whether I was aware of why they targeted me, I knew perfectly well that I wasn't just willing to be pissed off, I WANTED to be pissed off

And the thing about being the target of someone is, that you become really aware of their routines...

Like: 'I know I usually run into these guys at this place at this point'...

And 2 months into my freshman year, I could say with almost certainty that I would come across them at the same stairs leading from the 2nd floor down to the 1st floor every Wednesday after 3rd period, as we all had classes in close proximity on the 2nd floor and were all going to classes on the 1st floor

Now, these guys would always walk together

probably because they didn't really have any other friends outside of each other and they would always walk in the same damn formation with what I would say were the stronger 2 walking side by side and the weaker and more scrawny of the three trailing behind them

And on this particular Wednesday I time it so I am next in line to go down the stairs to the scrawny kid

and 2 steps down I hook his feet with one leg, push him real hard in the back and send him flying down the flight of stairs, not quite head first but enough so that he breaks his collarbone and one of his wrists and then continues down the stairs and clips his two friends, and then I yell:

'WHAT THE FUCK? WHO PUSHED ME?' and then just start screaming like a maniac...

Like something really hurt.

CAROL: And people bought that? [skeptical]

JOHN: Totally...

Well everybody except for the scrawny kid and his 2 friends of course...

And Louisa, but again:

she's the topic of my 3rd story, so let's save her for now

CAROL: 2 classes is like 50 students, right?

JOHN: It must have been at least 50, there were a bunch of other students there as well

CAROL: And nobody saw anything?

JOHN: I'm sure somebody saw something, but as you may know, humans make pretty terrible eye-witnesses...

In my experience, there are 4 categories of people when experiencing something significant like a little scrawny kid come flying down the stairs, and then being asked to explain what happened:

- You are going to have a lot of people who COULD have seen something, but who were too busy thinking about everything other than flying scrawny kids, and hence don't know shit
- You'll have the people that will swear, no matter what, that they saw John push the scrawny kid on purpose and then holla like the devil, because they don't like John, and the kid's 2 friends of course belonged to this category on this occasion
- Then you have the people who saw something that looked like John might have pushed the scrawny kid, but whose memory is easily manipulated by what happens afterward, like John yelling that someone pushed him or teachers asking them: 'did John really push the scrawny kid?' and they get to thinking, 'no gees, that can't have been what I saw because why would John do such a thing?' and empirical research has shown that a disturbingly large percentage of eye-witnesses belong to this category
- And finally, you'll have the people who saw John send the kid flying down the stairs, and even though they don't understand why anybody would do such a thing, they know what they saw. Or maybe they know why somebody might do such a thing because they have thought about doing the same thing or they've been in the 'people-getting-pushed-down-the-stairs'-scenario a lot - in the same way that bouncers are likely to make better eye-witnesses in describing what happened before, during, and after a fight simply because they have a lot of experience - but no matter the flavor, it's my experience that this category is pretty scarce

JOHN: and the thing is, there weren't a whole lot of people at school who believed I had any reason for pushing the kid

CAROL: But from what you've said, I have an image of these guys as the pretty annoying type...

JOHN: Sure, and if I had made a big thing about some of the shit they pulled, I think people would probably have believed me...

I would say that most of my classmates had at some point or another been harassed by these guys to some degree

but they had avoided being made a permanent target so it would be hard for them to really think of them as a major threat to their everyday lives...

And as they zeroed in on me, I assume they just naturally let off on some of their other 'initiatives'...

And the thing is when you are a group of people who elect to target a single individual

- whether through verbal agreement or an unspoken consensus -

you cross a line at some point where you know you are in the wrong in the eyes of society at large...

and so you start covering your tracks and instead send off a lot of small jabs that the target will certainly know what to make of, but doesn't really get noticed by everyone else

CAROL: Alright... So you send this kid, who

- by your account -

was kind of an asshole, flying down the stairs...

Was that the end of that?

JOHN: No... It wasn't...

His 2 friends were really pissed at me, and I knew they were likely to try for some shit if I ran into them after school that day, so I took off from school an hour early

But...

I had a habit of meeting in at school pretty early...

Even though classes didn't start until 8:10, school opened at 7:10 and I do my best thinking in the morning so I was usually there at around 7:20, and I was always one of the first students there

The day after the stairway incident, I was about halfway between the bus stop and the school, when I heard the sound of a moped running at high speed far away behind me...

CAROL: Oh no... I think I know where this is going...

JOHN: Don't worry...

I don't think it's going where you think it's going... [smiling comfortingly]

But it was of course the two friends of the scrawny kid...

Allan and Mike... zooming in on me

They had often arrived at school early as well and on many occasions, they had either spat after me or pushed me or straight up tried to run me down when our paths crossed...

And the place was perfect for that because it was damn deserted at that time of day...

So when I hear the sound of their moped I turn around to look at them, and then take off running at full speed, and after about 20 meters of running, the road forks:

right is to the school, and left leads into a tunnel under the highway leading into an industrial area

and I run left and make it under the tunnel and right after the tunnel the path makes a sharp right turn and the tunnel marks the ending of a stretch of about 20 meters of straight path for these guys to accelerate through

and they try to maintain a high speed, leaning into the sharp right turn and just as they clear the tunnel I swing at the driver with a baseball bat that hits him on the side of his helmet and the two guys smashed into the concrete wall that walled in the turn

The passenger wasn't wearing a helmet, and he must have been dead

on impact...

Without going too much into the gory details, I know for a fact that the impact crushed his skull...

CAROL: Oh my God!

That is horrible!

I have so many questions right now and at the same time:

I don't know what to say...

JOHN: Well, maybe I can spare you some of the questions and finish the tale [smiling]

Because the driver was pretty obviously alive, although he was not doing well...

Mangled in a wreck of bike and man... or well, boy...

And he really was a boy at that point, as he lay there crying and moaning in pain

I think he would have survived...

...if I hadn't intervened... [looking serious]

He was lying in this weird position, with his own body weight and the weight of the moped pressing down on his neck and head...

And I went over to him and shifted his position slightly to cut off his airways and held him there for about a minute until he stopped breathing and then I held on for a minute or so more, then placed the moped back on top of him, and called an ambulance and told them how I had been chased by two guys and then there had been a terrible accident, and they dispatched an ambulance and a pair of police officers

Carol had been holding John's hands for most of the exciting part of the story, but now withdraws them and looks at John in a combination of horror and disgust as he tells the last part.

CAROL: John, that's...

If that's true, then you are...

JOHN: Sick? A psychopath?

Both may be the case, I don't know

CAROL: Why are you telling me this?

JOHN: I'm not totally sure, but I think I want you to know who I am

And the violence and anger is, unfortunately, a part of that

There is a realization I made sometime later that I was hoping to arrive at, but I understand if you don't want to hear any more...?

CAROL: Right now, I'm shocked!

And I really don't know what to say!

And honestly, I feel disgusted!

JOHN: ... [looking at Carol, waiting]

About 5 minutes go by, during which Carol goes through various stages of feeling horrified, disgusted and in disbelief.

CAROL: I need to know some things about what you just told me
How did you happen to have a baseball bat handy?

JOHN: I hid it just around the corner of the tunnel the week before
[deadpan]

CAROL: So...

Did you plan the whole thing?

JOHN: Mostly. There were things I couldn't plan for...
like I had to plan for the fact that I very well could have missed the driver on that swing

CAROL: But you planned for them to chase you, and you planned to attack them when they came speeding around the corner?

JOHN: Yes

CAROL: Did you plan for them to die?

JOHN: ... [pensive]

Yes, I think I did

CAROL: What did you feel afterward?

Did you feel anything?

JOHN: I was mostly worried that somebody had seen me...

There were a good 2 minutes that I would have had a hard time explaining if they had been caught on camera

CAROL: And you didn't feel guilty about killing those two boys...

I mean, how did you justify THAT to yourself?

DID you justify it?

JOHN: I'm not really sure...

About the justification part...

I don't think I ever felt guilt, but I may have felt the need to justify my actions...

at least to myself...

The way I saw it...

and probably still see it... is...

that they chose to step into the arena...

you sort of said it yourself, when you said:

'Oh no, I think I know where this is going'...

Would they have killed me if they had the chance?...

Probably not

but then again...

they may not have been thinking that they were going to kill me when they set off chasing me, but you know how these kind of stories go:...

Two people in a blood-frenzy out for revenge, and they don't like the way I scream when they kick me and one of them says something

like:

'I wish the little bitch would just shut up'

...and the other one - not wanting to be a pussy - says something like 'Maybe we should shut him up for good'...

CAROL: This whole situation is just so FUCKED John!

You... them...

JOHN: ... [looking at Carol, expressionless]

CAROL: Alright, I still need answers to a few things...

JOHN: Shoot

CAROL: Did you get arrested?

I mean, how did you explain the situation to the police?

JOHN: I didn't get arrested, but I was brought in for questioning...

Mostly, I kept to the truth, but I changed a few details...

Like: I didn't tell the police that I had purposefully pushed the scrawny kid down the stairs...

There had been a terrible accident, and now I suspected these 2 guys who I had a feeling didn't like me to begin with blamed me for that accident...

And I hadn't hit them with a baseball bat that I hid behind the corner in an act of premeditation the week prior...

but a stick I conveniently found lying on the ground

...because I had put it there in an act of premeditation the week prior

...which I of course didn't mention neither

I didn't try for an Oscar...

I didn't try and say anything like:

'I feel just horrible about what happened to them'...

I told the police that I had been scared because I thought they would beat me to a pulp if they caught me, which I'm sure they would have liked to...

I think there may have been some of the people from the police who might have suspected that there was more to the story than I let on...

Maybe the autopsy report showed irregularities, but at the end of the day they had to decide if they thought they could put a convincing story together that would convince a judge or jury

I hadn't told them about all the shit these guys had done

just the stuff I knew they would pick up on anyway from talking to the teachers and the other students...

not enough to establish a motive for premeditated murder, but certainly enough to justify being afraid of running into these two guys on a deserted path with no one else in sight

...and I guess that the police also have to decide what they want to spend their energy on

CAROL: Why are you telling me all of this?
Basically, you are admitting to murdering two boys?
What will you do if I decide to go to the police?
JOHN: I can honestly say, that the thought hadn't even crossed my mind
[smiling]
Thinking about it... [pensive]
I might lie...
But I wouldn't hurt you if that's what you are worried about [*trying to smile comfortingly, without approaching or trying to establish physical contact*]
I'm not a very good scale of justice, but even if you decide to make it your life's work to put me in jail...
it's still a whole other thing than what those guys were doing
CAROL: I'm not sure if that is any comfort...
But maybe it is... [shaking her head]
Alright, finish the story
JOHN: As I said, the police decided not to pursue the case...
The parents of the 2 kids may have been pissed at me, but if so, the school and my father probably shielded me from it...
The school however decided that it would be good for me to have some regular sessions with the school guidance counselor/psychologist...

and she was really nice...
she was in her mid 40's, and I think she really cared for what she did and the students she talked to...
Initially, I was worried that she would drown me in a lot of weird psychologist questions and see right through my spiel
conclude that I was a raving psycho responsible for the death of two students and hand my case off to the police for indeterminate incarceration
but it didn't go at all like that...
We only talked about the accident during the first session, and when she asked me if it was something I still felt troubled by and I said: 'no'
we didn't talk anymore about it
Instead, we talked about a lot of other stuff...
stuff that was happening in my life at that point and old stuff from my childhood
I know she picked up on the fact that I had 'emotional blind spots' - as you put it - pretty much from the start
but I never felt like she condemned me for it, and I think she actually wanted me to have a good life... [*looking far away, maybe back in time*]
And then there was a session I remember really well...
We were talking about some of the things that had angered me throughout the years...
Things like being picked on by dipshits that just feel superior to you but also more common stuff like people being visibly tired of dealing

with you because you are bad at remembering names...
and she asked me:

'Why are you so angry John?'

in a way you can only ask that question if you really care for the well-being of the other person and I was about to answer the question...
and I knew the answer really well:

Because the world had deprived me of a mother, and all my life I had been surrounded by these assholes who would come home to: 'how was your day my little angel?' and warm hugs and kisses when the world was against them...

But just as I was about to start, I felt like I was about to tell a lie...
That wasn't it!

At least, it wasn't all of it...

I had just always felt so damn angry!

And I looked at her instead and just confessed:

'I don't know'

and I didn't get halfway through that sentence before I just broke down to a sobbing mess and just kept repeating it as sort of a realization or a Heureka-insight:

'I don't know'

CAROL: What did she do?

JOHN: She held me...

And let me cry...

And repeat myself like a retard: 'I don't know'

And that was the realization I was driving at...

That was the moment I realized that I was a really angry young man, and that I had no idea why

CAROL: ... [not knowing what to say]

JOHN: I can see this was a lot to take in...

What do you say that I help you clean up and then take off in time to take the train before you?

CAROL: I'll do the clean-up...

You can just go...

JOHN: Alright



Tuesday, May 28th, 2024

John Talks to Albert

Albert gets up from his desk at the Investment Compliance unit of FinaLibre every day at exactly 16:12, clears his desk, walks to the wardrobe where he puts on his long coat and walks out of the main entrance between 16:23 and 16:25. He then walks through the eastern part of the Thousand Acre Woods towards the nearest train station where he boards the train at 16:45. Every day. Wind and rain! It's not that this departure carries any specific significance to him... he would be just as happy catching the 17:05, 17:25, or 17:45 departure... hell, for all he cares, his day would be just as fine if he were to catch the 20:05 departure - except of course for the longer working hours this would imply - but he has a reputation to uphold, and THAT is important to him.

This day is exactly like any other, and Albert is strolling along the narrow part of the dark pine tree patch that precedes the much brighter and broader stretch just before the station, probably thinking about all the nice things that await him tonight - because Albert is a man that works to live, and not the other way around - when he suddenly feels an explosion of pain in the backside of his left leg. Albert hardly registers the pain before he finds himself on his hands and knees on the narrow gravel path.

ANGRY VOICE: GIVE ME YOUR FUCKING PHONE!

ALBERT: What?

The man kicks him in the ribs. Albert suspects that the pain he feels in the left side of his body may be from the two lowermost ribs being pressed (which indeed it is and he is going to enjoy those two ribs for the next two months to come). Albert reaches into his coat pocket and then holds out his phone as an offer to the angry voice and leg.

ANGRY VOICE: Do as I say, and you'll get this back and I won't hurt you
any more than I already have...
fuck around, and I will fuck you up!
Do you understand what I have just told you?

ALBERT: Yes

The man pulls out a little square box from a satchel and places Albert's phone in it.

ANGRY VOICE: This part of the path to the station is usually somewhat deserted...

most folks prefer the wider and brighter path around the pine trees, even if it is 567 meters longer

But somebody could decide to take exactly this path, at exactly this time on exactly this day, and I'd prefer for the talk we are going to have to be undisturbed, so we are going to walk behind those two large trees over there

Don't run!

Do you understand what I have just told you?

ALBERT: Yes

ANGRY VOICE: Are you going to run?

ALBERT: No

ANGRY VOICE: Good. Let's go

As they are walking towards the trees, Albert gets a better look at the man behind the voice and the leg, and it's a man he has seen around the office. The man hasn't made any attempt to conceal his identity. No hood. No ski-mask. Hell, if Albert was a betting man, he would place his money on the clothes the man is wearing now being the same he was wearing when he last saw the guy in the office just a couple of hours ago. Albert doesn't have any real experience with the criminal underbelly of society, but he takes the man's total lack of concealment as an ill omen.

ANGRY MAN FROM OFFICE: My name is John but I think you already knew that

and I am just going to ask you a few questions, and if you answer them to the best of your ability, I won't hurt you

I meant that!

If you withhold information, I will beat it out of you

I will try to keep to injuring you in ways that you will be able to conceal under most circumstances, so at least you won't have to be known as the guy that 'walked into a door'

You are going to have to do REALLY bad in order for me to kill you

Before we'd ever get to that, I would tie you to that tree, gag you, cut open your hamstrings, pull out your sciatic nerves

- they run along the backside of your legs -

and play them like a fiddle, a process known to be rather painful
Am I making sense to you?

In all honesty, none of this is making much sense to Albert - who found the man's monotone way of addressing 'playing fiddle' with his body parts a little disturbing - but he had a pretty good idea of what the man was asking of him.

ALBERT: Yes

JOHN: Did you know Angela?

ALBERT: Yes, she worked in the Fund Accounting Team at FinaLibre

JOHN: Did you ever see her outside of work?

ALBERT: ...

The man is staring into Albert's eyes in what Albert considers a 'sunken' stare.
He could probably do this all day. What a God-damned sicko!

ALBERT: Look, I don't mind telling you all about seeing Angela outside of work, but can I at least ask you not to pass any of the information on to anyone else?

It's not that I've done anything wrong per se...

JOHN: No [*deadpan*]

ALBERT: ... I saw her once outside of work [*defeated*]

JOHN: Did you have sex with her?

ALBERT: ... yes...

JOHN: Expand

ALBERT: ... It's a little hard to explain ...

JOHN: ... [*impatient*]

Prostitution?

ALBERT: ...yes

JOHN: Who set it up?

Who was she giggling for? [*impatient*]

ALBERT: She wasn't

JOHN: ...

ALBERT: I'm the prostitute

Albert the Whore

For the first time during this cozy exchange, the man seems to be taken aback by what Albert has said, and this comes as no surprise to Albert, because with his 172 cm, 89 kg and an almost criminally pathetic muscle-to-body-fat-ratio, Albert doesn't really fit most people's perception of what a male prostitute looks like. Hell, Albert doesn't fit Albert's perception of what a male prostitute looks like.

JOHN: Somehow I doubt that

The man... "John"... is doing a pretty good job of keeping up the tough guy act, but Albert senses a slight unease.

JOHN: Elaborate

ALBERT: Well, it wasn't really a career path I chose...
it just sort of happened a few years ago

JOHN: Go on

ALBERT: There was a party at FinaLibre, and one of the women brought a group of her friends and as the party was nearing the end, I was approached by one of said friends
- a really beautiful woman -
who basically told me that she and I would be taking a taxi to her place

JOHN: ... [*looking skeptical*]

ALBERT: I know what you are thinking because I was thinking that too
Well, I guess I kinda found out about that when we got to her place

JOHN: She robbed you?

ALBERT: No. We had sex
A couple of times actually
But let me tell you: I don't think she liked me...
or well - men in general - very much
I got this feeling that it was all about putting me down in some way...
I don't know...
trying to make me feel small I guess
Does that make sense?

JOHN: Ish... but go on

ALBERT: I think it would have worked on some guys...
hell, most guys with an ounce of self-esteem would probably have objected sometime before round 3, but it had been a long time since any woman...
hell, since ANYONE, had paid me much attention, and I was just too high on being there with her, that not even the assholes that used to steal my lunch money in elementary could have brought me down at that moment
and somehow this just seemed to wind her up even tighter...
I think an outside observer would have judged rounds 4 and 5 as outright acts of aggression on her part

As Albert says round 4 and 5 John's facade visibly cracks for a moment.

ALBERT: I think round 5 closed the show...

at this point, she was practically shouting at me to get out of her apartment, and I think she might even have slapped me at one point, and I yielded...

of course I yielded...

I tell her I just have to make a last trip to the bathroom, and I'll get out of there

Well, when I get back in the bed room to pick up my clothes, she is looking at me with a sadistic grin on her face, and I start to fear that she might do me serious physical harm, when she tells me to hold out my hand

Which I do...

She picks up her purse from the bedside table, pulls out 200 EUR, puts them in my hand, and tells me to 'get my dirty whore-ass out of her home'

looking back at it, I guess she thought I would feel degraded by this, and maybe if I had been one of the douchebags from Client Management I would have....

and I wouldn't have minded acting humiliated for her had I known that was what she wanted...

that would have been the least I could do...

but here I am, with this incredibly beautiful woman who I had just gone a 5-round with...

I was helpless in keeping back a huge shit-eater grin...

I was sunshine all across the board...

which of course just pissed her off even more, but what can you do?...

JOHN: Alright...

Assuming I believe you: how did you convert that one night into a 'career'?

and don't tell me you have been blessed with an abundance of beautiful, man-hating women with fuck-it money to waste for the last year [vaguely smiling]

ALBERT: Well, about a week later there is a knock on my door, and when I open I am greeted by a young woman, who nervously asks me if I'm Albert and tells me that her friend had suggested that she go see this male prostitute she knows

Now, I can kinda guess who that friend might have been
and what her motivation for passing along my contact information - not that I remember giving them to her -

had been, but I don't think this woman knows anything about that
She is just this somewhat introverted woman who feels insecure about her body, and wants intimacy without feeling like she is being judged, and I actually think my rather bland looks help here, and

hell;
she is paying for it, and I'm just some dumb sub-par whore, so what does she care what I think...?
not that she was like that at all...
she was really nice actually
I guess if your name is something like Barack Obama you get used to making important decisions on a daily basis, but I can't remember ever making any really important decisions before that moment, but I knew I had to make a decision right then and there:
tell this girl that I was flattered but that there had been a misunderstanding...

or jump on the wave and ride it for as long as I could...
It wasn't even a choice, and I have been clinging to the wave ever since

JOHN: Finish the story

ALBERT: Alright...

I think I did good by her, and I think she must have passed on my phone number to one of her friends, who must have let a word slip to a few friends, and...

well, you get the picture

And the thing is...

hell, how do I explain this?...

It's 2024, post-#Me2 right?...

Remember that fad where women were posting their number of sex partners on their Facebook walls?

but still... some things linger on...

I mean... it's no more than a few days ago I heard two young Albert Einsteins of the future agree on the old sage wisdom about the 'Master Key' and the 'useless lock'...
and fucking 'coin offers' man...

JOHN: Well... [shrugging in a 'I know what you mean' fashion]

ALBERT: Yeah! [stern]

And I'm sure that most of the women who request my services would prefer a 6 foot 5 poster boy for the fitness revolution, but I'm... dependable... I always give it my all...

I have a pretty broad taste...

I only do women and I adhere religiously to the 'half-your-age-plus-7'-rule but other than that...

I guess I do have obesity- and/or disfigurement-limits, but I haven't hit 'em yet, and as long as the little guy is ready for play, we go in there and give it our absolute all and best of all:

I come with a 100% discretion guarantee, because:

who's going to believe a claim that a beautiful young woman would pay me for sex anyway?!

Every Monday, when the 'Alpha Dawgs' stroll into the office and boast about their 'conquests'

- and I have a pretty good idea that at least half of those are exaggerated, if not downright lies -

NOBODY asks me if any 'fine chicks' have been paying me for sex this weekend

Most people see me as this weird introverted guy who probably lives in his mom's basement and has yet to experience the magical world of the birds and the bees, and I play into it...

avert eye-contact as much as possible

keep an OCD-like schedule of coming and going..

I could give a fuck less what train I catch, and my mom bailed on my dad and I when I was 2...

I don't give a rats ass about body-counts

Fuck trophy walls!

I JUST ABSOLUTELY LOVE PLAYING THE GAME and I'm going to do all I can to stay on that wave for as long as I can...

and when that 'U BUSY 2NITE?' -text dings

I'm as excited now as I was 2 years ago...

but all that goes down the shitter if the word gets out

JOHN: I'm not going to say anything...

I think people would believe my recounting your story about as much as they ask you about your weekend [*tired smile*]

JOHN: But give on Angela!

ALBERT: Honestly...

there's not much to tell really

I got a text about 3 months ago...

I didn't recognize her address, but then again, I don't know where anybody lives

I showed up at her apartment at 21:00 on the dot, as she had requested

It was pretty obvious that she was disappointed to see me there, but I'm not sure SHE even knew what she was hoping for

I honestly think it was sort of a spur-of-the-moment-thing for her

I told her I had no idea she was the sender of that text...

which was true, because I was as surprised as she was

that I would be more than happy - even honored - to carry out whatever she wanted

- which was also sort of true, I guess -

but that I would fully understand if she wanted to call it off, and that of course, no one would ever know about this misunderstanding and I think she was about to take me up on my offer to just forget about the whole ordeal, when I guess she must have changed her mind, and besides from that first time I told you about before, it was the single most weird experience I have had while 'gigging'

JOHN: Go on

ALBERT: At the root of it...

I really don't understand what made her change her mind...

I don't know much about what kind of person she was, but I imagine that she must have been used to a much better class of men than me...

Best guess is pity I suppose...

Most of the time, her mind was obviously elsewhere, and then all of a sudden...

for about a minute or so...

actually, it could have been 5 seconds or 5 minutes for all I know... she was TOTALLY there... Intensely!

Best way to describe it is, that she 'unboxed' me...

It was like the Terminator going through the phone book searching for Sarah Connor...

only... she was going through ME... scanning me...

The way she looked into my eyes...

like she was searching for something...

there was just such a will behind that gaze, and I felt completely powerless to do...

anything...

She could have gone Basic Instinct on me with a sledge-hammer to the forehead, and still I would have been unable to do anything to prevent it...

and then it disappeared, and so did she... well, mentally...

JOHN: ... [*still staring at Albert, but distant*]

ALBERT: ...

JOHN: ... [*staring, distant*]

ALBERT: ..and then the door to the bathroom springs open and we are joined by a group of leprechauns tossing gold-covered chocolate coins and Angela pulls off her mask, and as it turns out, she is actually my prodigal mother who left me during my infancy and I started feeling guilty, but in comes Doctor Phil to save the day and he declares that I had acted in good faith and therefore, was indeed NOT a motherfucker, and...

JOHN: ... [*distant*]

... [*eyes moving from side to side, seemingly in an effort to catch up to the conversation*]

Alright... [*smiling*]

You can go... and thanks...

And sorry about the ribs, but they should be alright in a couple of months, and I have a feeling that at least some of your customers are going to dig it [*smiling, apologetically*]

DONNIE: Is he clean?

JOHN: Clean enough, sir

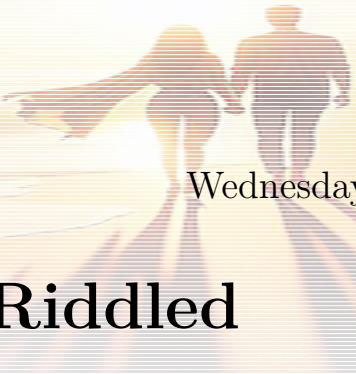
DONNIE: Had he been with Angela?

JOHN: Once, about 3 months ago, but I am 95% on it being unrelated to
her death

DONNIE: Anything else?

JOHN: Nothing important, sir

DONNIE: Alright



Wednesday, May 29th, 2024

John is Riddled

John is jogging towards the train station, cursing his poor time management skills. He has a feeling like he had been on time right up until it was time to actually leave the apartment, and then something had happened, and now he is running late. John believes that he can still make his train if only he runs the rest of the way. It's still pretty chilly for a Summer morning, but he may have to take a shower and change when he gets into the office, but it beats having to wait 20 minutes for the next train to Thousand Acre Forest. John doesn't immediately recognize the old lady when he runs by her, but when she calls out his name, he knows that there is no getting around it. He's going to have to be polite, and stop and have a talk with her. He owes Miss Jansen that much.

MISS JANSEN: JOHN! Is that you?

JOHN: So it is, Miss Jansen

MISS JANSEN: What has it been? 10 years since I saw you last?

JOHN: That sounds about right [*smiling a somewhat shallow smile*]

MISS JANSEN: You were always such a GOOD boy!

And what a shame what happened to your mother!

Is your father doing alright?

JOHN: My father is doing alright

I think he has made some friends and started seeing people after I moved out [*smiling*]

MISS JANSEN: I am really glad to hear it

John doesn't doubt it. Miss Jansen had been really good to him in school, and even as a child, John sensed that Miss Jansen was trying really hard in her own little way to correct a wrong, that a machinery outside anyone's control and influence had inflicted on him and his father, and he had always felt grateful for that. John had grown up without a mother, step-mother or even a 'Father's regular call girl' in his life, but the closest thing he had had to a mother figure in his life growing up, was Miss Jansen.

MISS JANSEN: You were always so talented when it came to mathematics
I bet you work with computers and numbers now, don't you?

JOHN: Well...

I sort of got a little side-tracked and never really pursued math... [a
little embarrassed]

But I may be turning it around now [*smiling*]

MISS JANSEN: That's lovely!

I sometimes fear that maybe I smothered you as a child, and didn't
let you realize your full potential...
letting you slide through life too easy

JOHN: Certainly not!

Well, you may have made life easier for me, but I'm not sure I would
have been a very nice person today if it wasn't for your influence
[*smiling*]

MISS JANSEN: But you are a nice person now? [*looking at him a little eerily*]

JOHN: I'd like to think so...

Look, Miss Jansen, it's great to see you again but I'm running a
little late and...

MISS JANSEN: I've got one for you!

How do you make a square radical?

JOHN: Is it a joke or a puzzle?

MISS JANSEN: Does that make any difference John?

JOHN: It does narrow down the search a little

MISS JANSEN: Well, it's a little of both, I suppose...

Like so many other things in life

JOHN: Hmm... I can't figure it out

How do you make a square radical Miss Jansen?

MISS JANSEN: No John!

I'm not going to let you take the easy way out this time!

You have to apply yourself!

Anyways, you don't have to figure it out right now

Why don't you think about it a little, and see if maybe it comes to
you?

John is starting to get a bad feeling about the situation. Miss Jansen is definitely not the teacher he remembered from 9 years of elementary school, and there is something about the way she looks at him that makes him feel uneasy.

JOHN: I'm going now [*stern face as he walks by her*]

MISS JANSEN: Have you been to see the girl in the lake lately?

John could kick himself for not having seen it before. There really had been plenty of clues: he had been late getting out the door because 'something had happened', but he couldn't remember what that something was, could he? Miss Jansen calling him 'John', but that's not the name she knew him by! And somehow, Miss Jansen didn't seem to have aged at all during the last 10 years. Just to be certain, John looks at the tattoo on the inside of his wrist... 'zZleep'... What is it supposed to say again... 'AWAKE' he believes. Well, he is definitely dreaming.

MISS JANSEN: That got your attention, didn't it

Why do you always run away from her?

JOHN: Because she's a murderous bitch who's going to drown me in that lake if I get close enough to let her

MISS JANSEN: How will you know before you've tried it?

John DID know, because John HAD tried it, and there were other things wrong with the Lake-Girl scene that totally justified John's urge to suppress it.

JOHN: What do you want Miss Jansen?

MISS JANSEN: I want you to apply yourself John!

You had so many options available to you, and you flushed them all down the pisser with drugs and anger issues!

Most of your life, you've breezed through, always picking the path of least resistance, and when life gave you lemons...

you either threw them away in anger or beat someone up and mugged them so you had money to buy soda pop

JOHN: That's not entirely true

But you have made your point, and I have gotten the message

MISS JANSEN: That's good John!

That's what I wanted to hear!

You are running behind schedule, but you can still make it if you put a little elbow grease into it

But there are things you need to know:

- YOU HAVE TO SEE THE GIRL IN THE LAKE!
- YOU HAVE TO WALK THROUGH THE LONG HALLWAY
- AND YOU MUST CONFRONT WHAT HIDES IN THE SHADOWS

JOHN: What is hiding in the shadows?

There's a man isn't there?

MISS JANSEN: The shadows are YOUR domain, John

JOHN: What hallway are you talking about?

MISS JANSEN: Start with the girl in the lake John...
you'll find out about the hallway later...
but John...
didn't you have a train to catch?

As the old lady says this, John is immediately reminded of the urgency he felt before meeting her, and sets off running to catch it. There is something of utmost importance on that train! John enters the loading area of the train station, in time to glimpse the train disappearing behind the first bend in the tracks on the way to Thousand Acre Forest, and the disappointment overwhelms John with roaring fury.

JOHN: FFFFFUUUUUUUCCCCCKKKKK!!

JOB INTERVIEW GUY: Now John, we can't have that tone here at FinaLibre

We are a respectable company and you can't go around acting like
you would with your junkie and hooker friends

You are simply going to have to apply yourself now

JOHN: Well, we're not at FinaLibre now, are we? [angrily]

JOB INTERVIEW GUY: Are you being insubordinate? [shocked]

JOHN: No sir, I'm not being insubordinate

I'm letting out emotions, which is something real people do, so they
don't explode in fits of screaming rage at the slightest provocation

JOB INTERVIEW GUY: Well, you are just going to have to find a more civil
outlet for your frustration!

At this point, John has started to dress down, taking off his tie and cuff links. It's not that it really matters, with this being a dream and all and what does he care if he gets his imaginary suit dirty, but he kind of likes the ritual. It's a little like cracking your knuckles and neck.

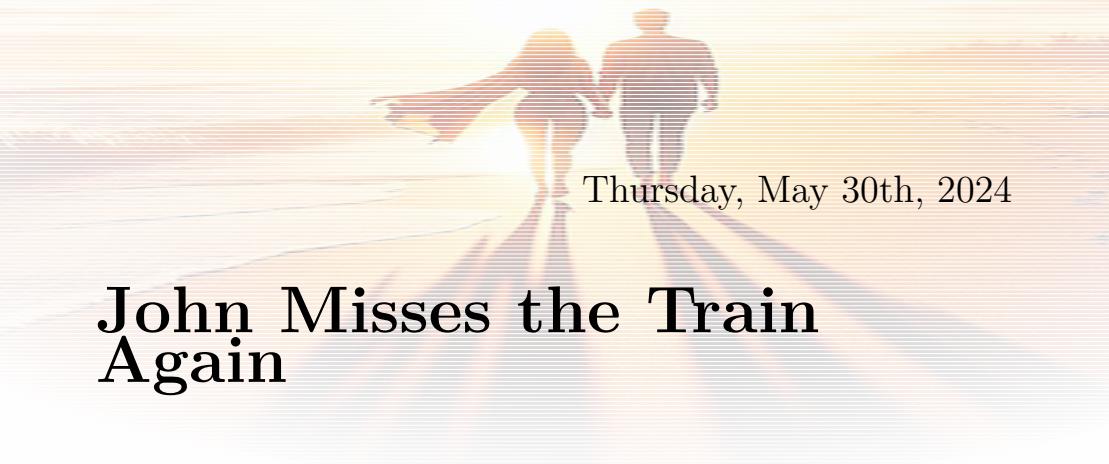
JOB INTERVIEW GUY: I don't like that look in your eyes, young man!

JOHN: Keep talking

Job interview guy does keep talking and screaming and crying as long as he remains conscious, but even though John's mind finds excuses to keep the man alive and screaming, he knows that the therapy session must end at some point. As he walks out of the train station, the cleaning crew comes rushing in to clean up the blood and various other body fluids the bloody corpse has expelled during the massacre. The next thing John is aware of is, that he is passing through that small passageway between dream and awake; the point where you know you are awake, but can still remember your dream. John reaches out for his phone, and sends himself a message that reads:

- GET ON THAT TRAIN
- lake girl
- long hallway
- the shadows... Shadow-Man?
- remember tattoo-check! IMPORTANT!

After replaying the dream once again, he adds: How do you make a square radical?



Thursday, May 30th, 2024

John Misses the Train Again

John is walking to the train station on a bright Summer morning and he is on time. When he closes in on the train station, he sees his old Elementary School teacher Miss Jansen, looks to his own wrist and sets off sprinting for the train. John is running on fumes when he reaches the platform of the station, just in time to see his train setting off. He pulls hard on the throttle of his own energy supply in a last-ditch attempt to catch the train, but for all his intent and resolve, he only catches a glimpse through the windows of someone who looks a little like the dead woman from work... Angela... before the train has accelerated out of reach.

ARROGANT VOICE: You look like a young man who was just in time to realize he missed his train

John is leaning his weight on his knees with both hands trying to catch his breath, his back turned to the arrogant voice. At the sound of the voice, he raises his one hand above his head, all five fingers outstretched.

ARROGANT VOICE: The least you can do is respond young man!

John's thumb hides behind the palm of the hand, leaving four outstretched fingers.

ARROGANT VOICE: You know, that's why you're never going to amount to anything John! Bad attitude!

Three fingers.

ARROGANT VOICE: I have had enough of this John! You're fired!

John is reminded of how hard it is to keep just the little- and ring finger outstretched and it doesn't matter: he has caught his breath. John turns around and initiates the blood bath with a push kick to the Job Interview Guy's chest, and 10 minutes later he walks out of the station. He still has a feeling of failure and regret about missing his train, but it's a lot less intense after therapy.



Friday, May 31st, 2024

John Explores the Basement

John suddenly feels the need to check the tattoo on his arm. "AWAKE". But he already knew that. There are dreams that are so real, that you feel really stupid when you wake up from them, because throughout the entire dream, you were convinced that you were in the real world. And there are situations in the real world, where the details of life sneak up on you in such a way, that you come to believe that you must be dreaming. This is neither. John's not stupid. Granted, he has spent most of his life honing a very specific set of skills, which has led teachers at various institutions to conclude that 'the boy is hopeless', but that was a question of what you choose to dedicate your life to. And as a matter of fact, those skills come in handy in understanding the current situation. John noticed the CCTV camera following him in the stairway down to the basement, and he noticed the fact that this specific camera was different from every other surveillance camera in the building and that the wires from the camera ran down into the basement instead of up through the ceiling. John knows that the sense of unease he's feeling is caused by a very deep bass sound being projected from somewhere in the ceiling above him; if you know it's there, you can very faintly hear what sounds like a drowning engine every 6th second. John is also very aware, that the chanting he hears, is very likely a playback from a recording of something like Enya - though not one he remembers having heard before - lowered in pitch and played back at maybe 0.5 the regular tempo, he has even noticed that it repeats every 34th second. The flickering overhead lights are very good, but whoever is pulling the strings behind this scene, has apparently not considered that the chances of EVERY overhead light in the hallway struggling for death at the same time are minuscule. As for the woman yelling over the loudspeaker - and he is pretty sure that this sound - unlike the chanting - is coming from just a single speaker - ... well...

SHRILL FEMALE VOICE: Jooooohhhnnnn.....
Why did you let him kill me John?

Why didn't you do anything to save me John?
Why did you let your father kill me John?
(sobbing)
I loved you John, and you just watched when that monster killed
your own MOTHER!!!!
[extremely loud screaming]

All in all, John understands most of what is going on, but it just doesn't make any God damned sense! It's like understanding every word of a sentence very clearly, but when you read the sentence out loud to yourself, it's pure nonsense. Like "few mermaids obfuscate Gothic pencils". Pure nonsense! Somebody is clearly trying to get under his skin, but who would want to die so badly, that they would go through all this trouble?! There are so many easier ways to kill yourself than this. Is it because they want to lure John into recording him in the act? Again: if they wanted so badly to go, they could have just asked. He has ruled out the dicks from Client Management; though he wouldn't put it past them to try for a practical joke, this is way too elaborate for any of them to have come up with.

The door leading into what appears to be a laundry room is open, and here, the suicidal joker has lit up black candles. Nice touch. The hooded figures standing around the bloody pentagram on the floor are also very nicely done, except for the fact that only 2 out of 5 are swaying, and the swaying seems just a touch too mechanical. Just to be sure, John does a quick sweep of the room and the robed mannequins. The room is clear. John continues down the hallway and now that shrill voice comes on again

SHRILL FEMALE VOICE: I am your guilty conscience John
I am the sins of your past
JOOOOOOOHHHHHHNNNNNNNN!
My baaaaaab!
You just let me bleed to death in the laundry room and then you
helped your father EAT ME!
[screaming that could have served as inspiration for Yoko Ono's
career]

That God damned screaming! John is almost twitching from unreleased anger when a person wearing a cheap Chinese copy of the Scream costume jumps out in front of John, holding what looks like a very real knife.

SOON TO BE DEAD MAN: BOOOOH!

John doesn't say anything in response to this; by this point, it would be impossible for him to articulate anything more advanced than a primal scream.

He does however give an immediate response to the suicidal joker by means of a very deeply felt push kick to the persons rib cage, and the person gracefully replies by flying a couple of meters backward.

SUICIDAL JOKER: Aw hell you ungrateful brat!
How dare you treat mother like that?!

It comes as a surprise to John that the joker was able to prevent landing on his head and passing out. He is disappointed to realize that 'mother' is still holding on to the knife, because that means he has to restrain himself and keep the distance. "But we can do that" John thinks as he charges the figure, causing the person to abandon his attempt to get up, and instead throw his head to the floor, away from John. "Here comes the grunt work" John thinks, and begins working on the person's legs with his shin. John gets 7 good kicks in on the person's left leg, and unless the person has done A LOT of leg hardening, he's not going to be able to do much with that leg now. And then John sees the person draw the knife back for a throw, and John instinctively steps back and draws his arms up to protect his head, and then he hears the sound of the knife passing through the air - far enough away from John's ear for him to know that it certainly didn't hit him - but then the person starts with the fucking SCREAMING again, and then all the lights go out, and then the person kicks him in the nuts, and John knows that he has about 5 seconds before intense pain is going to reduce his mental capacity to that of Silvio Berlusconi in a Venice brothel on Easter Morning, and he can't see anything in this fucking darkness, and he wants so badly to kick something but chances are just too damn high that he is going to do more harm to himself than what he now considers his mortal enemy, and here comes the groin pain creeping up his stomach at first and then just blaring like a pain siren demanding the attention of every nerve ending in John's body. "KEEP IT IN JOHN. Unless he's wearing night vision goggles, he's just as blind as you are. Take a deep breath, and slowly exhale... Oh God... here comes a bad one"

JOHN: AAAAAAARRRGH! FUCKING HELL!

*JOHN (thinking):
Fuck! Keep it in John!*

is about all John has time to think before he feels a hard kick to the hip.

SUICIDAL JOKER: AAARGH FUCK!

What the hell is wrong with your body?!

Why do you have such feminine hip-bones you damn freak?!

'Arh yes! There's nothing like someone else's cries of pain to forget about your own! That was almost worth the kick!' John can hear his enemy breathing and moving about. John takes a couple of steps back and then freezes, to draw in the bastard. But more importantly: he want's to hear his movement. Oh yes, he is limping... It sounds like he has trouble standing on one of his legs. John taps the wall on his right side, and quickly throws himself against the wall on his left side, hoping his enemy didn't pick up on his movement. Nothing! John hears nothing! Not even breathing. John reaches with his hands in slowly expanding circles to determine whether the man is in his close perimeter, when the room suddenly goes from pitch black to blinding light, and John catches a faint glimpse of a person coming in for a tackle from about a meter and a half away, which is not enough for John to defend the attack. The man resumes his high-pitched screaming as he lands on top of John, and starts pummeling John with his forearms. The guy gets in a couple of good strikes before John regains composure, and gets in a couple of strikes of his own. Punch to the inside of the man's right shoulder, punch to the inside of the man's left shoulder.

JOKER: AAAARGH!

What the fuck is wrong with you?!

That's my bad shoulder you prick!

You can't hit my bad shoulder!

Respect the rules you punk!

'Let the fucker waste his breath!' John throws a left hook at the man's head, and the guy overcompensates the defense, which opens him up to a forearm across the left side of his face. John grabs a hold of the man's ear and is about to pull him down to overtake the guy, when he bites John's arm and dives for a headbutt.

Sometimes, things in life align perfectly. Dissonant sound waves of random noise interact to cancel each other out, and for a single moment, you can almost feel some higher power pausing the world to align everything just right for this years Satanic Christmas Photo, and in that moment, you are able to see not only your own perspective, but see the entire scene in which you are partaking in full 3D 360-degree interactive perfection. This was such a moment: not only was John able to see the scene from his own perspective, with the psycho laying on top of him frantically headbutting him, he could see the scene from the eyes of the psycho: John holding on around his neck, headbutting back in what both parties had by now realized was a futile war of will's to see who would first pass out from exhaustion and minor brain damage. Most notably though, John was

able to see the scene through the eyes of Carol, who was now standing a few feet away, looking at this pathetic spectacle.

CAROL: I see you've met Sune

Karl said he saw you go down here, and I thought I would come down and warn you about him...
but I see that you've already made friends [*smiling*]
Try not to kill him, John...
that would upset Management...
I don't think anyone really knows which parts of our infrastructure he'll take with him when he dies [*turns around and heads back towards the stairway*]

Sune takes advantage of John's inattentiveness and sneaks in a final headbutt before he pushes off John and dances towards his office in a degenerate mix-breed between a limp and a victory dance.

SUNE: I win again!

I believe I can flyyyyyy.... [*singing*]
I believe I can touch the sky [*horribly off key*]

As John jumps to his feet, Sune turns towards him... startled.

SUNE: Alright now...

We'll share the victory...
You get 54.4%... OK?
I'm the bigger man...
I can handle it gracefully...
No need to fight anymore!

JOHN: The hell there isn't!

That stunt was fucking deranged!

SUNE: Alright alright alright...

In the spirit of Glasnost and broken bones, I'll concede it was a little much

JOHN: There are things a mentally ill person can do, that will warrant someone else to hunt him down and chop the fucker to pieces with a dull ax inch by inch...

And then there is the sick fucking bullshit you just pulled!

And in between the two, you could host the fucking Super-Bowl!

Complete with valet parking!

SUNE: Now John, there's no need to hold a grudge...
I said I was sorry...
JOHN: You did not!
SUNE: Then you may not have heard me...
but... in the spirit of Glasnost...
I'm sorry
But...
if you kill me, you won't get your present...
And I'll fight you every step of the way...
I have to [*smiling*]
I have a date with Valerie The Valkyrie [*in a dreamy voice*]
JOHN: Would you at least take off that stupid mask?
You look mentally retarded!
Can you even see through the damn thing when it's halfway backwards

The man... Sune... is now seemingly too posh to comment on this, but he does take off the blood-soaked Scream-mask, to reveal a bruised and blood-drenched face, and with the swelling around the man's eyes, John is surprised he can see even without the mask in the way.

JOHN: Can you see anything at all?
SUNE: I don't know...
I haven't tried for a while...
Maybe 5 minutes...
I just switch to ejecting evil from my temples and steering off the bounce-backs...
Like a bat

John decides that he won't kill the old bastard today as he is gripped by a sudden fear that there is an ancient evil crawling around on the inside of the man's skull, and that killing him risks setting that same evil loose. Better it stay where it is, tucked away in this basement than out in the real world doing whatever atrocities its twisted nature propels it to do.

JOHN: You mentioned a gift?
SUNE: Yes I did...
and you are going to love it!
JOHN: ... [*looking at him, tired*]
SUNE: Ask yourself what brought you down here
JOHN: A search for knowledge
SUNE: Ah yes...
That goes without saying
But knowledge of what?

JOHN: Who killed Angela, and will he kill again
SUNE: You are a filthy liar!
 You know, the worst thing a man can do to poison his own soul, is to lie
 You know that right...?
JOHN: I'm too tired for these games...
 What's the gift?
SUNE: OK, so we'll do it the boring way...
 Catch!
JOHN: A USB stick?
SUNE: And who is it from?

John is about to say 'the Devil it seems', when something makes him think twice.

JOHN: Angela
SUNE: Oh, so the boy is starting to use his brain!
 I'm proud of you!
 It's what you are looking for, and the reason you came down here today

John is all of a sudden feeling completely overcome with fatigue, and the old bastard's cheerful insanity is making it all the worse. He can't muster up any type of energy to argue or correct the guy.

SUNE: And....
 There's a message!
 This is not the hallway you are looking for Joooooohn [*in a deep voice, presumably supposed to belong to a ghost*]
JOHN: What was that? [*suddenly feeling very awake*]
SUNE: Aarh... That got your attention, huh?
JOHN: Where is the hallway I'm looking for then? [*now feeling the brief surge of energy roll back into the void*]
SUNE: It's about 45 feet in that direction [*points in two different directions simultaneously*]
 I'm just shitting you... tihi
 But it's around here...
 close...
 but you can't make the jump today...
 you are much too tired for that...
 and I have to get the secret ingredients
 It's designer drugs [*whispered, hovering on his knees, pointing with dread against the ceiling*]

But we'll make the trip next week I think...
How long does express delivery take from Holland?
Maybe it will be the week after...
but fear not...
I will teach you how to make the jump!
Because now that we have fought each other to near exhaustion with
the intention of killing or seriously injuring one another
I am bound by Holy Fate to help you in your quest! [now standing at
*attention, with his right hand across his heart, like he was singing the national
anthem*]
JOHN: Look...
Why is it that YOU were in possession of Angela's present?
SUNE: She gave it to me...
Easy question!
Hit me again!
JOHN: When?
SUNE: Hmm... 2 days before she died
JOHN: She didn't just die... Be specific!
SUNE: Before she was murdered [*whispering, once again pointing at the ceiling*]
JOHN: Be specific!
SUNE: Before she was brutally killed with 38 stabs to her abdomen in a
2nd floor bathroom [*fake pensive expression*]
JOHN: BEFORE YOU KILLED HER!
SUNE: (high-pitch scream) [*both hands grasping his hair*]
You know what?...
You really ARE an idiot! [*calm*]
Look at me!
Look at me John!...
I did not kill Angela
I did not kill your girlfriend

It's not until John gets home that evening, that he stops to think about that last remark, but by then he's so tired that he is ready to write it off as something he had imagined.

JOHN: But you know who killed her...?
SUNE: No John!
And you won't find the answer on that disk either
But that's not what you really want for there to be on it anyway, is it?
It's a dream diary!
A glimpse into the brilliant but troubled mind of a young genius slash madwoman
I haven't looked at it of course

That would be inappropriate seeing as she wanted you to have it
There are sex-scenes! [whispering, conspiratorially]
JOHN: You just said you hadn't looked at it [very tired]
SUNE: Well you see John...
That one is really easy to explain...
Almost trivial as the Professor used to say...
It's because I lied [ending on a 'simple-as-that'-note]
Ooooohh...
This is goooood...
You are tired now, but I've got just the thing to cheer you up
Come with me, and hurry!
Peter from Accounting - he's been here for 3 months - is coming
down the stairs now
You need to know about Peter, that every girlfriend he has ever had,
says about Peter, that he is afraid to sleep with the lights off
Presumably, because he is afraid of the occult
And that means that we have just hit Jackpot! [does the universal
'pulling-down-his-elbow'-jackpot-move]
Two for one rig!
Grab the sickle in the corner, will you?

Sune pulls out what looks like an old cell phone, and makes the light go back to flickering and the low-hum chanting begins again. John has all kinds of objections against what Sune wants him to do, but by now he is defenseless against the insanity floating around in this basement, the whole time gnawing at his mental defenses like maggots through a corpse, and decides to just go with it. And Sune is right: in a borderline psychotic way, John does actually have fun, and it does revitalize him. And when the kid runs screaming back towards the stairways he had come from less than 2 minutes prior, and John can hear the screams echo from above as the kid hurdles through the building, clearly taken to the floor by office furniture on a couple of occasions, and he hears the hysterical laughter of the old bastard rolling around in pig's blood on the floor next to him, John is no longer able to hold anything together and is seized by a fit of laughter that ultimately sends him to the floor clutching his aching stomach.

SUNE: Did you notice his pants? [in between laughter]
JOHN: He pissed himself!...
And then he tripped in it! [laughing hysterically]



Monday, June 3rd, 2024

Albert Joins the Investigation

It is 16:33, and Albert is nearing the narrow patch of pine trees in the Thousand Acre Woods, on his way to catch the 16:45 train. The assault he had endured last week on the same patch of gravel track hadn't dissuaded him from choosing the shorter of the two most popular paths between FinaLibre and the Thousand Acre Woods (East) stop, but it had taught him to pay attention and be on the lookout, but even if it hadn't, he couldn't have missed the young man - "John" - who stood with his back against a tree, most likely waiting for him. For a brief moment, Albert experiences a shiver running down his spine but quickly convinces himself that this meeting won't be a replay of their previous encounter. On making eye contact with Albert, the young man jerks his head up in what is universally recognized as the 'What's up'-gesture you shoot at friends, and starts walking towards Albert. Had he known what was about to happen, John might have put a little more thought into picking the right gesture for the occasion, since the assumed camaraderie the gesture expressed sends Albert into a fit of rage. When they are about 2 meters from each other, Albert draws his right leg back and releases it in what could easily have passed for a mid-tier semi-professional soccer goalie driving the ball far down center field on a kick-off. The top of Albert's foot makes contact with John's inner thigh about 30 centimeters above the knee as Albert drives the point home by yelling:

ALBERT: NOD-UP IS FOR FRIENDS ASSHOLE!

NOD-DOWN IS FOR CASUAL ACQUAINTANCES YOU ASSAULT
IN THE WOODS!

JOHN: JEEEEEESUS!

You came about 10 cm from hitting the nut-sack!

I think you may be taking this OCD act a bit too far!

ALBERT: I'M TAKING THIS A BIT TOO FAR?!

MY RIBS ARE STILL BLUE AND RED AND HURT LIKE A SON-
OF-A-BITCH EVERYTIME I DO ANY KIND OF MOVEMENT

INVOLVING MY UPPER BODY, WHICH HAS LED TO A CONSIDERABLE
DECLINE IN MY OVERALL ENJOYMENT OF LIFE!

JOHN: Well, then maybe my memory fails me, because I remember specifically
saying 'I'm sorry' about that...?!

Do you need to kick me in the ribs to get it out of your system?

ALBERT: Splendid idea!

JOHN: ...?! [questioning]

ALBERT: ...!!!

JOHN: You are actually serious!

You sick bastard!

You know, it's a clear trait of anti-social disorders, not being able
to just let bygones be bygones!

Nobody likes a little vindictive man...

Everybody roots for the big guy...

The guy who can forgive and forget and move on with his life
[nonetheless descending into a high-plank position]

You know, this is some real cartoon-villain-petty behavior on your
side!

I was expecting a lot more from you!

With the concentration of an NFL-kicker about to clinch an overtime victory, Albert completely ignores the stream of trash-talk, takes one step back on his right leg and then propels himself forward, landing a hard kick with his right leg on the side of John's body. It's hard to blame Albert for not paying much attention to where he should aim his kick when the procedure was demonstrated to him last week - he had after all had other things on his mind - but if he had been given more time to prepare, hopefully, he would have realized that it is preferable to avoid hitting the hip of the target - unless you have really durable feet and ankles.

ALBERT: AAAWWWW FUUUUUCK! [dropping to the ground in pain, rolling
while grabbing his right foot]

JOHN: What the hell is wrong with you?

I said ribs not hips! [on his back, arching hips off the ground]

Jeeesus...

Right where the basement freak kicked me!

I damn well hope you got it out of your system now because if you
kick me again, we're fighting!

ALBERT: I'm done, I'm done

In reality, John was definitely exaggerating the intensity of the pain he felt, but he knew what kind of game changer the looks and screams of a person in agonizing pain can be when enacting payback, and he figured he owed the guy at least that much.

JOHN: Was it worth it? [getting up]
ALBERT: Not really [also getting up]
JOHN: Well, revenge is like a 2 o'clock hookup from the bar at 10:00 in
the morning sunlight...
you're not willing to swear you'll never go there again...
but it damn well better be pitch black
ALBERT: How poetic!
Now, do you mind telling me what the fuck you are doing out here?
JOHN: I was waiting for you
ALBERT: I figured that much. Why?
JOHN: Because I want you to help me
ALBERT: Why would I want to help you?
JOHN: Because I am a cool guy, and cool things happen around me
ALBERT: Cool things?
That sounds gosh darn tempting, buuut... I'll pass
JOHN: It's not like I'm asking you to spend your spare-time on this... You
are free to do all of your usual whoring
I'll get you out of that boring auditing job at FinaLibre and make
you part of a special ops team for the duration of the investigation
ALBERT: It's Investment Compliance, and I like working in Investment
Compliance
JOHN: Spoken like the kind of guy who asks for seconds when broccoli is
on the menu!
ALBERT: I like broccoli! Broccoli is good for you!
JOHN: Yeah, and if you eat it everyday of your life, then one day
- the day you DIE -
you're going to look back on a life full of eating broccoli and wonder:
'Was that all there was?
Should I maybe have joined a cool special ops team instead of eating
FUCKING BROCCOLI'!?
But by then, it will be too late!
ALBERT: That argument was bad, and you should feel bad!
JOHN: Alright, then let's try this instead: have you ever wondered how
you ended up on Angela's doorstep?
ALBERT: Of course not, I KNOW how I ended up there:
she texted me with the time and place!
JOHN: And did you ever wonder how Angela ended up with your phone
number?

In truth, Albert HAD wondered about that bit on a few occasions, since she - to the best of his knowledge - wasn't friends with any of his regulars, but he decided to maintain his opposition to John's suggestions a little longer.

ALBERT: Sure, she got it from a friend of hers, who also happened to be
a satisfied customer of mine

JOHN: And you know this?

ALBERT: Not as such, no

Why do you mention this?

JOHN: Because I have come to believe that she knew damn well who she
was texting, and specifically set the arrangement up so she could get
you alone

This latter part John knows, is speculative at best, but everybody likes a story
when it's about themselves.

JOHN: I have come by information that suggests, that Angela had suspicions
regarding the sincerity of your OCD disguise and that she conducted
a series of rather unusual psychological and social experiments, in
order to prove or disprove her conjectures

I don't know why she felt the need for a conclusive test, but this
is one of the things I am asking you to help me figure out, because
you weren't the only person Angela experimented on, and I want to
find out if her experiments contain the key to understanding why
she was murdered

But there is too much data, too little time, and my knowledge of
the employees at FinaLibre is too limited for me to be able to work
through the information I have to prevent a next killing
if a next kill is indeed in the making

ALBERT: Elaborate on the experiments

JOHN: She conducted at least 3 experiments on you

There may have been more, as she wasn't very good at keeping to a
single method in scrambling her data, but I'm pretty sure that you
are the person she code-named 'Uncanny Al'

ALBERT: Uncanny Al?!

JOHN: It's just a code-name...

She might have pulled them out of a hat or chosen them at random
from her favorite subreddit

Who knows?

Does it matter?

ALBERT: It does to me!

JOHN: Then you'll be happy to know that your code-name was on the
endearing end of things. If anyone has a reason to be upset, it
would be 'Dickless Doug'!

ALBERT: Who's Dickless Doug?

JOHN: Hell if I know!

I'm no good with names, and I haven't even met a quarter of the employees at FinaLibre
But I bet you have!

ALBERT: Woah, let's stick to the subject at hand:

'Uncanny Al'

How do you know that's me?

JOHN: Well, there's the matter of the tests she carried out...

They are all tests I would deem rational based on what you told me last week

About 6 months ago

- over the course of 2 weeks -

she would commit some minor act of aggression against Fong Shui, and move something around in the visible vicinity of the Investment Compliance team

We are talking stuff like re-arranging a post-it such that it was just slightly misaligned to the other Post-its on the board, rotating a single desk so it was ever so little at an angle to the desks around it Things like that, that most people wouldn't notice, but she suspected would drive someone with OCD up the wall

ALBERT: I never noticed

JOHN: I know, and Angela was pretty sure you wouldn't

She felt confident that your whole persona was a massive spiel to hide something else, and though she never said it in so many words, I believe her next 2 tests were designed to figure out what you were hiding

I think of the first of them as the 'Money-hungry-bastard'-test

On two separate occasions, she presented you with the potential for an extra-payoff in such a way that you were sure to come across them:

in the shared folder containing the company's official guidelines on the specifics regarding taxation of capital gains on Indonesian Bonds, she placed a signed document by the CEO of the company, that he not only was aware that an investment advisor to one of the Asian funds was working maliciously in tax-optimizing profits but was helping to funnel the proceeds of the operation out of the fund

ALBERT: I remember that document! It had me sweating HARD, trying to figure out what to do

On one hand, it looked kinda authentic, but it didn't seem likely that Donnie would risk damaging the public image of the company for chump change from a tax-fraud scheme

I didn't want to draw attention to myself, but I felt like the least I could do was to tell someone about it anonymously, and therefore put a print-out of the document in Donnie's office with a note explaining that I didn't believe it to be true but just thought he should know about it

JOHN: Yes, Angela thought that was cute. Naive, but cute
She was pretty convinced that you weren't working a private money angle, but nonetheless went ahead with the other money-test, and put a total of 200 EUR in 10 EUR bills under a stack of paper that she expected you to come across...

ALBERT: Which I did!
I didn't take them...
I just left them off to a side where their rightful owner was more likely to find them

JOHN: She liked that part as well, though in her notes on the experiment she did put in a lot of swearing and cursing herself for forgetting what type of greedy bastards work in Finance
It would seem that not everybody lived up to the same moral standard as you
This is where she broadened her search for the driving mechanism behind your character, and started hitting you with links to various internet-sites promoting very specific interests
The ones she could safely conceal under the guise of being work related, she sent you as emails from what seemed like legit businesses, and made sure to tweak the corporate spam-net to allow them through

ALBERT: I remember thinking that I had started to receive some pretty spammy mails for a period and then they seized

JOHN: But that wasn't all
She also did on-the-fly manipulation of your Facebook feed, exchanging 1 out of 10 commercials with one that linked to sites she created

ALBERT: I didn't notice any of that

JOHN: Of course not [smiling]
Why would you?
There were other ways in which she manipulated the content you got online, but it all came down to the same thing:
she wanted to see what got your attention

ALBERT: I'm afraid to ask...

JOHN: So I'll save you the trouble
You only ever showed interest in a pretty sketchy site selling off-brand Tramadol out of Spain, a news article about the spread of STDs among young women and a 'For Her'-sex-toys-shop, specializing in BDSM equipment in bright pink

ALBERT: Oh God!
That was for a client I had who was too shy to...

JOHN: I can extrapolate... [smiling]

ALBERT: Alright
So Angela suspected I was hiding something, carried out a series of weird tests, reached the conclusion that I was a male prostitute, but why?
Why go through all this trouble?
Why not just jump directly to spying on me?

And why oh why, with a pretty strong suspicion that I was whoring on my own time, and not a threat to the company in any way, did she go to the trouble of contracting me?

JOHN: I think her interest was more or less only in the method, and in devising a set of tests that could be applied on a large scale and yield non-trivial information, and to that end, it's kinda hard to scale up manual surveillance

Among her notes, are also transcripts from what appear to be therapy sessions with employees at the company, and I have a feeling that they are about more than just scientific curiosity

This is the part where things become very speculative on my end, but I have a feeling that Angela was a very lonely person that may have been the reason for having a go at it with you Or maybe she wanted to know what made you so good that you were able to make money from turning tricks

ALBERT: So... What exactly is it that you are asking me to do?

JOHN: Well, as I'm sure you've figured out, the only reason I got hired was, because the CEO...
the guy with the office...

ALBERT: Donnie

JOHN: Yes, that guy...

He wants me to do an under-the-radar investigation into who murdered

Angela

why she was murdered and most importantly:

if there is any risk that another murder will happen or the company and/or its employees will be attacked in any other way

He has specifically asked me to keep a very low profile on the investigation, so as not to cause panic

but you already know about it...

and now that we have performed the old Kong Fu ritual of 'Kong-da-youth-fik-jaan'

- hard knocks, shared journey -

you are bound by honor to help secure success in my quest

ALBERT: Yeah... That last part is bull-shit! [squinting eyes]

JOHN: Indeed it is, but it will do you good to do something that benefits the Old Brotherhood of Man...

I mean, you are of course benefiting the Sisterhood of Woman one customer at a time...

I'm not saying that doesn't count for anything, but this is more the thing that could make a real hero out of you...

Like Batman, Albert!

ALBERT: Alright, I'm in

Are we going to be a 2-man-army or are you planning on enlisting more Dark Knights?

JOHN: Well, nothing final, but I've been thinking about asking a third member to join... [starts walking]

ALBERT: Yeah? Who?

JOHN: Maybe we should discuss that at a later point in time...

Nothing's for certain yet... [speeds up his pace]

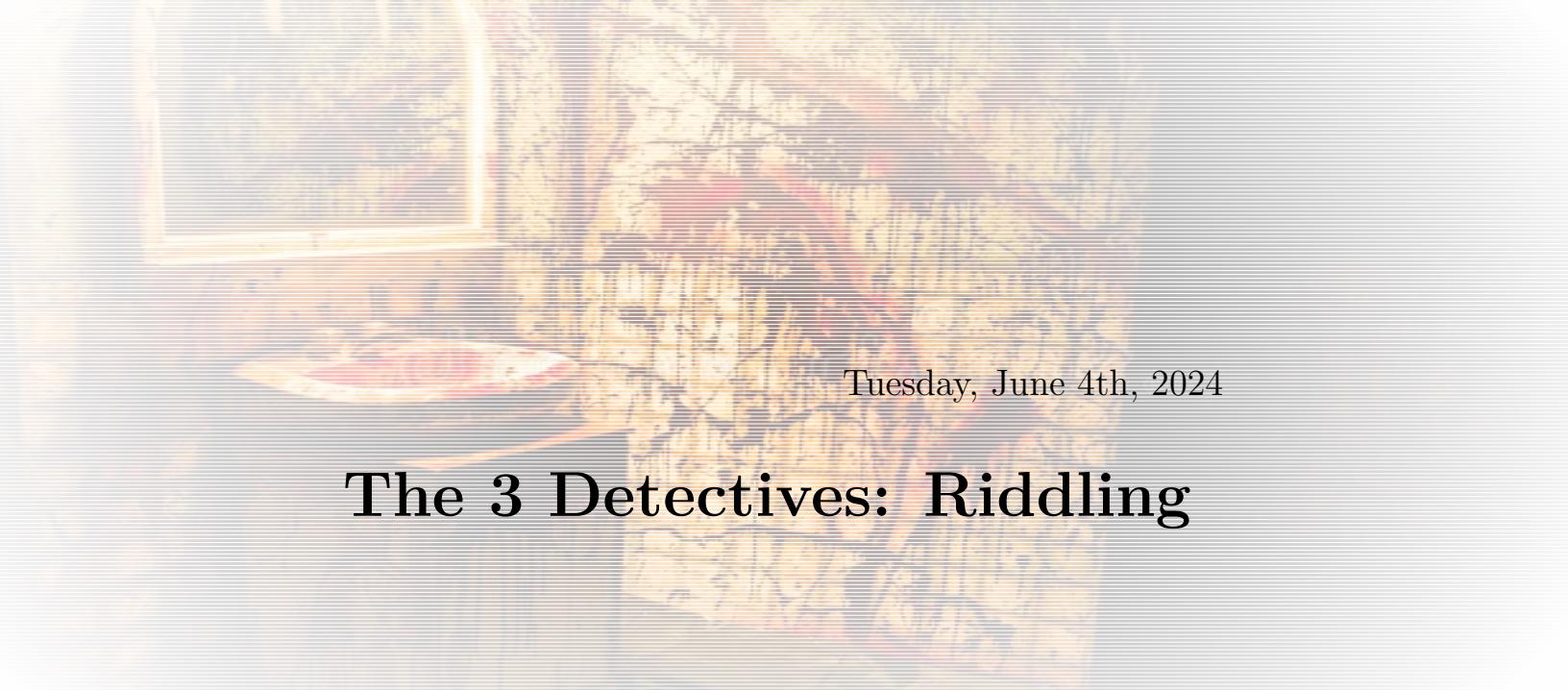
ALBERT: Who's the guy??!

JOHN: Well...

do you know that guy who has his own office in the basement...?

ALBERT: You've gotta be kidding me?!

He's about as reliable as a shipload of nitro-glycerin in a thunder-storm!



Tuesday, June 4th, 2024

The 3 Detectives: Riddling

ALBERT: No, no, no... I checked the stress diagram for the building, and we're going to collapse the entire North half of the building if we put it there

However...

If we place 2 charges in the crevice between this beam and the ceiling...

And a single charge in a little dugout of this wall...

There is almost no chance of causing damage to any part of the weight-bearing structure...

AAAAND...

It will almost certainly drive the mark to run this way...

SUNE: RIGHT INTO THE PIT!

THAT IS BEAUTIFUL!

SIMPLY BEAUTIFUL!

You know, we might actually be able to drive the poor bastard right into the PTSD sweet spot! [excited grin]

All this time, dedicating myself to this fruitless labor in service of man-kind...

seeking not wealth nor glory nor a never-ending stream of adventurous young women waiting their turn in a neat little line outside my apartment...

I'm not saying I would have said no...

BUT I NEVER ASKED FOR IT!

I only ever wanted perfection!

And as it turns out, the answer was right there all along!

It really isn't about the journey...

SUNE AND ALBERT IN CHORUS: It's the friends you make along the way

[Sune, wiping an actual tear off his cheek]

JOHN: I think you may have mispronounced 'ACCOMPLICE' [making sure to stress that last word, and the fact that he had used the singular form]

'There really is something rotten about this basement!' John thinks to himself, as he hears Sune and Albert lay out their plan to scare the fear of death into some

young - most likely undeserving - new hire at FinaLibre, who's only provable crime had been to accept the job offer in what he thought of - and what probably indeed is - a hip new FinTech company in the prime of its existence. It was no more than 5 hours ago, that this little band of amateur detectives assembled in Sune's office in the basement for their first meeting, and John practically had to drag Albert along by the boots. The guy was shaking so hard walking down the stairs as long-since repressed memories of some sick prank came topside in the ocean of Albert's mind. And then look at the 'murderous-little-bastard'-to-be now! John can feel this place getting under his own skin as well. The worst part about it is that the madness gets into your head, and somehow you stop noticing that it's there while the disease slowly eats away at your sanity. John remembers having read about a parasitic creature that will infect bees and wasps and take control of their mind, and while the creature is spawning offspring that nest inside the animal's body, the animal falls more and more under control of the parasite until it's time for the offspring to hatch and the parasite pushes the big red self-destruct button causing the animal to kill itself and leave its remains for the offspring to feast on.

JOHN (thinking):

Was it really bees and wasps?

or some other insect?

Dammit, John!

That's how it gets you...

You know that there is something dark and evil eating away at your very core, and all you do is pacify yourself with questions about insects!

JOHN: Alright, I need you guys to step out of your little 'Bonnie and Clyde in the Twilight-Zone'-fantasy for a bit, and talk to me

SUNE AND ALBERT: ... [looking expectingly at John]

JOHN: What do you guys know about dreams?

SUNE: Ooohhhh Sunny...

I had dreams once...

Until that damn shark ate my leg and my baby! [once again wiping a tear from his cheek]

ALBERT: ... [looking in admiration]

JOHN: Dreams, as in whatever the hell the brain is doing while we sleep
[a little annoyed]

SUNE: Dreams...

The window into the soul

ALBERT: That's the eyes, man!

SUNE: Aaaahhh.... THE EEEYESSS! [mock horror]

ALBERT: Tihi

JOHN: Alright...
so now you are 0 for 1 in keeping with the conversation I am trying to have!
Let's try again:
What do you know about dreams?
ALBERT: I think they are the result of some cleanup job the brain performs at night
Cleaning up unfinished and interrupted thoughts
SUNE: So ya have a clean shitter in the morning! [Scottish accent]
But there's also the recurring dreams...
You know: the one with the beavers
JOHN: The beave... NO!
I can't believe you almost got me again!
None of us is going to ask you about your recurring dreams of soul-eating beavers, or whatever sick shit you have just thought up!
SUNE: Your loss!
But if I have to come visit you in the hospital because you have acute shock from the 'Beaver-dream' and didn't know that the key is to use the plunger...
I'll be singing:
'I told you so, I told you so, I told you so' [*singing in a mocking tone of voice*]
JOHN: ALRIGHT!
Text me whatever hint you have on getting out alive from the 'beaver dream'
I had a dream
A school teacher from elementary school confronted me with a riddle...
or it could have been a joke...
she was a little unclear about that...
she also mentioned a bunch of other stuff, but I'm not really ready to talk about that
SUNE: ... [*looking interested at John*]
ALBERT: Give man!
JOHN: How do you make a square radical?

The question is followed by more than a full minute of silence.

SUNE: Radical how?
Radical has several meanings
JOHN: What meanings?
SUNE: I have to google that... One sec...
So as a noun, the word 'radical' can mean:

- a person who advocates thorough or complete political or social change, or a member of a political party or section of a party pursuing such aims
- **In chemistry:** a group of atoms behaving as a unit in a number of compounds
- **In language:** any of the basic set of approximately 214 Chinese characters constituting semantically or functionally significant elements in the composition of other characters and used as a means of classifying characters in dictionaries
- **In mathematics:** a quantity forming or expressed as the root of another

ALBERT: I remember hearing about the last one before

It sorta resonates, doesn't it?

It also doesn't I suppose

I mean, if you have something that is the root of something else, and then you square it, you are left with that something else

SUNE: You are applying a function and its inverse

Getting you right back where you started

Could this teacher of yours have been meaning to tell you something like:

In the end, you end up right back where you started, and you'll realize that it's not about the journey...

ALBERT: It's about the friends you made along the way! [Heureka-expression]

JOHN: ... [staring, speechless at the two]

I don't even know if you went off-track there, or just went straight to outer space!

Look, I only knew the first definition of radical you read

My mind couldn't really issue riddles to me in a language I don't understand, could it?

ALBERT: Unless...

your mind DOES know that other meaning, but it has repressed it... because something terrible happened to you! [another Heureka-expression]

SUNE: ... [grabbing John's hand and looking at him with compassion]

Did the teacher lady hurt you, John?

Did she make you do things even though you had a 'no'-feeling, but she just wouldn't stop...?

It's alright John! [comforting voice]

Now is a good time to confront those fears!

You are in a safe environment among friends who care about you...

JOHN: ...

I...

You guys are fuc...

... [draws deep breath in, closes eyes, and exhales a lot of suddenly pent-up frustration]

I absolutely know the riddle is about the first meaning!

As in: a radicalized person...

radicalizing someone
It's the only meaning that strikes any sort of chord with me
So... Staying ON THE TRACK OF THIS CONVERSATION...
What the hell does it mean to square a radical person?

ALBERT: In Pulp Fiction, they use the term 'square' to mean something boring...

SUNE: Oh, I like that movie... [*staring into nothing with dreamy eyes*]

ALBERT: So the meaning would be along the lines of:
'How do you make a radical person boring?'

JOHN: I think you are onto something there...

Not that it makes much more sense to me now, but it FEELS closer to the answer

There is yet another 1 minute period of silent contemplation.

SUNE: You know, it reminds me of a set of jokes my mom used to tell

John and Albert both look at Sune in utter shock. It would have been really hard for them to justify that look had he asked them about it, but somehow it came as a shock that a real human woman had at some point given birth to the strange compound of evil and insanity seated in front of them, and allowed it to call her 'Mom'”.

SUNE: So one of them goes like this...

What is this? [*makes an 'eating Pacman' gesture with his hand zooming towards John*]

...

Hell if I know, but here it comes again [*repeats the hand gesture*]
Or this one...

What is this? [*stretches out his hand in a horizontal position*]

...

It's one of these that has fallen over [*raises the outstretched hand to a vertical position*]

John stares at the explanation in deep contemplation.

JOHN: I think I've heard these before...
If we roll with this...
And interpret the riddle in the spirit of those jokes...
Then the answer to 'How do you make a square radical?'...
would be something silly like:

'First, you make a cubic radical, and then you squeeze it until it's square'...

Right?

SUNE: Hmm... Wouldn't it just become round?

I doubt it would become square

ALBERT: But if you assume that meaning, then you can pretty much remove the part about the radical being square because the riddle reduces to:

'How do you make a radical?'

JOHN: Or... 'How do you radicalize someone?'

SUNE: Ooooh! I know the answer to that! [pulls out an old leather notebook]

I once worked in a terrible place called 'The Pit'...

It drove away my sanity, and left me this way!

The Cripple forced me to participate in a 'Social Experiment'...

He was a real psychopath!

Bad hip!...

EVERYBODY ELSE HAD TO SUFFER because of it!

The experiment was to try to radicalize this poor bastard...

'Wadih'...

or 'Wahid'... or 'Jesper'...

Hell if I remember

I took extensive notes though... [opens the notebook]

JOHN: Look...

I appreciate these undoubtedly useful insights, but unless whatever findings you guys made can be expressed as a one-liner, I doubt it's going to be the answer we are looking for

SUNE: Yeah... It's much the same...

It didn't work...

He just kept on with that stupid grin and his 'Skønno Bardønno Frede' and chucking beers and pork grinds...

Between the three of us, I'm not sure he really understood the language... [tapping the side of his nose conspiratorially]

Or maybe he was just immune to new ideas

Maybe...

If I was somehow able to operate on him...

Yeeessss... It may work if the voltage is high enough, but we'd have to make sure...

JOHN: CUT! Back to the here and now!

SUNE: Yes... It's just so damn hard...

letting go...

when it's a noble cause... [distant]

ALBERT: But it does raise a valid point:

do you think anyone could become radicalized?

SUNE: CERTAINLY NOT! Not the stupids!

ALBERT: Now, that's just not true!
Do you mean to tell me that I would be unable to find a dumb-as-a-door would-be terrorist?
If I knew where to look, that is...

SUNE: FOLD! [gesturing an imaginary throw of his hand]

ALBERT: but I think I know what you mean...
It does take some mental awareness to dig into a cause or model of understanding...
getting to grips with the lingo...
researching how to make bombs, or gain access to unregistered firearms...

SUNE: That one's easy...
I'll send you a link [winks with one eye]

ALBERT: I guess it takes... dedication
And you have to be ready to separate yourself from society as a whole while you undergo some metamorphosis...
At least mentally

JOHN: Alright, but there's gotta be more...
Otherwise, why hasn't HE become radicalized? [pointing at Sune]

ALBERT: ... [looking questioningly at John]

JOHN: Well... [conceding]

ALBERT: I think I know what you mean...
He certainly does have potential...
but, it's like he doesn't really believe in anything...
I think, in order to become radicalized, you need to at least WANT to believe in something...
He seems more or less content with just fucking around with scaring the shit out of the low-hanging quartile of the workforce, and whatever other types of shit he gets into down here...

SUNE: Why, I have NEVER!
HERACY!
I thought you believed in the cause!

ALBERT: And can you describe the cause in just a few words?...
No distracting diagrams!

SUNE: EASILY!
PTSD in less than a minute and a half... You know that!

ALBERT: Exactly! You have a goal...
And, it's both insane and beautiful and I'm totally on board, but it's not a 'cause' as such unless we include '4 shits n' giggles' as a cause...

JOHN: ... [looking pensive]
Alright, how about this for a solution: 'How do you make a square radical?'
You take an idealist, break him down, and bake him at 200 degrees for 30 minutes in a square mold'...?
OK, OK...
I know, it needs a little work, but it does make me think of something

Where did we put Angela's test results?

JOHN: I remember wondering about this test she periodically did on Frank...

ALBERT: ... [looking in amazement at John]

You remembered a name!

JOHN: Well, it only seems appropriate...

I've dreamed of killing him often enough...

Would almost seem rude not to remember his name at this point

ALBERT: But why?

And what do you mean by 'dreamed of killing him'?

Like daydreaming or do you kill him in your dreams?

JOHN: No, no... Only in my dreams...

Alright, I guess I do feel a need to strangle the son of bitch when I am awake...

BUT ONLY WHEN HE'S IN THE ROOM!

No, I'm talking about when I dream...

Something annoying will happen to make me just about to lose my shit...

like being late for the train...

and then he shows up, smarting off in that annoying way he has...

and then I basically beat him to death...

I try to keep him alive so I can beat him some more...

It's really therapeutic...

You should try it! [said in the certain voice of someone who KNOWS]

ALBERT: I don't think there was ever any doubt, but carpooling is definitely off the table!

Why do you hate Frank so much?

I may not worship him like most of the others do, but as far as middle management goes, I think he's pretty good!

He certainly tries hard enough to do right by people

JOHN: I don't think I hate him...

I just want to kill him

SUNE: You are still young, apprentice...

There are levels of wisdom that cannot be reached through rational thought... [putting his hand on Albert's shoulder]

sometimes, you just have to listen to your heart! [putting his hand on his own heart... Looking sacred]

John has found his way of truth

and personally, I'm with John...

I think we should kill Frank!

ALBERT: Why?

SUNE: You are doing it again Albert...

Let go of that which holds your spirit back from the light

Frank is an evil bastard, and if we don't kill him, who will?

Sometimes, you have to be the change you want to see in the world

John hadn't really been driving at anything... He had just put his view on Frank out there, as sort of a: 'by the way, I think Frank is a fucking psycho and I'd really like to kill him' with the same lighthearted intent two married men will notice the changes in 'hot and not in women's legwear' on a young woman passing by their bar stool, without actually having any intent of approaching her. Of course, if she offered to go somewhere more private with one of them so he could have a closer look, he may feel forced to oblige in much the same way that John wouldn't mind catching Frank doing some weird shit that would justify pummeling the man silly, but neither had any intent. But now that it is out there, John inevitably gets to thinking about some more aspects of the situation: there is definitely something about Frank that rubs him very wrong, but he is also suddenly struck by an all-new realization - though come to think about, the old freak might have hinted at it a couple of times: say he was right about Frank and this little unholy group of outcasts killed the man and were able to get away with it and prove to the world that Frank had been responsible for every catastrophe since the destruction of Babel, his job here at FinaLibre would be done. And how would he feel about that? UNSATISFIED! The old bastard is right: 'his involvement in this scene is about a lot more than figuring out who killed Angela and prevent further killings. To him, this is first and foremost about HER!'

JOHN: Much as I hate to disagree with you old man, he's right:

We can't kill him without proper cause

It's true:

the guy is highly respected here at the company, and people will definitely notice if he goes missing all of a sudden

I'll take the test data Angela pulled on him home with me, and see if I can find something to suggest that he went psycho over the years working here, or that Angela at least suspected him of it

Let's not make a move until we agree on a course of action, alright?

ALBERT: These two cards were in the Frank pile earlier [*pulling out two cards on which had been handwritten 'Leo №BB29384' and 'Thomas №BB88204'*]

But I wasn't sure they belonged there...

JOHN: I'll take them for good measure [*shrugging, taking the cards*]

Sune doesn't say anything to this but also doesn't make any objections. Albert on the other hand, replies with a 'bowing-to-Sensei'-gesture to show his approval.

ALBERT: I hate to leave you guys to it, but I have an appointment in town in an hour, and I really need to change into something that won't have me arrested on suspicions of terrorism if I happen to run into a police bomb squad on my way there

SUNE: You promised!

At least give me her phone number so I can write her myself

ALBERT: Alright...

But whatever happens, know that she's going to absolutely loathe you and do everything in her power to pull you into the swamp of self-loathing and hold you under until you drown

SUNE: ... [*looking into the void, seemingly love-stricken*]

ALBERT: Have fun Sensei

SUNE: OOOOSSSH!!!

John has been surprised to discover that he kind of likes hanging out with the old freak and the young whore... There is something freeing about for once not being the most mentally disturbed person in the room. John however knows, that the trio works best when they are indeed a trio. When the whore is there, John can sort of lean back and only interfere with the conversation when it has gone too far off track - like smacking an 80's television set when the signal goes bad - but when it's just him and the old man, it's all just too much. The constant barrage of bullshit fired at him is draining as hell, and John is contemplating an exit strategy as Albert steps out but he could have saved himself the trouble, because as soon as Albert is out of earshot the old freak does his signature move - the one where he balances between being far off in some other world and being very 'right here and in your face' - as he slams both his fists into the desk between John and him, leans in and stares intensely at John:

SUNE: You may think you have all the time in the world to fuck around and chase the ghost of Angela, but you don't, and if you don't reconcile yourself to that fact, a lot of people are going to die!

Nobody is saying you have to stop, but keep your fucking eyes on the primary objective!

JOHN: ... [*unbelieving*]

Sune's phone gives out a 'DING'.

SUNE: Now get the fuck out!

I have a very fine and extremely angry young woman on the way paying good money to do me a great deal of bodily harm, and I have to hose down the laundry room before she gets here... and locate the damn pigs-blood

John knows better than to try for a win when trailing by 10 and in a way, there is something beautiful - no, that's the wrong word for something so evil - 'awe-inspiring' about watching the guy do change-of-direction-drills up and down the mental illness spectrum. John lets the two last comments hang there as the final words and mental images to summarize the result of the day and walks out.

DONNIE: Did he do it?
JOHN: My gut feeling is 'no'...
if we are talking about killing Angela...
as for all sorts of other twisted stuff... probably... sir
DONNIE: Does any of that other stuff involve murder?
JOHN: I wouldn't rule it out...
I just don't know sir
I'm sorry...
DONNIE: Please keep at it, John...
We are keeping him away from the police...
for obvious reasons...
but we have to make sure that we aren't just sheltering a homicidal
maniac
JOHN: Yes sir
...
Sir?
DONNIE: Yes John
JOHN: I need you to give on Frank
DONNIE: Yeah... I thought you might ask at some point
So you have noticed that me and Frank don't get on very well...?
JOHN: I hadn't...
but I have also never seen you with Frank...
I just have a bad feeling about him...
DONNIE: I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation for that, but let me
start from the beginning

Frank: The Crown Prince of FinaLibre

FinaLibre was formed 9 years ago and consisted of just myself and 5 other breakouts from some of the big Financial players in the country. The first couple of years were sort of a struggle just to stay alive, but around 7 years ago we had managed to secure a solid foundation in terms of loyal clients and we slowly began hiring more people. Almost 6 years ago, one of those people was named Frank. He had taken the long road before ending up with us: after high school, he first served his mandatory conscription and then joined the Special Forces and did 2 tours to Afghanistan. He then did some kind of voluntary work related to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq around the year of 2015, but he has always been very reluctant to talk about that... don't get me wrong: I'm sure he was on the 'right side' - if ever there is a such in war - but I've always gotten the feeling that he experienced some pretty gruesome stuff down there, and I haven't pushed the issue.

Upon his return from voluntary service, he started on a degree in Finance and after he finished his B.Sc. he signed on to FinaLibre and worked full-

time while at the same time completing his M.Sc. I did the interview with him back then, and I immediately recognized that he was a force of nature! He is by no means the brightest or most knowing here at the company, but when he sets his mind to something, he goes for it full-throttle! And he believed in our mission... You see, most of the people we hire - especially those bringing a degree in Finance or Economics - come with a mindset of 'what will you give me, if I give you this', but Frank really believed in our purpose: to make the capital markets accessible to everyone and always gave his all.

He spent 2 years working for different teams within the company before I promoted him to Team Lead and then within a year he was pretty much 1st in line to take my spot when I either decide to leave the company or I am thrown out. And it's been that way for the past 4 years, give or take.

3 years ago I had a conflict with him and since then... our relationship has gone... cold, I suppose. Frank hired a guy he had served with in Afghanistan who - like himself - had gone on to study Finance and seek work in the Financial Sector. The guy had lost one of his legs from a roadside bomb, and I always figured Frank somehow wanted to make up for the guy's loss, but Frank's relation to him blinded him from seeing the guy for what he was: lazy and manipulative. I was going to have a talk to Frank about it when my wife - who is CFO for another financial institution - told me that the guy had approached her company and offered to sell confidential secrets from one of our RnD initiatives, so I just fired the guy the first chance I got. I was still going to have a word with Frank about the issue... but then I decided not to. The thing is, that Frank was beginning to show signs of fatigue, but this thing sort of brought new life to him. 3 years ago, Frank's wife was pregnant with their first son, and between them settling down in a house and getting ready for a baby and Frank's responsibilities here at the company, I think it was all getting to be a bit much for him. But then when this thing happened... there was no doubt he was angry with me for firing his friend, and with good cause... neither he nor anybody else knew about the guy offering to sell trade secrets to the competitor... but Frank seemed able to harvest that anger and put it into his work. In many ways, he became the best version of Frank we've had! And that made me figure that if seeing me as an unreasonable asshole could help Frank - and by extension the company - be more efficient, then I didn't mind being the bad guy. For the past many years, I have expected Frank to succeed me when the time is right, and he has a much better handle on what goes on around here than I ever did, so I'm mostly just waiting for Frank's private life to settle down a bit - they had their 2nd son last year - before seizing the opportunity to get out and see what else life has to offer.

JOHN: Does Frank still believe in the company mission?

DONNIE: Well... [pensive]
That's a good question...
I would have to suppose so... [gesturing some uncertainty]
as I said, we don't talk much nowadays, but from the reports I receive
from the different departments, I would say he still has a solid hold
on things...
and he still seems very liked by the other staff...
but, I would expect that his priorities have changed since becoming
a father...
I certainly hope they have...
JOHN: Could he have killed Angela?
DONNIE: Well, he was a professional soldier...
So I'm sure he COULD have...
but I can't see why he WOULD have...
I think he always really liked Angela
JOHN: One last thing sir
DONNIE: Yes...?
JOHN: You saw Angela outside of work?
DONNIE: I did... Or well, WE did...
There was a period about two years ago when she came by our house
a lot
It lasted for a couple of months...
JOHN: Why did she come?
DONNIE: I'm not sure...
Sometimes we talked about work, but most of the time she would
stop by and have dinner with us
then stick around for a couple of hours talking about... life...
and go home
JOHN: Sir...
did you ever have sex with her?
DONNIE: ... [shaking his head]
I suppose you have to ask...
No... There was never anything sexual between us...
In fact, since I met my wife 25 years ago, I've only been intimate
with her...
I've always hated when people have said something like what I am
about to say...
but she was more like a daughter to me...
and that is of course totally off the mark, because I only ever saw
her at work
and then during those couple of months...
but the DYNAMICS were more like a grown-up daughter coming
home to visit her retired parents...
than a middle-aged couple looking for fresh young meat for sexual
depravity [looking accusingly at John]

JOHN: ... [putting his hands up in a defensive 'your-said-it-yourself-I-had-to-ask' gesture]

DONNIE: Maybe with the exception, that she asked a lot about us as a couple...

Again... nothing intimate, but questions like: 'how do we solve conflicts?' and 'how do we decide where to go on vacation?'

JOHN: What made her stop coming?

DONNIE: Hmm... It's hard to be sure since we never talked about that...

But I got the feeling that she had found the answers she needed...
or at least the ones we could provide her with

JOHN: How did your wife feel about Angela?

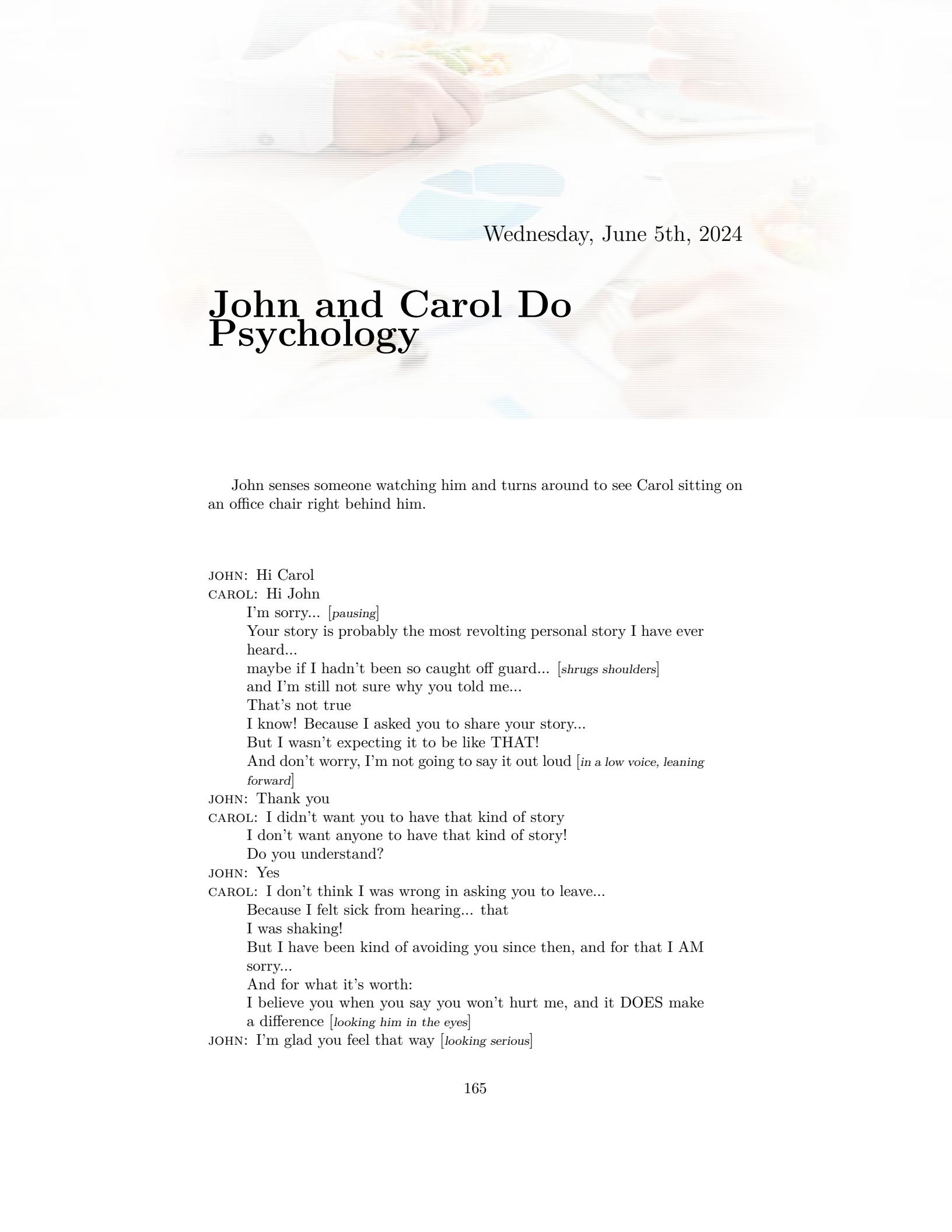
DONNIE: I think she liked her...

My wife is also a somewhat special woman...

I think she saw a part of herself in her...

and Angela was always very polite when she came by, so it was
usually very cozy [smiling]

JOHN: Thank you, sir



Wednesday, June 5th, 2024

John and Carol Do Psychology

John senses someone watching him and turns around to see Carol sitting on an office chair right behind him.

JOHN: Hi Carol

CAROL: Hi John

I'm sorry... [pausing]

Your story is probably the most revolting personal story I have ever heard...

maybe if I hadn't been so caught off guard... [shrugs shoulders]
and I'm still not sure why you told me...

That's not true

I know! Because I asked you to share your story...

But I wasn't expecting it to be like THAT!

And don't worry, I'm not going to say it out loud [*in a low voice, leaning forward*]

JOHN: Thank you

CAROL: I didn't want you to have that kind of story

I don't want anyone to have that kind of story!

Do you understand?

JOHN: Yes

CAROL: I don't think I was wrong in asking you to leave...

Because I felt sick from hearing... that

I was shaking!

But I have been kind of avoiding you since then, and for that I AM sorry...

And for what it's worth:

I believe you when you say you won't hurt me, and it DOES make a difference [*looking him in the eyes*]

JOHN: I'm glad you feel that way [*looking serious*]

CAROL: The thing is...

I still like you John, as troubling as I think that is...

And I want to hear the final part of the Trilogy of John... [pausing]

I want you to come over tonight and lay down on my couch and tell doctor Carol your story...

except I'm not a doctor and I don't have a couch...

JOHN: I know [faint smile]

CAROL: I don't have anything on Angela, so I can't give you any tat, but if your story is good, I do have... [faint smile]

JOHN: ... [faint smile]

CAROL: And if I'm not deeply disturbed by your story, you can stay the night on the couch...

except I don't have a couch... [smiling]

and then in the morning, maybe we can enjoy a breakfast where we talk about music or movies or the weather...

or even work or ANYTHING SFW or even NSFW but at least SFL...?

JOHN: I'd love to come over, but...

What about I come over a couple of hours earlier than last time, so in case you don't like my story I can still catch a train home, and I won't have an incentive to try and shine up my story to avoid walking home...?

because I like telling you my story, and I want it to be MY story, and not a lie I made up for housing and shelter... [smiling]

and as for... 'GP exams on the doctor's couch'...

even though she doesn't have a couch... [smiling]

let's do that if we feel like it...

I don't want it to be an elephant if you know what I mean... [questioningly]

CAROL: I do... And let's... [smiling]

JOHN: ...

I need to ask you about something completely different... [leaning forwards, lowering voice]

How is Frank doing these days?

CAROL: Oh, we're still on that...?

Are you jealous of him...?

JOHN: Hmm...

I haven't thought about that...

I don't think I am...

Do you think that's it?

CAROL: I don't know John...

But you do seem a little obsessed about him... [looking at him in a 'give-it-some-thought' manner]

...

Alright... [whispering]

You gotta promise to keep this between us...

JOHN: ... [raising his hand slightly as if he is about to be sworn into public office]

CAROL: It's only unconfirmed rumors...
I heard that his wife may have a regular appointment at the Perfidia Motel...
It's about 30 km from here...
and known for having a very rigorous bed-sheet cleaning policy...
and an overly GDPR-compliant approach to customer data... [looking at John in a 'catch my drift?' way]
JOHN: I understand [smiling]
Does he know?
CAROL: I don't know...
I don't even know if it's true or not...
and maybe they have that kind of relationship... [gesturing 'it's not impossible']
JOHN: Hmm... He doesn't really fit the prototype, does he?
CAROL: I don't know...
But please keep it to yourself...?
JOHN: Of course [looking serious]
CAROL: Thank you...
I'll see you tonight at 20 John [smiling]
JOHN: I'll see you tonight at 20 Carol [smiling]

At Carol's place, 20:04

CAROL: Alright, and if the patient would take a seat on the couch and clearly state his name

JOHN: Full name?

CAROL: No, of course not: First name is more than enough to identify the patient [smiling]

JOHN: John [voice breaks over]

Sorry...

... [clears throat]

JOHN [said clearly]

CAROL: And why are you here today John?

JOHN: I'm here to tell you the last chapter of the Trilogy of John

CAROL: That's very good John! Please lie down and make yourself comfortable [smiling]

JOHN: So... Do you remember how nobody had seen what really happened on the stairway that day?

CAROL: Yes... Except for the two friends...

... and Louisa

JOHN: Yes, Louisa...

John's Story Part III: Louisa

Louisa was in the same grade as me in high school, but she was a year older due to her doing 10th grade of Elementary, and she was... this part may be a little hard for me to tell, because I don't want to tell you the parts of her story that are not mine to tell... Who knows what the future holds, and if someday you end up knowing her for whatever reason, she should have the choice of which parts of her story to tell and how... but I also need to tell enough about her, for you to understand what she meant to me and why... Louisa was - and still is I'm sure - a special person, in a really good way.

At the time of her freshman year, she was... caught up in the realities of teenage life... and maybe there was some 'being-the-middle-child-with-an-older-and-younger-sister'-rebellion somewhere in there as well... She was really good at partying... I hope she wouldn't mind me saying this, but during the course of a party, she could drink almost a bottle of normal-strength alcohol and still retain her cool composure and attitude. As I said, she was a freshman the same year that I was, but we didn't have any classes together, and up until about the end of freshman year, I had only ever 'seen her around'. And then around the end of our freshman year, there was a house party at this dude we both knew, and it started off pretty slow with about 10 people sitting around a table drinking and shooting the shit... and

then this one dude, out of nowhere asks me: 'Yo John... What happened with the shithead on that stairway?' I wasn't expecting it at that time, because there hadn't been any talk about the incident in months, but I think I came off alright as I looked at the guy deadpan and said: 'I don't know, friend... I had just started going down the stairs and then I felt someone push me in the back real hard' and once again, I didn't try for an Oscar or anything but just left it at that and everyone around the table accepted the explanation... or so at least it seemed to me, and someone took the mic and ran with it in some other direction... and naturally I thought that was that, but then maybe an hour later, Louisa gets up to go to the bathroom or whatever, and on her way there, she comes over to me, leans in and whispers in my ear: 'Are you aware that your left eye gives off a faint twitch when you lie?' and I turn my head to look at her and she just winks at me and takes off to the bathroom... or whatever...

I was pretty surprised, but I knew what she was talking about... not about the twitch, but the fact that she knew my version of the Stairway Story was bullshit, but she didn't seem to make a big deal of it so neither did I... I took it more as a: 'I don't think we've been properly introduced' on her side. And so, when I went looking for the upstairs bathroom at one point, and I came across Louisa standing alone in the parents' bedroom, I found it appropriate to strike up a conversation that started something like: 'Do you actually like the band or do you just wear the t-shirts as a fashion statement?' to which she replied something along the lines of: 'They are OK, but I mainly wear the t-shirts because of that one song... You know... I'm afraid of the dark...? That's why I'm always out so much... Hoping to find someone to comfort me in the dark...' and I'm not doing her justice here, because the way she said it... she delivered those lines with such a straight face... She could have put so much more innuendo into them and I still wouldn't have dared to call her on it...

We talked a lot that night, and the next day and the days that followed, and we crossed some boundary at some point, and we crossed that same boundary a lot after that, and one day she looks at me and says something like: 'So, am I your girlfriend or what?!' and once again, her delivery was so damn ice cold that I had to admire it but of course I knew her a lot better by then, so I say something like: 'I sure as shit hope so! I had to choose between the girlfriend-ring and the BFF-necklaces and I ordered the ring' and without skipping a beat she replies: 'So when do I get it?', and so I went out to find a girlfriend-ring for her the next day, which I had low-key been expecting I'd have to from the moment those words went across my lips, and hopefully figure out what the hell a 'girlfriend-ring' is in the process

As I said... I don't want to risk overstepping the boundaries for which parts of Louisa's story I can tell... I hope that you will accept it at face value when I say that Louisa could go pretty hard... and I think she might have been able to go harder than everyone else I have ever known... and I know that she considers high school as a pretty hard part of her life, where she was working through some things... and that part becomes relevant later...

In any case: we finished high school at the same time and were still together and we both moved to the same dorm within 2 months of each other, and we lived there for 2 years together, and then we got a small apartment and moved in together, and at his point, Louisa had changed a lot. I guess you can say that she was beginning to figure out what she wanted out of life and had settled down a lot. We were both studying and held part-time jobs on the side. She wasn't the type to have our future meticulously planned out, but she was settling in on a course that somewhere down the line probably included buying a house and a car and raising children and so on...

I guess you could say that I was mindlessly following along... except that wouldn't really have been true... I think I knew that I was putting off facing the truth: that I felt more and more... alone... and 'not human'... We gradually exchanged Friday-to-Sunday benders with board game nights and Saturday brunch with family, and I was becoming increasingly aware of how poorly I functioned during those things... I mean, we'd be at her uncles house for some kind of birthday-brunch, and her family would be sitting around the table talking about what they all had planned for their Summer Vacation and I would panic like: 'Haven't we JUST hit April? Are you supposed to have that shit figured out already? I'm not even sure what I'm doing two weeks from now!' and I could tell that Louisa wanted something like that... those Saturday brunch things...

We began talking about babies and starting a family and such... and while it was still mostly an abstract thought, I was OK with it... but at some point, I had a realization that I should not become a father under any circumstance... and it was a very sudden realization, but please don't ask me to explain the circumstances in detail, because if I did, and you told me it sounded stupid... that would hurt a lot...

CAROL: Why would I say that?

JOHN: ... [searching for words]

CAROL: Alright, you don't have to explain that part [*smiling*]

But can you at least give me a tl;dr-version of your REASONING?

JOHN: I can do that... [smiling]
even though it may be a bit uncomfortable...
for you, that is...

CAROL: ... [looking surprised, and a little worried]

JOHN: It's not going to hurt... trust me [smiling, raising himself to sitting position]
I want you to lie down on the couch for a second and close your eyes

CAROL: Alright [a little uncertain but complying]

JOHN: Alright...
now picture that murderous asshole I told you about, that leaned over a 17-year-old boy and choked him to death...

CAROL: ... [making a disgusted face but keeping her eyes closed]

JOHN: Now imagine that same guy, maybe 12 years older, standing in his sons kindergarten, small-talking with the other idiot fathers about building outhouses, career paths and bla bla bla...
or worse still:
imagine how his children will feel when the family is off on vacation and dad has gone for one of his long walks to cool off again, and they don't understand why he always acts so distant and angers so easily...
I'm not saying that you can't be a murderous bastard and still have children...
What I'm saying is that if I had children...
those kids would be a lot worse off than their peers...
in this day and age and in this type of society where you are expected to mature emotionally...
I would always be an anchor... holding them back...
I don't know...
I wasn't able to explain it to Louisa either...
I guess you could say, that 'family wasn't really for me' [smiling]

CAROL: I understand John [smiling]

JOHN: And I realized something else as well...

John's Story Part III: Louisa (continued)

Between Louisa and I... one of us had to sacrifice... happiness I suppose... but more than that actually... when we talked about who and how we were in high school, she would make this grimace like she was embarrassed by it... by herself I guess... and I didn't feel like that at all... yes, there had been some pretty crazy times, and I can understand why she may have been a little embarrassed the day after I had to hold her hair while she... but I never minded that at all... and I don't think I ever did anything to give her the impression that I did...

What I was coming to realize was, that I had always felt lost and alone, but when we were OUT THERE together, I didn't feel like that... it may follow from not really feeling the world around me unless I'm going at a high pace... but whatever the reason... she went OUT THERE because she wasn't happy, and I was only ever ANYTHING... OUT THERE... and so for me and her to stay together, one of us would have to be... not happy...

I didn't end things in the most mature manner... but I probably wouldn't have been able to... I hated making her sad... I was at a bar, and this woman approached me... she had the feel to her, that she'd had a bad night and wanted to get hammered and have someone tell her that she's pretty... and so we got hammered and I told her she was pretty... and as far as me and Louisa's relationship went, that was pretty much it... I got a cheap rental on the other side of town and took up a pretty self-destructive course. I had given up the idea of being in a relationship.... I wasn't ready to become a weird loner in my early twenties, but I knew I didn't want to go through something like me and Louisa again... You know, it's a really weird and unpleasant feeling, looking at somebody you care for, sad because her boyfriend is a complete asshole, and you want to tell them to leave the idiot, but... I'm sure you understand...

So I decided to go for a substitute... You know these guys who start dating a woman and you just know it's going to end badly for them, because she really isn't into them, or her lifestyle is so... 'fast'... that she's bound to screw around...? Well, I thought I could be one of those guys... so I started going to bars out of town, where I knew that I could be anybody, and I was free to make up whatever persona suited the occasion, and I would approach women who acted in a specific way... women who were always a little more drunk than their friends... women who wanted to be center of attention a little more than everyone else... and based on the type of lifestyle I deemed them to have, I would adjust my own to match... So, if I was talking to a woman who could only ever see herself with a 'bad boy', and who had a long line of failed relationships with people now behind bars, I would be the semi-successful IT nerd desperately in need of love and affection... someone they might keep around for a couple of free dinners and compliments and then dump... If I was talking to a successful businesswoman who was out on the town to get confirmation and a cheap bang for her buck before continuing her search for that handsome silver fox CEO of her dreams, I had just been released from prison for some type of violent gang crime, and was moving across the country to get my life in order. In any scenario, I was someone expendable.

CAROL: That seems like a lot of work... Don't quote me on this, but why didn't you just see a prostitute?

JOHN: Well, I did think about that... But I have a pretty special kink
that I can't get at a prostitute
Intimacy [whispering, showing embarrassment]
I won't say that my relations with the women I met at bars where
much in the way of intimacy, but having to outright pay for sex...
In any case, I came to a point where I realized that I had to stop
with the bar spiel...

CAROL: Let me guess...

Pedro the Outlaw nailed some Investment Banker's wife...?

JOHN: He might have...

Hell, he more than likely did...

but that didn't stop Pedro... [shooting two finger 6-shooters in the air a
couple of times]

John's Story Part III: Louisa (finished)

I started the operation, thinking I was in the right because I was the one being used and therefore wasn't hurting anyone else... but, I ran into one of the women a couple of months after we had spent a night together, and when she figured that my persona had pretty much been one big shtick... she seemed hurt and used... and I got to thinking that I was probably a pretty bad judge of character... and if I had to start vetting the women I was going to sleep with beforehand to make sure that they would indeed act heartless... well, that would just be too weird... and it coincided with other events in my life...

As I said, I was on a pretty self-destructive path, which included a lot of drugs... I'm no expert on drugs, but if substance use was like a salad-bar, I had been around and dipped into a good half of the available bowls... and had more than my fair share of a couple of them... and at this point, I had my head pretty well and buried in the bowl of shredded carrots... then one night, I went out with some of the people from work to this bar, and sitting at a table in the back was Louisa with this guy that looked like the damn incarnation of the type of life she wanted, and it hit me like a freight train... I think I had been good at handling jealousy during our relationship... Especially during the last part, where I had started feeling more and more 'boxed-in' to a lifestyle I didn't understand, I would work off of the emotions that jealousy would bring when I suspected she was cheating on me... and for the record: I don't have any reason to suspect that she ever did, but I honestly don't care... Once again... It's only if you ever meet her... But seeing her in the bar with him brought up that old feeling of anger and rage... that someone had something that I could never have... and I felt really alone... and that made me want to hurt her... and not in a physical sense... I've never understood that in relationships... I wanted her to feel the loneliness that I was overcome by... and I knew I

had absolutely no right to feel that way, and believe it or not, that actually mattered a lot to me...

I wanted to kill someone she loved! And I knew that there was only one person I could justify killing... I told everyone else that it was just a misjudgment on my part, and that with fentanyl, it was a mistake that was really easy to make... I'm not sure if anyone believed me... maybe my father...

You know... Louisa is the reason I didn't die that night... she saw me leaving the bar, and she knew I had seen them, and she knew something was up... and she tried calling me and when I didn't pick up she texted me, and while I was getting ready to shoot up I texted her back with something like: 'Yeah, I saw you guys... It felt like I was invading your privacy in some way... It felt a little too weird, so I took off without stopping by to say hello... do you mind if I call you tomorrow afternoon? I have an early day and I'm really beat' and she might have almost bought it, but then again: maybe not, because I re-read it the next day, and the spelling had been kinda off and maybe a bit too many smiley faces, but she and her date were already sitting in a taxi on their way to my place in any case - which I doubt was what the guy had been hoping for - and she decided to ring the doorbell and by then, I was OD'ing on my living room floor, and when I didn't answer she asked her date to kick down my door and from there it was the usual drill of first aid and calling 112...

She wasn't really impressed with me... and once again, I felt like a complete shit... and that was the last of the Great Realizations in The Story of John: I am completely lost, with no hope of escape. I can't swim for the same shore as everyone else, because those are foreign lands to me... I can't drown myself, because there are 2 people who have made too many sacrifices to keep me afloat... I often feel like one of those sharks that just have to keep on swimming to stay alive... And sometimes the going is nice and easy and sometimes I feel like I'm being dragged under in the storm, but I'm always swimming...

JOHN: On my way here, I thought about what I told you this afternoon
about how I like telling you my story, and it is true:
I like telling you my story and being with you...
It feels like swimming in warm Caribbean waters...
It doesn't absolve the shark from being a shark, but it feels damn
nice...

John had been sitting kind of crouched over on himself during this last part of the story looking at the floor and only now looks over at Carol who - as seems a habit to her - has taken off her shirt and is opening her arms to him.

CAROL: Then come get your feet wet [*smiling*]
but I want the kinky shit today...
eye contact and everything!

And they maintain eye contact throughout most of what follows, and it is only near the end that Carol closes her eyes, but it seems like it is kinky enough for her.

Carol wakes him up at 6:30 the next day, and tells him to get in the shower. After the shower, John gets dressed and walks into the living room, where he is once again greeted by the breakfast buffet at Chez Carole. John sits down on a chair opposite Carol, and begins pouring eggs and bacon onto his plate.

JOHN: Did you know, that the German-born composer Hans Zimmer has composed the Original Soundtrack to more than 150 movies, among which are The Weatherman and Gladiator, the latter including such epic scores as 'Now We Are Free'?

CAROL: ... [looking at him puzzled]

A good 20 seconds pass by before Carol bursts out with a 'You beautiful bastard!' leans in over the table and violently kisses John on the mouth.

JOHN: Excuse me, Miss...

I wasn't expecting such behavior in a professional setting such as this...

Do you always kiss your colleagues with such aggression?

CAROL: Only the ones I plan to fuck silly...

If John's stupid grin as he once again lays on Carol's bed an hour later is any measure to go by, she had done just that.

Thursday, June 6th, 2024

John and Leo Make an Escape

Leo started with FinaLibre in November of 2022, and after a less-than-impressive tour through the Academy, Leo joined the Transactions and Settlement Team in April of 2023. Leo didn't particularly mind this; by now he had come to terms with the fact that he was no shooting star in the Financial Sector. It's not that he ever had any reason to suspect he was, but when he signed with FinaLibre in 2022 he had hoped, that his time as a student assistant for one of the country's large Investment Banking Firms would let him shoot right into the C-level. Some might say, that Leo was extraordinarily unlucky to be subjected to a particularly cruel-spirited 'Rite of Passage' and as a result of this had to be forcibly freed from the ventilation system by the Fire Department. These same people would probably also claim that trying to play Angela for some quick project credit and ending up suggesting to the board that FinaLibre went early-market on Hentai-NFTs, was just dumb luck. But then again, the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps people would certainly insist that such minor incidents would be no hurdle for Leo to overcome, was he the Christ Incarnate of the capital markets. Leo for one, didn't really bother claiming one or the other anymore but had reconciled himself to the fact, that his chance of 'making it big' was to hang in at FinaLibre and pray to God it would someday land him an easy job in a normal firm based on his merits of having been there during the upswing.

The afternoons were hard on Leo. Leo enjoyed the finer things in life, and this included the buffet in the FinaLibre cafeteria. On this day, the cafeteria served schnitzel which was an absolute favorite of Leo's, and to no one's surprise, he had attacked the buffet with an intensity that would impress most people. Leo is paying the price for this exertion now, as all of the blood in his body is being mobilized to his stomach in the fight against an alarming buildup of pork grease that is clogging everything up down there. Given Leo's less-than-fit-for-fight state, it takes him a few moments to notice that a person has sat down on an office chair next to him and is now staring at him. As Leo raises his eyes to look at the stranger he has to restrain himself from jumping back in his seat in shock. The stranger is looking at him with a deadly intensity, that makes it

almost seem like he is concentrating to make his pupils form daggers to send through Leo's skull. After maintaining eye contact for about 10 seconds, the stranger slowly looks down at his own hands, in order to divert Leo's attention to the small sheets of paper he is holding. As the stranger convinces himself that Leo has read each note, he shuffles the papers so the next becomes legible. The messages written on the pieces of paper, are as follows:

- Note 1: №BB29384
- Note 2: There are 6 people in the world that know
- Note 3: 5 of them are actively seeking to locate and kill you
- Note 4: I am #6 and I won't kill you
- Note 5: If and only if, you do exactly as I say
- Note 6: You'll be walking a tight line for the next 6 hours
- Note 7: One false step in any direction, and you won't live to see nightfall
- Note 8: Nod once if you understand and accept these terms, nod 3 times if you prefer to solve this problem yourself

The stranger stares at Leo's face as he nods once, and keeps staring to stress to Leo that whatever happens, Leo has signed on. Leo only nods once.

- Note 9: Remove all electronic devices that may contain recording equipment and/or GPS locators, and place them in your locker
- Note 10: This includes smartphones and smartwatches

Leo does so.

- Note 11: When I lower this card, walk to the West exit of the building, head directly into the forest
- Note 12: Meet me in 10 minutes at the big Thousand Acre Forest entrance gate

The stranger lowers the cards and watches Leo head out of the office. He waits for about a minute, before he goes into the bathroom, tears up the small notes he has been showing to Leo into tiny pieces, and flushes them down the toilet. He then heads for the main entrance of the building, to take the scenic route to the forest entrance gate.

Leo is at the requested entrance gate exactly 1 minute and 26 seconds before the time he was given and is visibly worried when the stranger is not there waiting for him. For what feels like minutes but in fact is only 40 seconds, Leo waits nervously for him to show up, and then notices him coming onto the path Leo is on from a crossing path about 100m further into the forest. Leo runs to meet the stranger, who is now talking on the phone with someone.

JOHN: That's right. I have 29384, and we are heading for the extraction point. ETA 5 minutes and 40 seconds. When Team Bravo has extracted 29384, I'll return to the building for 88204 and lead him to LZ2 [talking on the phone]
... [directing Leo to take a right on the crossing path]
No, there's just these two
No, Frank is the one who gave them up to the Banshees...
he is not a priority to us
I'd say I'm 90% sure there are no others...

At this, Leo shows a very small sign of wanting to interrupt with something.

JOHN: Hold up... I may be mistaken [into the phone]
Are there any others than you and Thomas? [staring tiredly at Leo, like an affirmative answer would almost surely be bad news]
LEO: There are 2 more... Martin and Lonnie
JOHN: Jesus fucking Christ!
Cancel that... There are 2 more [into the phone, tired]
I FUCKING KNOW WE ARE SPREAD THIN, BUT WE DON'T HAVE A CHOICE:
THE BANSHEES ARE CLOSING DOWN SHOP AND THEY ARE DOING THE BIG CLEANUP
Look, Team Juliet must be back from abroad, right?
They can fucking rest AFTER this operation because there isn't going to be much of anything if we don't salvage what we can RIGHT NOW!
I don't give a shit about affidavits and testimonies...
I doubt there will be anything to testify against in a week
... [motioning Leo to keep the pace and not slow down]
Did you see what they did downtown?
They are bringing back the Blood Eagle... The fucking Blood Eagle!
A whole team of 1st responders threw up at the scene
They are going to frame this as a Viking terrorist organization run amok
Look, the directive is straight from the Chief, so take any objections up with him

Good, then get on mobilizing Team Juliet...

... [motioning Leo to head off the path they are on, and up the small hill in front of them]

We'll change the plan...

As soon as 29384 has been picked up, I'm going back to the office where 88204 is going to have a heart attack...

You will dispatch Team Juliet in an ambulance, and while they are escorting 88204 I'll locate the last two...

FUCK, I FORGOT THEIR NAMES

LEO: Martin and Lonnie, both from Accounting [stuttering]

JOHN: Martin and Lonnie from Accounting [talking into the phone]

Yes, I think I hear the chopper now...

... [making eye contact with Leo and points to a spot in the sky out in front]

Leo brings his one hand up to shield the sun while he looks for the helicopter and while he is thus engaged, John bends down to pick up a rock and smacks Leo on the backside of the head with it. Leo falls to the ground and John drops the cheap burner phone (that doesn't have a battery in it anyways) to the ground, pounces on Leo and drives the rock down on Leo's neck 3 times, to make sure he doesn't make an incredible recovery while John carries out the next very important task. John rests one knee on Leo's back, brings out a pen and paper and writes down: 'Martin and Lonnie, Accounting'. He then draws a metal syringe from his pocket, twists on a needle, rams the needle as far as possible into Leo just below the bottom right-side rib, and empties the 2mg fentanyl solution in the syringe into Leo's body. He then drags Leo the 20 meters down the other side of the hill, rolls him into the pit he dug earlier and covers the body with dirt from the pile beside the pit.



Thursday, June 6th, 2024

John Meets Someone Familiar

As has now become a daily ritual for John, the first thing he does when waking up in the morning is to check his wrist. 'AWAY' it says... That must mean he is awake. Wait a minute... John checks again and notices that his hands look... off. 'I was wrong' John thinks and gets out of bed. John doesn't bother with any type of morning routine; he just walks out of his main entrance and into the stairway outside in his underwear. Once down on the street, he sets off running towards the train station.

He is running at a steady pace when he passes his Elementary School teacher Miss Jansen.

MISS JANSEN: How about that radical John? [shouting after him]

JOHN: It's just Frank Miss Jansen [without stopping or turning around]

MISS JANSEN: And the Lake Girl and the corridor?

JOHN: It's on my ToDo

MISS JANSEN: Hurry up and apply yourself John

Once again, he is just in time to see the train pull away from the station. John knows that trying to catch up to it is futile since it has already gathered up speed to be going faster than he can run, but he does begin to accelerate his run. A well-dressed gentleman is standing some 10 meters away from John, and when he notices that John is closing in on him at high speed he addresses him.

WELL DRESSED GENTLEMAN: That's no outfit for going to...

And that is all the man has a chance to say before John lands a flying knee to his face, and yet another blood-dripping therapy session plays out.

John is looking down at the sad remains of what was once the head of the aforementioned well-dressed gentleman, cursing the circumstances of this damn scenario that will not let him catch that train, when he is interrupted by the voice of a train station service attendant with a mop and a bucket of water.

SERVICE ATTENDANT: Do you mind, sir?

John stares in amazement at the young woman in the denim overalls and denim cap as she begins washing away the blood, splinters of skull, and chunks of brain matter off the platform.

SERVICE ATTENDANT: Can I help you sir?

JOHN: You look familiar

FAMILIAR SERVICE ATTENDANT: How's that sir?

JOHN: You look like a young woman who was murdered a few weeks ago

FAMILIAR SERVICE ATTENDANT: tsk tsk tsk

Don't you just hate that...?

You go about minding your own business, and then somebody stabs
you in the guts 38 times...

Late-stage capitalism in a nut-shelf [*shaking her head*]

... [*looking up at John, smiling*]

JOHN: I think she was on that train I just missed

FAMILIAR SERVICE ATTENDANT: Oh John [*looking intensely at John, wiping a
bloody thumb across his cheek as if to say 'you silly boy'*]

If she's dead, it doesn't really matter if you catch the train or not,
does it?

JOHN: ... [*staring at her, puzzled*]

FAMILIAR SERVICE ATTENDANT: You are lost John [*looking at him sympathetically*]

Let's find you [*leans in and kisses him on the cheek leaving a bloody lip-
print*]

The familiar-looking service attendant walks away from John, dragging her mop and bucket behind her as John stares at her in bewilderment.



Friday, June 7th, 2024

The 3 Detectives: Out on the Town

SUNE: Well, this has been a really productive day but would you look at the time already...
uuoooaaaaawww [*unconvincing attempt at a yawn*]
Time flies and some of us have very active social lives...
I'd love to have you guys hang around all night...
but then again not
GTFO! I'm going out on the town

As John and Albert are being hurried out of Sune's office, they stare at each other in amazement.

JOHN: What the fuck was that all about?!
ALBERT: ... [*shrugs shoulders, indicating 'yes, that was weird, but not even on today's top 10, was it?'*]
JOHN: ... [*contemplating*]
Are you turning tricks tonight HookerBoy?
ALBERT: I have a meeting with a client at 21 [*opting for the high road*]
Why?
JOHN: Because I want to see what the fucker is up to
ALBERT: No you don't!
JOHN: I know what you mean, and you're right...
but at the same time:
we have a damn obligation to know what he is up to...
We're lead investigators on the case of a woman murdered in the same building that freak of nature has wreaked mental havoc on for the past 8 years...
and are actively taking part in hiding him from the police...
ALBERT: Come on... the guy barely has the mental capacity to finish one sentence before starting another...

JOHN: Yet, you gotta admit that some of the 'rite of passage's he's pulled off have been pretty elaborate

ALBERT: Do you honestly believe he's guilty of Angela's murder?

JOHN: No I don't

but I damn well don't believe he has a 'very active social life' either...

and if he spirals off into some criminal act of retardation...

and we get questioned about it come Monday morning...

'And you never suspected the mental patient had something planned?'
[cop voice imitation]

'No officer... He said he was going out on the town and had a very active social life' [imitation of someone very dumb and gullible]

ALBERT: I know what you're saying...

but we don't even know where he is going...

do you want to just trail after him and hope he doesn't notice us?

JOHN: Look... If he's going 'out on the town' there's really only one town that can be...

And we're both going there anyways

He doesn't seem like the type of man to own a car...

at least: I sure as shit hope he doesn't

so he's bound to take a train to town, right?

which we were both going to do anyways...

All I'm suggesting is, that we hang back down at the train and wait to see if he shows up...

we'll give him half an hour and if he's not there by then, we'll forget about it, head into town, and go our separate ways...

No harm done...

If he does show up...

let's just see where he goes...

ALBERT: Alright, but he's still going to notice us...

it's not like there's all sorts of places to hide down at the train stop

JOHN: and I've thought about that as well...

it's game day today, right?

Albert and John are waiting at the train stop.

ALBERT: I feel damn ridiculous!

I don't even like soccer!

JOHN: Me neither...

but look at it as an opportunity to act loud and obnoxious in public
and sing about female genitalia without anyone batting an eye

ALBERT: Why would I even want to do that?

JOHN: well... I don't know really...

ALBERT: I guess I just don't see why you have to make this a 2-man
operation...

JOHN: Look at me!

ALBERT: ... [looking at John]

JOHN: I look like someone who just got released from prison...

ALBERT: But that's how you always look...

JOHN: I know!

But with you tagging along...

I look like someone who's just been released from prison...

being accompanied by his parole officer...

or his friend who will swear:

'Yes officer, I'll make sure he keeps it down'

I have a much better chance of not being stopped for 'random
questioning' with you hanging around

ALBERT: Alright...

but I'm taking off at 19:30 at the latest...

I can't show up at the client looking like a damn clown...

or well... maybe for this specific client... [pensive]

JOHN: 19:30 is cool, and then you can go do your thing...

Look, there he comes, blend in...

What's that they are singing about someone being a wall?

During the train ride into town, Sune seems to be totally consumed by his own thoughts and probably wouldn't have noticed John and Albert if they had sat down next to him, but to be on the safe side, they choose to stand in the cart neighboring the one in which Sune is sitting, hoping to catch him as he leaves the train. At the stop just before the downtown central station, Sune gets up from his seat and gets ready to leave. Lucky for John and Albert's keeping with their disguise, so do most of the soccer fans aboard the train.

JOHN: Look, he's going into that bar

ALBERT: Alright, what do you want to do now then?

JOHN: Let's go to that fast food joint across the street...

It looks like we'll have a pretty good view of what goes on in the bar from there

About half an hour goes by, and to no great surprise to neither John nor Albert, Sune is indeed not joined by a large group of friends, nor a female companion nor just a single school friend who is unlucky enough to run into him. He just sits alone at a table in the back of the bar, seemingly staring at nothing.

ALBERT: Wow, what a social guy! [*in a sarcastic tone that isn't really needed to get the point across*]

JOHN: I know!

ALBERT: Oooh... He's getting up now...

Wonder if he's had his social bone tickled enough for one exciting evening

What the fuck is he doing now?...

JOHN: ... [*staring intensely*]

ALBERT: Is he harassing that young couple?

JOHN: I don't think they are a couple...

ALBERT: What does that even have to do with anything?

JOHN: You didn't notice what the guy did when she was in the bathroom a moment ago, did you?

ALBERT: Guess not

He just chugged the girl's drink...? [*shocked amazement*]

And now he's sitting down with them...?

Looks like he's getting in trouble with the bouncer now...

...

The hell?

The bouncer did nothing about this and just left them...

And now they are stuck with him...?

JOHN: How old is Sune's daughter?

ALBERT: I don't know...

Adult'ish I think...

I'm not sure anyone at the company really knows for sure...

You don't suppose that's his daughter, do you?

JOHN: Obviously not...

Unless her mother is extremely dark-skinned

But I've got a pretty good idea of what's going on here...

I'll bet you an even hundred, that in about 30 minutes, Sune is going to start getting really uncoordinated, and then the bouncer is going to come have a talk with our young Casanova there

ALBERT: ... [*thinking*]

I see what you're saying...

but there must be an easier way than this to go about it...?

JOHN: I'm sure there is, but you know the guy:
doing the Lord's work and getting free drugs in just one sitting...
that's like hitting two birds with one stone

ALBERT: but that stuff is like horse tranquilizers or some shit...
He's going to be all over the place...

JOHN: ... [gesturing 'hey, to each their own']

As suspected, no more than half an hour goes by before Sune is swaying all over the place and the bouncer returns to the table and grabs the young man by the shoulder. The young man is looking really worried at this point. John and Albert have had to yield their table at the fast food joint to a group of drunk hooligans, and are watching the spectacle from the street.

JOHN: Alright, unless you're in the mood for watching some good old rapist-bashing, it's cool if you take off now
If the old weirdo has anything planned after this, I doubt it will be anything that threatens world peace with him hopped up on horse tranquilizer

ALBERT: Yeah, I have no doubt you'll get a real kick out of watching the bouncer kick the living shit out of that young turd, but I'd just as well go home and get ready for my appointment
See you John

JOHN: See you HookerBoy...
Give it your all!

John goes around a building to see the action in the back alley to the café where the bouncer is having at it on the young scumbag. To his surprise, Sune has not only gone along to watch the spectacle, but is - in his own way - attempting to partake in the beating of the creep, mostly punching the air, but once in a while managing to land a solid one. After about a minute of this, with the creep now lying senseless on the ground, the bouncer goes back into the café, and John watches in amazement as Sune picks through the creep's pockets, pulls out a vial of pills, leans back his head and empties the vial. Granted, most of the pills hit anywhere but the open target of Sune's mouth, but John has to assume that the guy dry-swallows a good 5-10 of those pills. Sune then stumbles out of the back alley, walking right past John without showing any sign of recognizing him.

For about an hour, John follows Sune as he stumbles around the area of the immediate vicinity of the café without any apparent purpose, until Sune gets on a bus headed South of the greater metropolitan area of the city, and John follows. At this point, John is fairly certain Sune isn't up to any mischievous scheme, but partly to make sure and partly out of curiosity as to how the old man manages to still remain standing, he is determined to see this thing through. If nothing else, then to have something to do until his appointment with Carol at 22:00. About midway through the bus's route Sune gets up, seemingly with

the intent of getting off at the next stop, which indeed he does. He stumbles out of the bus and approaches a group of 5 senior men who, based on John's estimate, has been sitting on the bench next to the bus stop for a good couple of hours drinking beers. Sune starts yelling at the men.

SUNE: Which one of you bastards did this?

I will fuck you up! [waving fist around at no one and everyone it seems]

Fucking drunkards...

Pissing another man's pants

YOU WILL NOT GET AWAY WITH THIS!

JOHN: I'm terribly sorry gentlemen

This man is a patient at the nearby mental institution, and has just been released on a trial basis today

The darn head shrink and head nurse decided that today would be a good day to try changing the poor guy's medication [shaking his head]

SUNE: You can't do that to a bloke [almost crying, pointing an angry finger at a bus-sign]

ELDERLY DRUNK MAN 1: I feel that in my soul man...

We've all been there brother!

ELDERLY DRUNK MAN 2: Shut up Johnny!

You better tell your friend there to move on along now, or he's gonna need medication... [at John]

JOHN: Not friend kind sir, I'm this man's man-nurse [low-key hoping this will set off drunk guy #2]

ELDERLY DRUNK MAN 2: ... [staring at John, maybe considering it, then takes a couple of steps away to center the group's attention away from John and Sune]

JOHN: Come on you miserable old bastard, I'm taking you home

Where do you live?

SUNE: That's so kind of you good sir

I think I live in that mental institution right around the corner

JOHN: You don't. House number?

SUNE: Aaahh yes... 642, 4th floor to the right

JOHN: That's in the other part of the area

Why the hell did you get off the bus here?

SUNE: I needed to have a talk with those BASTARDS [yelling that last part, while pointing somewhere 15 degrees off the location of the elderly drunk guys] They pissed my pants, man [in a comradely voice to John]

A long half an hour later - at least it felt long to John who had to support Sune's weight the whole way - they are standing outside the stairway to 642"

JOHN: Your last name sure as shit isn't Myzunki
Give me your God-damned wallet!

SUNE: Is this a robbery? [handing over the wallet regardless]

JOHN: Jesus Christ!...
You live in 210 you miserable son of a bitch

SUNE: Sure I do... Only person who lives down here is Miss Myzunki
She's haaaaawt!

JOHN: Come on!

As they are approaching 210.

SUNE: You know who pissed my pants, John?

JOHN: Yeah, those drunk hooligans you almost beat the living shit out of...

SUNE: It was the Shadow-Man John [stops walking and looks at John]

JOHN: What do you know about the Shadow-Man? [looking sternly at Sune]

SUNE: I know one very important thing! [starts walking again]
The bastard pissed my pants!

JOHN: Where did you hear about the Shadow-Man?
Damn it old man... This is important

SUNE: Then pay attention, John!
The Shadow-Man pissed my pants

John helps a staggering Sune get in the front door to his apartment, and then Sune settles on going to rest on the floor.

JOHN: Sune... What can you tell me about the Shadow-Man?

SUNE: ... [suddenly getting a sober and very intense look in his eyes, getting himself up to a sitting position and grabs both sides of John's collar]
Now you pay attention, John, because this is important!
I pissed my own pants, and the Shadow-Man doesn't exist!
It's just something you and Angela made up to not have to take responsibility for the consequences of your actions [throws himself backward onto the floor and goes to sleep]

Sunday, June 9th, 2024

Thomas has a Bad Day



'What a night!' Thomas thinks as he begins regaining consciousness. Thomas knows that this is going to be a hard day to get through, but luckily he doesn't have any plans and just thinking about last night dulls the headache a little and brings a smile to his face. And hey, doesn't he still have half a baggy? ... Yes, he thinks so. If only he can conjure up the initiative to get out of bed, then lining up and getting started will come automatically. Maybe he can even get in a few glasses of gin before the headache can really get a hold of him, and hey: then this day might turn out above descent after all. It's all about standing up, but before that, he has to open his eyes. Hmm, that's weird! He opens his eyes and it's still dark. And what the fuck?! Is he tied to the bed?! He can't move! Thomas starts pulling the restraints around his ankles and wrists when he hears a 'whoosh' and feels something hitting him hard in the ribs. He opens his mouth to let out a scream of pain and then feels something being jammed into his mouth. That might be a sock! A used sock! Thomas hears a weird robotic voice coming from somewhere to his right.

ROBOTIC VOICE: I will not lie to you
The next 5 minutes will be painful

And then, the beating begins. Thomas isn't sure what he is being beaten with, but it could very well be his own baseball bat. He is fairly sure that a few of his ribs break during those 5 minutes, that to Thomas feels more like 2 hours but other than that, he believes he may be able to get away from this with just a lot of bruises.

ROBOTIC VOICE: I will now talk, and you will listen, and then you will choose
3 years ago, I found myself in the exact position that you are in now,
and I survived. As can you

I believe that you will be able to walk from this
- if you so choose -
which is more than you could say about me
I spent 4 months in recovery before I could stand on my own feet
again
I came out of recovery to ruination, bankruptcy, and federal charges
due to information I had released under duress
- namely, while I was in the position you are in now -
and used against me while I was unable to dispute
I am now among the 20 richest men in Northern Europe, with a
fortune hidden away in offshore accounts
The reason I am telling you this is, that the time has come for you
to make a choice as my time had come to me 3 years ago
Put your trust in the Banshees and give us what we want or...
try to survive when I walk out of this door
You will only be given the choice once, so I recommend that you
think it through
You need to know what is at stake:
I will ask you for your personal credentials for your FinaLibre laptop,
and we will use your credentials to embezzle 100 million EUR to the
Banshees through European and South American tax havens
You stand a 50% chance of facing indictments, as your credentials
will be all over all of the transactions, but...
and this is the important part:
you will not go to prison
The Banshees will make sure the case is dropped and forgotten about
within a year
I personally believe, that the Pruning will occur within the next 3
weeks and everybody ranked worse than 200, will be forcibly resigned
and terminated, but only 2 people in the organization know the exact
date
You are currently ranked 189 but your cooperation in this job will
clinch your position within the top 50 when we realize the profits of
Project Banshee
If you choose not to cooperate, I will leave this room immediately
and let you enjoy the rest of your Sunday
I will let the door stand open, so somebody will surely come along
soon to unlock you
The keys to your restraints are on the floor
The Banshees will not contact you in this capacity again.
I will give you a minute to consider your options... starting now

John sits back in the chair and starts a timer. A minute goes by.

ROBOTIC VOICE: Minute is up!

In a moment, I will remove the sock from your mouth so you can provide me with your answer
Say 'YES' if you choose to accept our offer and cooperate with our demands
say 'NO' if you choose to decline our offer.

John removes the sock.

THOMAS: yes [very faint]

ROBOTIC VOICE: I am very happy to hear that
Now tell me the password to your account at FinaLibre
THOMAS: honeysuckle459
With a capital H and capital S... no spaces...

The sock is stuffed back in Thomas's mouth, and he hears tapping from a keyboard.

ROBOTIC VOICE: Very good

I will be done for now in 5 minutes, and then I will untie you and leave you to it

When Thomas's personal profile is done loading, John browses through Thomas's sent-box to get a feel for the man's style of writing, and then sends the following email to Thomas's boss:

- Title: Im sick
- Content: I think its corona. Im throwing up. Ill let you know when Im better.

John then turns off the computer.

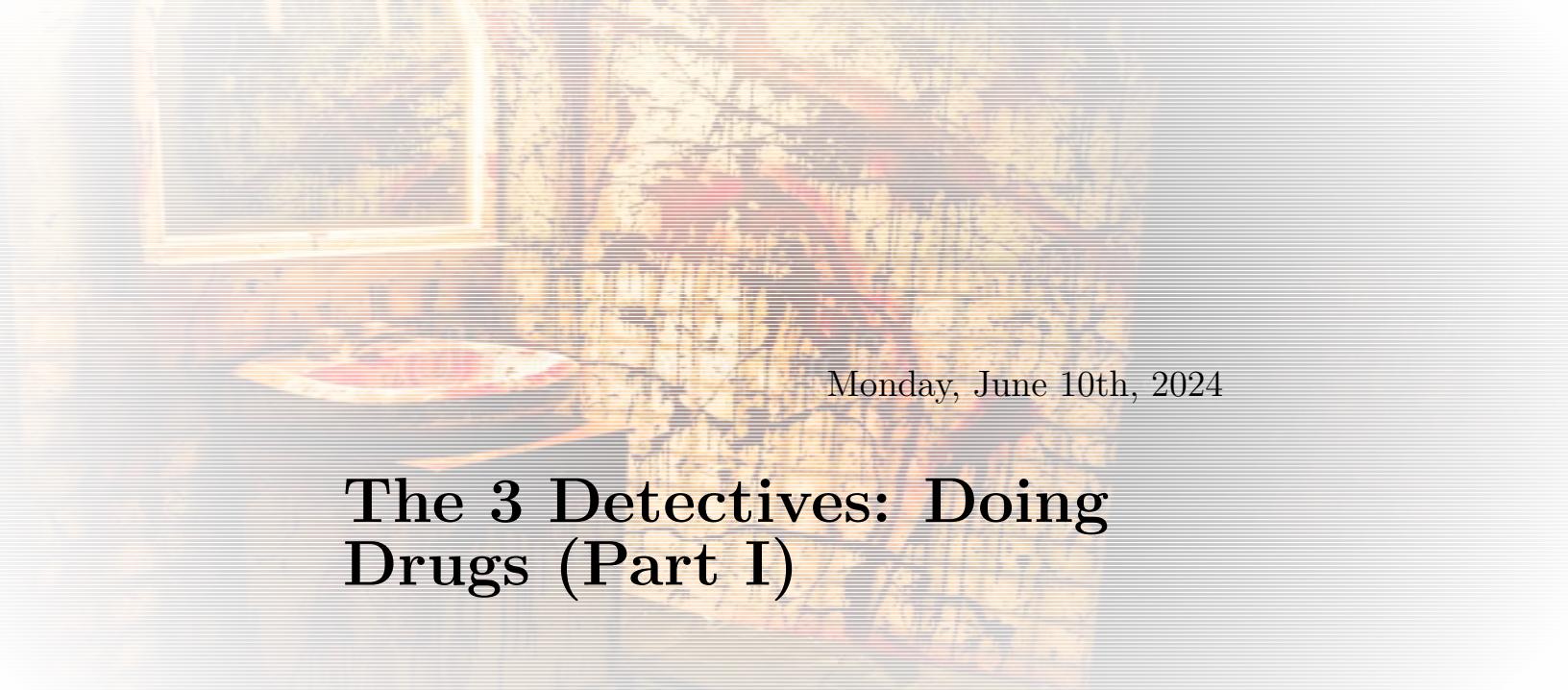
ROBOTIC VOICE: What is the PIN to your phone?

John removes the sock from Thomas's mouth.

THOMAS: 1 1 1 1 1... Six one's

John brings out the phone - tape covering the cameras - from a lead-covered box in a satchel, verifies that he is able to unlock it, places the sock back in Thomas's mouth and puts the phone back in the box. He then walks to the kitchen and browses through the SMS log and the social messaging logs in order to determine if Thomas has loved ones who might stop by within the next couple of days. It doesn't appear to be the case, but to be on the safe side he sends an SMS to the contact listed as 'Mom - ICE': 'Im staying at Lindas for a couple of days... In case you stop by... Love Tommy'. John then turns off the phone and leaves it on the kitchen counter, takes a filet knife from a drawer, goes into the living room, and slices Thomas's throat. He double-checks that the blood draining from Thomas and running off the bed stays in the confined area he has wrapped in plastic. He then verifies that he hasn't forgotten anything, and leaves the apartment.

For all the mental anguish his time in the basement of FinaLibre has caused him, he has to hand it to the old weirdo that it has taught him the value of disguising his intent behind insane amounts of emotional misdirection and made-up bullshit.



Monday, June 10th, 2024

The 3 Detectives: Doing Drugs (Part I)

ALBERT: Seriously, why is it so damn hot in here
We've been here less than 5 minutes, and my shirt is as good as
see-through

SUNE: Yeah...
You should apologize for that...
Maybe hit the gym once in a while
But, we forgive you...
It's not your fault the damn Air Condition is broken
Have some ice-cold Coca-Cola...
It'll do you wonders

Sune starts pouring from the - not even refrigerator-cold - bottle of cola into the 3 glasses on the table while laying it on John and Albert with his usual "compliment, weird-ramble, unbelievable insult, quasi-wise mysticism"-kombo, that John has come to think of as the man's standard MO, and they therefore don't object too much to the weird Eastern European Coke off-brand the guy was offering as repairs for an unbelievably poor work environment.

JOHN: Jeesus Christ... Where did you even get this? [*twisting his face as if drinking pure vinegar*]

is about the only remarks to the sub-par conditions of the beverage situation John and Albert think to inject into the conversation. Partly because the first glass pretty much kills off whatever taste buds they had going into today's session, but mostly from the usual fight of trying to keep up with the verbal shenanigans of the Basement Prankster, so as to not inadvertently agree to something stupid like securing that 100 kg of fertilizer the guy so badly wants (a fate that almost befell Albert and his credit card the day before). After about 15 minutes of introductory rambling - also something John and Albert

has pretty much accepted as part of the daily ritual - the room falls quiet and they get back into the analysis of Angela's 'lab notes'. After about 20 minutes more, the heat finally gets to Albert:

ALBERT: Seriously...

We have to get out of this room...

I don't want to sound like a cry-baby, but I think I'm getting pretty close to having a stroke

SUNE: Don't worry about it, I'll just turn down the Air Condition

ALBERT AND JOHN: ... [*both staring in bewilderment at the man, sweat streaming down the sides of their faces*]

ALBERT: DUDE!

You...

SUNE: said the air conditioner was broken, in order to get you to drink the soda pop

and now that you have finished your meat and soda pop, you can have cold

JOHN: What was in that bottle? [*looking tired at the man, having a bad premonition*]

SUNE: A bunch of C's and D's mostly...

2C-D, 2C-I, 2C-P

Your MDMA, DET, LSD, LSZ, DMT...

Honestly, I'm not really sure...

I targeted some specifics and then splurged the last Monero's on a surprise pack

Let Lady Fortuna decide you know

ALBERT: ... [shock]

What does that even mean?

JOHN: It means we will be tripping balls within half an hour tops

ALBERT: You drugged us?!

SUNE: Now Sunny, I don't want to hear that kind of talk!

When 3 people are bound by a holy quest, there is no room for suspicion and scornful accusations

We all agreed that John has to make the jump, and we are going to help him

ALBERT: Well, first of all...

I don't remember agreeing to anything about no damn jump!

SUNE: That's because you weren't paying attention...

Don't blame us for your shortcomings

ALBERT: Secondly: why did you have to drug ME if John is the one making the jump?

SUNE: What kind of friends...

no: QUEST MATES...

would we be, if we just sent him flying off alone...

Not the type of people your mother would have wanted you to associate with, that's for darn sure

JOHN: Dude, just let it go [*tired, motioning to Albert that arguing with the man is only going to make it worse*]
BUT WOULD YOU AT LEAST TURN DOWN THE DAMN HEAT?!
[as he drops off his chair to lie down on the much cooler basement floor]

ALBERT: And maybe most importantly:
WHY DO YOU HAVE A GUN?

SUNE: That man's a damn psychopath... [*whispering while pointing at John*]
There's no telling what he might do... As soon as we think we're safe, he'll crawl across the floor with murderous intent in his eyes, to gut you open and eat your intestines

JOHN: Quit scaring the guy and turn down the damn heat!
What do you think will happen when he runs upstairs and tells everyone who's unlucky to run into him about how his 'Quest Mates' fed him a week's worth of leftovers from a large-scale chemical drug lab?

SUNE: If they get a hold of you, you mustn't tell them about the plunger trick! [*looking dead-serious at Albert*]
It will only carry so many of us to the other side...
if shit hit's the fan

JOHN: THE HEAT!

SUNE: I'll do it on the next turn...
just gotta land something a liiitle higher than 'hoovy' [*looking worried at his own legs*]

Sune watches his legs intensely for the next 15 seconds, then suddenly jumps up and makes the 4 meters to the counter-top where the air condition remote is lying in full sprint and as he runs past the spot where John is lying on the floor, he lets the remote control fall.

SUNE: BOMBS AWAY

John lets out an indecipherable protest as the remote control lands on his face, but then contents himself with trying to figure out how this alien piece of machinery works. It's hard to ascertain another person's exact level of comprehension regarding a specific subject, but the changing climate in the room over the course of the following 3 hours - going from 'freezing cold' over 'scorching heat' to 'humid like a tropical forest' - suggests that he never achieves a state of supreme practitioner in the craft of weather-regulatorism.

JOHN: So... How do we do 'jump'?
SUNE: You muzzt heer thee zztorii
ferhst
ALBERT: I'm not coming down from up here
You tell your story Old Man, but I'm staying up here
JOHN: You do you, man!

It's pretty telling of the mental temperature in the room, that Albert is at this point lying on his stomach looking directly into the floor. John hasn't moved from his position on the floor, lying on his back, staring up into a colorful array of lights, while Sune has re-conquered his office chair, and is now fiddling with the gun, apparently trying to figure out where the handle is.

SUNE: STORY TIME AZZHOLES [*pointing the gun around the room*]
Do you guys know Blender?
ALBERT: Yeah... My dad had one of those
JOHN: HookerBoy knows all about Blendah Old Man
SUNE: ... [*struggling a little with pronunciation throughout*]
Blender is a three dee animatronix software
And it is soooooo good
but I wouldn't know nothing about that, because I get dizzy...
because you can move around in the computer...
but then, you get lost on the Z-axis and you can't come down to the
plane again...
you displace...
Did you guys know that I was a normal guy once?
JOHN: BULL SHIT!
ALBERT: Aaarrkwaard siiilence [*actually articulating the words*]
SUNE: I had a family once [*unphased*]
Before I displaced
A loving wife, a smart and beautiful daughter, and a sweet little boy
ALBERT: The boy wasn't smart?
SUNE: Oh yes! A very smart boy!
But then one day, something scary happened
ALBERT: Please lower your voice...
I can't 'loud scary' right now!
SUNE: A cloud came by [*in a whisper*]
and shifted the man
ALBERT: The man was you, right?

SUNE: It was!
The cloud drifted in at night and shifted my v-coordinate...
And then the daughter said something like: 'Where is dad?'
And the wife said something like: 'Goddammit, where have you gone off to now you miserable psycho?'
And the poor little boy kept looking for me all throughout the house
[sobbing slightly]
AND I WAS RIGHT THERE!
But they couldn't see me, because I was off-V-coordinate to them!
I could look into their plane and see them...
But they couldn't see me! [now crying]
ALBERT: Why did the cloud do that?
SUNE: What cloud?
Stick with the story man!
John...
We have to change your V-coordinate...
But you must jump...
We'll get you back when it's time...
back to this plane
JOHN: Haaoooww?
SUNE: Quit fucking around John!
You know how!
Get your feet wet!
JOHN: No!
I'm not going in there with her!
SUNE: I'm sorry buddy
There is no other way
The quantum gate is open now, but it won't be for long!
JOHN: She wants to draaaowwnn mee
In blood!
SUNE: Ok, so you close your eyes and think about something nice!
I made an even 100 off HookerBoy's old girlfriend like that the other day
ALBERT: I've never seen her before in my life!
SUNE: Just listen to my voice John...
I'll talk you through it
But we need to hurry, the draft from the quantum state is sucking the evil into the room
And HookerBoy is sitting right upwind...
he won't be HookerBoy for long if you don't hurry up and jump
I need you to take a deep breath in, John
ALBERT: DO IT FOR CHRIST'S SAKE!
SUNE: Now blow it out, John
ALBERT: RELEASE THE FUCKING AIR JOHN!

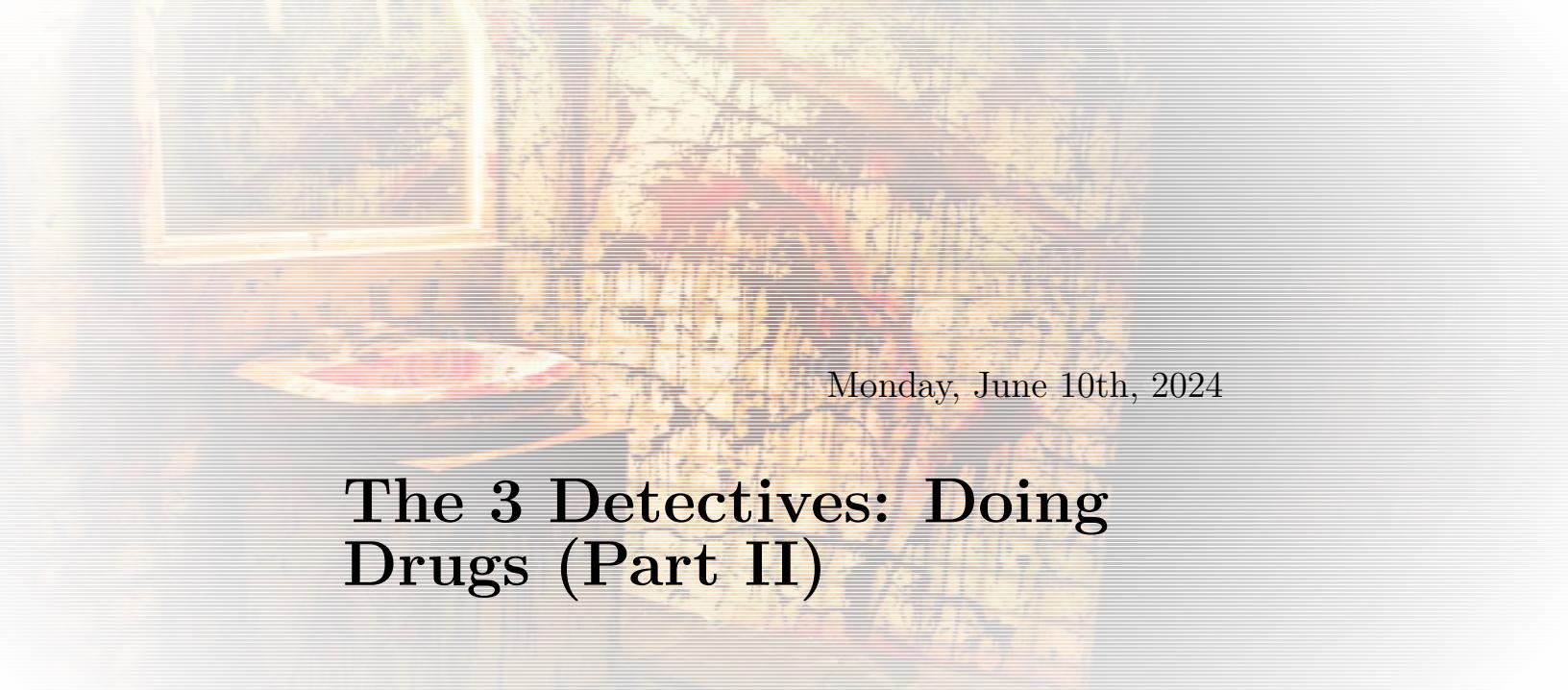
SUNE: Now close your eyes, John!
I'll count to 6, and while I do that, you breathe air into your lungs
When I count down from 9, you release the air
1...2...3...4...5...6...
Hold it in
9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...
We'll do that again John, but this time, you let go of space...
you'll be carried up, up, up to the clouds John
1...2...3...4...5...6...
With your inside voice, say:
'Ohm tat zat'...
It means... 'So long space'
ALBERT: SAY IT JOHN!
SUNE: HookerBoy is already starting to turn pale with evil
That's it, John...
Now breathe out John... 9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...
That's good John...
Now, I'm not going to count for you anymore, so you have to learn
to breathe on your own or die
It's very important that you use your inside eyes for the next bit...
If you open your OUTSIDE eyes, you are going to cause a rupture
in quantum space and kill everyone within a 5-kilometer radius
ALBERT: OPEN YOUR FUCKING INSIDE EYES JOHN! [said with a voice
that indicates sheer terror, but a huge evil grin]
SUNE: Do as he says John, he only wants what's best for you
Open your inside eyes
Ada boy
Now look around with your inside eyes...
you are standing on a cloud, John...
below you is the lake...
she is waiting for you in the lake...
but you have to jump down there John
And when you jump, you have to say 'Gung Ho Fat Jahn'...
It means... 'Adiós Time'...
You will be V-coordinate-free...
At last, John...
ALBERT: I am quantum...? [mouthing the words in surprise]
SUNE: On the count of 3, you jump John
3...
ALBERT: I am quantum! [mouthing with a look of realization]
SUNE: 2...
ALBERT: I... [saying out loud]
SUNE: 1
ALBERT: AM... [yelling]
SUNE: JUMP JOHN!
ALBERT: QUANTUM!!! [yelling]

As Albert yells this last part of what is to become his mantra for the next couple of hours as he ravages the air ducts of the FinaLibre building, he gets up and takes off running down the long corridor outside Sune's office, screaming at the top of his lungs.

SUNE: YOU FORGOT THE GUN QUANTUM-MAN...
I DON'T TRUST MYSELF WITH IT

And just like that, the room goes silent.

For whatever else can be said about Sune, he certainly is a damn liar, and the only slightly redeeming quality to this fact is that he at least believes his own lies more than anyone else does. This for instance means, that when he had talked John into the clouds and convinced him to jump, he was 100% certain that John would land in his lake. It also meant that he was now fully convinced that the death of his family life had been caused by a shift of position out of the V-axis, and not one very patient woman deciding for the sake of herself and her children that enough was finally enough. If he had been the kind of person who would learn from making a mistake just once, he would surely have reminded himself that filling his own head with that kind of nonsense is a very bad starting point when going for a deep sea swim in the ocean of psychedelic designer drugs... but he isn't and thus, while John takes off to pursue his destiny with Angela and the mysterious girl in the lake and Quantum-Man is having the time of his life causing mayhem to the floors above by means of airborne psychological terror distributed through the air vents, Sune spends most of that time bawling his eyes out, trying to reach across the V-axis-offset to comfort the little boy he can see pacing the empty house calling out for his father.



Monday, June 10th, 2024

The 3 Detectives: Doing Drugs (Part II)

Google search trends tell us, that the term 'Quantum' saw a major rise in popularity around November of 2008 and has since then maintained a popularity about a fifth of what it was at its highpoint during that final inning of 2008. I would go so far as to venture, that unless you work in very specific branches of physics or quantum computing, or was involved in the production of the Ant-Man installments of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, you have a fairly neutral relationship with the concept of quantum. It can therefore be hard to understand how the sentence 'Quantum-Man reclaims' has such a dramatic impact on the young man who has gone to the bathroom to relieve himself, that it sends him running out of the men's room with his trousers and underwear still around his ankles, but I suppose it is the result of a very enthusiastic enactment by the man in the air ducts - now identifying as 'Quantum-Man' - combined with a very unlucky set of circumstances and/or pre-existing conditions with the young man. Had it for instance not been for the suspenseful build-up of tension to the scene as Quantum-Man observes his mark through the air vents and 'de-fumigates evil' in an almost inaudible moan, it is unlikely that the scene would have played out like it does. Had it not been for the uneasy feeling of being watched, looking around the room, thinking he sees what looks like glowing cat eyes through the air vent, dismissing it as the workings of a stressed-out mind, thinking 'there WAS something there' and looking back at the vent to now very clearly see a set of red eyes encased in a bloody and sweaty face - drool running in a steady stream out of one corner of the mouth only milliseconds before the face erupts in an explosion of: 'QUANTUM-MAN RECLAIMS' and then on this, the first day of easing off benzodiazepines prescribed to him after a stressful event in the company's basement involving organ harvesters, Cecil certainly wouldn't have reacted the way he did. But such are the conditions and such goes Cecil storming out of the building for the second time in as many months, naked from the waist down except for the trousers that make his evacuation all the more troublesome. And Quantum-Man goes on with his evil ways.

On a chilly Autumn day by the lake of his mind, free from space and time, offset along the V-axis, John has his own things to worry about, most notably the young girl standing knee-deep on the other side of the lake, calling for John to join her. This is another one of those scenes that would have most people saying 'Yeah?! What's so bad about that? You should have seen some of the things I have...' and continue on in that annoying fashion, and once again we need to know a little background to appreciate the intensity of the situation as experienced by John. The thing is, that John had experienced this specific scene in dreams on various occasions throughout his childhood, never with a happy ending. If John tried to escape the scene by running away, a mysterious force would pull him back. If he ignored the girl on the other side of the lake, her insisting that he join her would get louder and more intense, until the entire world would resonate with her deafening shrill shriek. And lastly, if he would venture down into the water and across the lake, which he had done only once, the water would turn to thick blood, the girl would come charging at him, throw her arms around him, and pull him down into the bloody swamp with her. In either scenario, he would feel almost frozen by fear, unable to act. Throw in the fact that every previous re-play of this scene had at least been in the setting of a warm summer day and that the setting now has a very cold Autumn wind blowing directly at his face, John's aversion to coming here makes a little more sense.

John stares across the lake to the girl on the other side. It's the same girl. Always the same girl. Pretty in her own right, maybe 17. Around that age. She never changed, even as he got older. He doesn't remember having known anyone who looked like that throughout the course of his life. As usual, her face is locked tight in a weird grimace halfway between a grin and a scream of agony, and although he can't see her eyes from here, he absolutely knows what they will look like... those swirling irises... actually spinning hypnotically around in the middle of her eyes. 'No rest for the wicked', 'pursue your destiny John'. John starts walking through the water towards the girl who, as expected, starts running towards him. As she comes closer, John stares into her eyes, and not long before reaching his limit, that point where you have pushed yourself so far beyond the boundaries of what you think you can endure that you accept whatever devil that may take you, he hears... no, not quite hears, but not quite sees either... experiences the... 'essence' may come closest, of Angela. 'Come home John, let go'. And John lets go as the girl in the lake tackles him and pulls him with her into the now seemingly bottomless pool of blood. And for a short moment, John's consciousness let's go in much the same way as when you lay down to take a 15-minute power nap and you get up just before the alarm would have prevented you from actually falling asleep: you haven't slept but somehow both you and the world have changed in those 15 minutes. When John's mind gets up from his power nap, he is deep underwater... or: 'underblood' maybe?... Alone in what feels like an endless ocean. But at least the cold is gone... in fact, the gooey substance now feels almost boiling hot, as if he is swimming along the underwater magma outlets where two tectonic plates meet. And as he only notices after a good long period of time swimming around down

here: breathing doesn't seem like something he needs to concern himself with. In fact, the only thing he really feels is an immense feeling of loneliness. No matter in what direction he looks, there is just an endless amount of emptiness. In a sense, this is what he had always expected to find when experimenting with psychedelics, and he always attributed that expectation to a weird cartoon produced in the 1970s or 80s, but this is the first time he has come anywhere close to psychedelic underwater tomfoolery. John has an intuition that if he gives into the small voice in the back of his head, telling him that he is going to die alone down here swimming aimlessly around in the vast void, he is going to panic and have a really bad time. John closes his 'inner eyes' and tries to lower his agitation level, and is at the brink of obtaining a sense of 'oneness' with the void when - from someplace very far away - he hears his father's sobbing voice. 'My boy! My sweet little boy'. John feels like this is a little much to put on a person at the bottom of the Mariana Trench of an absurdly un-thought-through acid trip, and sets off swimming to escape the awful sobbing voice. And to his amazement, he discovers that he can swim really fast, and zoom through the water like a missile through the sky.

It is while zooming through the void, that he notices a movement out of the corner of his eye, and playfully decide to follow it. He is a shark traveling effortlessly through the water... in pursuit. He is in the midst of passing the other shark when it suddenly latches on to him, sending them both spinning around in the void, as he looks straight into the electrified essence of Angela, her face looking absolutely charged to max-capacity with... MADNESS. And he knows he is too. Pure murderous madness. And they go round and round, daring the void to come at them, moving the endless masses of water along their circular path creating an underwater whirlwind that grows into a vortex that seems capable of draining the entire ocean until they finally fall prey to the forces of their own doing and are swept down the bathtub drain and John is thrown into the final chapter of his 'jump along the V-axis': the damp and humid castle corridors of his memory.

While John is in this way engaged in the humbling experience of seeing himself lost in the boundless void, the man previously known as Albert - now Quantum-Man, is continuing his acts of terror on the 'Upstairs Dwellings'. The story of Quantum-Man - at least, as understood by Quantum-Man himself - is, that he had been quite an ordinary human being when a 'mind cloud' had killed his friend and made him choose between spending an eternity 'offset by 2 V-units' or channel the will of the 'mind cloud' into this world, and 'when you put it like that?' Quantum-Man had thought. To a lot of people, whether the thumping in the air ducts of the building as he 'flows inaudibly' about is caused by Albert or Quantum-Man is about the same difference; most of the other employees would have found it pretty weird had they known the truth, but many would have been relieved to know that it wasn't the damn 'Rat-problem of 2022' all over again. To Albert however, the division is huge, as it allows him to clear himself of the horrible actions committed by Quantum-Man. Albert for instance always thought of himself as a kind-hearted and humble soul; sure, he did sometimes dream of smashing the 'Alpha-pricks' from Client Management with a wooden baseball bat, but since getting to know John he has realized that this is after all the kiddy-pool of pent-up anger. Especially with women, Albert has always gone a long way to please and come off as friendly in a non-creepy manner and wouldn't dream of using his experience with the female body in all its shapes and sizes to anything but spreading well-being. Quantum-Man however, does not have any moral barrier or behavioral codex keeping him back; when the 'mind cloud' commands him to enact the will of the cloud, Quantum-Man obeys without thought or reason. And as it turns out, this combination of personalities can be a very dangerous thing! Not in the sense of thoughtlessly propping a mass murderer up on an unknown quantity and combination of hallucinogens and blindly turning your back to him while you try desperately to jump back along the V-axis, but in the sense that it holds potential for causing a lot of emotional pain.

What Quantum-Man discovers is, that while the 'mad-screaming-maniac-behind-the-air vent'-approach works wonders on guys as they are performing their afternoon-disembowelment-ritual, it tends to anger the women more than it makes them scared, yelling awful, hurtful things like 'get the fuck out of here you fucking freak' at him. However, the prostitute-Previously-known-as-Albert, has a wealth of information to draw on in order to really get at the women in the bathroom. The thing about being a not-particularly-attractive-male-prostitute is, that most women don't really feel like they have to maintain any type of facade around you. Combined with the fact that they are paying him, means that more than a few of his clients have put menu items such as 'psychologist' and 'general physician' on the 'A la carte'-part of Albert's menu, and would happily order from them in between the appetizer, main dish, and the dessert, telling him things like 'I worry so much about this chunk of fat on my tummy that I have started wearing a corset which is just horrible in combination with my flatulence', causing Albert to develop - without any conscious effort - the ability to not only have a really good idea of what the women he sees look like naked, but also which parts of their bodies they feel most insecure about. As

Albert has seemingly vacated the premises, this ability now just lies there on the inside of Quantum-Man's skull, waiting to be used to do the mind cloud's evil bidding. With whispers so faint, that they surely must be coming from inside the target's own mind, Quantum-Man continues his reign of terror with remarks like: 'they ALL noticed' and 'this skirt totally doesn't hide them'.

As Quantum-Man is expanding his evil reign of terror, Albert has gone AWOL and Sune sits trapped by the consequences of his refusal to acknowledge facts, John's situation is unusually dull. He sits, somewhat delusional, staring down a long extremely moist corridor, wondering what the hell the reason for bringing him here had been. He had been scared shitless as he stood in the lake of blood being charged by the freakish young woman, but in the same way as getting off the couch and hitting the gym is not something you really want to do but you do it anyway because it's good for you, confronting what had been a lifelong recurring nightmare had seemed like something that needed to be done at one time or another. And even though it wasn't something he could really name or pin a definition to, he had realized that the blood in that lake was inevitably tied to him.

That feeling of being alone in the void was something he knew all too well, and the maddening excitement of not being alone and playing with Angela was something that resonated off the happiest memories of his life. But what in the world is THIS about? It's just a long brick corridor. The kind you'd expect any rational 15th-century monarch to have built as a last-ditch underground escape route, for use when the peasants revolted against higher taxes, daily whippings or whatever the hell had them all so worked up when they came to exercise their God-given right to mob-led pitch-fork democracy. Except this corridor continues for as far as John can see, with no apparent doors or connecting corridors, but of course, John can't see that far because it is pitch-black everywhere except for the places where candles light up small circles on the wall and floor and these spots are stretched pretty thin along the apparently endless corridor, with large lengths of corridor in complete darkness. From the circles of light closest to him, he can see that at least those circles are covered with blood spatter, but that is about the extent of familiarity this place has to offer. It would be wrong to say, that 'John had always been a man of action!', at least, he never really saw himself that way but the same would probably be said about a man of action. 'So alright, maybe I AM a man of action' John thinks and then feels like he gets it a little more right with 'I am not really a man of contemplation', and so far, contemplation was about all John could think of doing down here. His first instinct had of course been to grab a light, and start walking down the corridor, but it had been completely impossible to remove the two candles at the nearest circle of light, from the metal holders fixating them to the wall, and that first circle of light was about as far as he had gone, because that's when the drag became almost unbearable. The thing is, that as John had started walking down the hall, he noticed that his body felt heavier for each step he took, making each step a lot harder to take than the one before. The inverse had been the case when he had walked back to the place he had first entered the corridor and in which he was indeed now once again located.

John gets to thinking back to that one time, when he and his team mates from football had discovered that the giant bench press rubber bands the heavy lifters used for working the top part of their bench press, could be used to shoot at other people. It took two people to operate them: one person had to push one side of the rubber band out in front and overhead of himself, while the other

person would pull back and eventually release the rubber band, hopefully hitting it's intended target and not the backside of the other man's skull... Although, for the guy in charge of firing the rubber band, both outcomes had felt like sort of a success. John would like to have one of those rubber bands now. 'I wonder if the drag only affects a person's ability to move on his own accord, or if it would also slow me down if I could somehow shoot myself from a rubber band down the hall' John is thinking when he decides that he has had just about enough of this damn contemplative sitting-about and that - rubber band or no rubber band - it is time to DO something. God damn it, John can just sprint at full force down the corridor, and maybe he can outrun the drag. He decides to go for it now, before he has time to think about just how stupid that last notion had been. As it turns out, it ISN'T possible to outrun the drag. Sure, John makes it about 3 meters further on this attempt, but now he is stuck in a mid-run, 'Heisman-trophy-as-it-would-have-looked-had-it-been-created-for-the-special-ed-league'-pose completely unable to move neither forwards nor back. 'This is actually worse than sitting on the floor'.

If we were to play a game, in which I would ask you to name the arch-nemesis of a person of my choosing, and I were to say: 'Batman', I bet there's a good chance that you would think of 'The Joker'. And if I were to say: 'The Joker', I bet that you would very likely say: 'Batman', assuming a parity in the selection of arch-nemesis, because after all: if you have selected someone to be your arch-nemesis, the least they can do is choose you back, because the fear of rejection and being the only person at the school dance without an arch-nemesis makes the pairing-option the most COMFORTABLE. But it isn't really the most RATIONAL, is it? If we approach the topic from another angle and try to de-clutter and de-mystify the effects of alienating nomenclature like 'villain', 'psychopath' and 'exhibiting-severe-anti-social-traits' or whatever else the psychiatrists subject us to for that prescription, people like 'The Joker' and Lex Luthor are really just assholes. And we know from experiences such as school- and workplace bullying that assholes will sometimes focus their energy on whoever they deem a sufficiently weak target regardless of whether or not that person is also an asshole or not. Most often though, assholes have a tendency to surround themselves with other assholes: they have asshole friends, asshole family, asshole colleagues, and they have asshole enemies. When looking at the situation in this light, it should come as no surprise that the arch-nemesis of Quantum-Man turns out to be - not a hero who arises in a time of need when employees were being harassed by an unseen - though not entirely UNHEARD - force of evil in the air ducts - but another asshole. An asshole, that Quantum-Man thinks of as 'The Shadow-Man'.

Albert had always been a realist and had for instance never really believed in the notion of 'love at first sight', and Quantum-Man couldn't care one way or the other but from the moment he stares down at the dark figure standing in the shadows of the North 2nd-floor bathroom, he knows that he hates the person down there. The setting of this specific bathroom - where a young woman had been stabbed to death a little more than 2 weeks ago - may have added to the intensity Quantum-Man experiences in the room, but he would have hated that ill-lit figure in any setting. It may have happened during the aforementioned murder or it may have happened in the ruckus that followed, that the wall-lamp had been broken and nobody had found the time to fix it yet, leaving the small lamp above the hand wash mirror with the unfathomable task of lighting the entire room. Although it isn't something anyone ever says out loud, the shared belief among the staff at FinaLibre is, that it is useless to fix the broken lamp, because nobody is ever going to use that bathroom again (unless a disaster of unimaginable proportions is to occur in the cafeteria-kitchen and in that case, the poor lighting in the room may turn out to be a blessing). Indeed, since the clean-up crew had finished on the evening following Angela's murder, nobody has been in here. That is: nobody but the man who killed her, 'The Shadow-Man'.

When Quantum-Man first comes to the air vent of this bathroom, he believes the room to be empty, until he notices the shadow of something that can only be a person, standing still in a dark corner of the room. On top of Quantum-Man's ability to float soundlessly through any confined space, he also has the unusual

ability to 'tune his sight', a move of the hands that to the untrained eye would look like someone wiping hair, sweat, and/or blood from his eyes. Tuning in on the man, he becomes able to sense the ghostly glare emitted from the area around the Shadow-Man that replays Angela's murder for the man's enjoyment over and over. Well, actually determining that THAT is what he is sensing is of course a little difficult, since Quantum-Man had been blessed with the good fortune of 'radical disco-lights' from the moment of his inception, but if that same spiritual birth had taught him anything, it is that it is perfectly alright to use a little imagination to fill out the dark corners of ignorance.

Knowing what we know about Albert's build, it's hard to imagine that the Shadow-Man didn't hear Albert moving in on his current position from a long way away, but for a long time, the dark figure just stands there reveling in the beauty of his past misdeed even as Quantum-Man starts to growl at the dark figure. And then all of a sudden the figure raises his gaze to the air vent, and rays of red-hot microwave light are bombarding Quantum-Man, and the disco lights all shift to blood red, pounding to the beat of Quantum-Man's cold heart as he realizes that the Shadow-Man means to cook him like oatmeal pudding in a microwave oven and he lets out a primal scream supposed to be the declaration that 'this shitta is Quantum!' but instead comes out sounding like a hoarse mix between the scream of an angry drunkard before he launches himself into a bar brawl and a person being roasted alive. And then Quantum-Man decides on a tactical retreat, zooming through the air ducts of the building, back for reinforcements and back to receive new orders from the mind cloud.

Frank hadn't really been expecting anyone to be watching him in the bathroom, and to say that Frank knows exactly what had just happened simply wouldn't be true, but Frank has a pretty good idea of who the fat weirdo in the ventilation system is and he knows how to deal with the situation. After all, he had hired the miserable fuck so naturally it was his job to terminate him. Like everything else around here. Frank looks at himself in the mirror, adjusts his tie, and calmly walks out of the bathroom.

Sometimes, you have to stand your ground and fight, whether it be a social, symbolic or knuckles-against-bones fight. There are people who will push you as far as possible up into a corner until your only way out of the situation is through them. There are situations where the pillars of the figurative house you call your life are rattled and shaken, and you need to stop running around picking up framed memorabilia and get working on fortifying your home. John didn't do much with living by predefined principles or rules, but he did have a lot of ingrained behavior and reinforced habits. If for instance, you put two buttons in front of him - one of them labeled 'violence' - you could be pretty sure that he had pressed whatever button was stained with blood before you had the chance to present him with his options. As such, he finds his current situation, being completely frozen in space, very uncomfortable. As his movement stopped, his body never let go of the tension of running at max-intensity, and it took for the large muscles on the back of his leg to go into spasms, for him to realize that his situation would be much improved if he just lets go. 'Relax, and let go'. And so he does, and though he wouldn't wish to be left like this for days, he is pretty sure he'll be alright like this until his kidney and liver have processed enough of the insane mixture he consumed, for his brain to start working on an exit-strategy back to reality. As such, John once again finds himself on the brink of coming to peace with himself and his current surroundings, when the damn sobbing returns. It is coming from somewhere very far off, but when you are standing completely still in an unventilated endless hallway, it doesn't take a lot of any sound for it to get under your skin. Luckily for John's sanity, he now hears something else: footsteps coming from down the hall. As they get closer, Angela appears at the edge of the darkness of the unlit area in front of him and walks up to him until she is only half a meter away from him, tilts her head to one side, and looks at him in much the same way a mother would look at a toddler who had just painted it's own face with peanut butter and says: 'John... You're going the wrong way', and as she says it, he realizes that not only is she right, but 'why had he not realized this before?' And with the realization, comes peace. Peace in the very real and physical sense that he regains the ability to move his body freely. Angela takes him by the hand and continues forward, and when they come to John's previous place of contemplation, the place where the lights stop and the road continue into complete darkness, John stops. Angela - now two steps in front of him - turns her head and looks at him as if to ask 'are you coming?' and he says to her: 'I'll be right behind you' and Angela walks on and after her 4th step, John can no longer see her out there in front. Keeping his inner eyes wide open, John walks into the darkness.

JOHN: What's with HookerBoy?

SUNE: ... [putting a hand up to signal to John that he should tread lightly]

Quantum-Man! [whispering]

He's sulking because I wouldn't let him have the gun to reclaim the fallen parts of 'Quantum-Land' [voice slightly raised, as if he was telling another adult what mischief the boy had been up to, partly to let the boy know that he had not forgotten about it]

I've offered him some sedatives but he's content with just taking them himself when 'the mind cloud comes to avenge the injustice'

JOHN: ... [concentrated look]

I think you did that!

SUNE: ... [looking thoughtful, then shrugs his shoulders]

Maybe

JOHN: You look peaceful...

you don't have that energy of raging insanity radiating off you

SUNE: I'm all cried out

It'll be back... I'm not worried

Did you find Angela?

JOHN: As much as is possible under these circumstances...

given that she's dead and all

SUNE: I'm glad to hear it [smiling]

That you found her that is

They both sit without moving or saying a word for a couple of minutes.

JOHN: Look... when Angela came down here to give you the diary...

SUNE: yeah?

JOHN: Which way did she leave?

SUNE: ...? [not understanding]

JOHN: When she stepped out of your office, did she go right like everyone always does, or did she turn left?

SUNE: ... [looking deep in thought]

I think she turned left

JOHN: What is there to the left?

SUNE: I don't know

I think there's a fire escape or something

I always figured that that was where the evil circulated in, and mostly just kept it as is

John gets up, showing clear signs of being lightheaded, struggling to get his body started again.

SUNE: We're going out to look at the left [directed at 'Quantum-Man']
Are you coming?
If you keep your yelling and swearing to a minimum, you are allowed
to leave the room now

ALBERT: ... [not answering, continuing to look straight into the wall of the corner in
which he is seated]

SUNE: You know where to find us if you change your mind [making a show
of picking up the gun and taking it with him]

JOHN: It's a stairway

SUNE: Who would have thought?
I guess I would have thought that...
because we are underground
But I've never been out here before

JOHN: Doesn't look like cleaning has neither
But someone's been here [pointing at the footprints in the massive dust-
pileup]
There is something behind the stairway...
Help me get those boxes out?

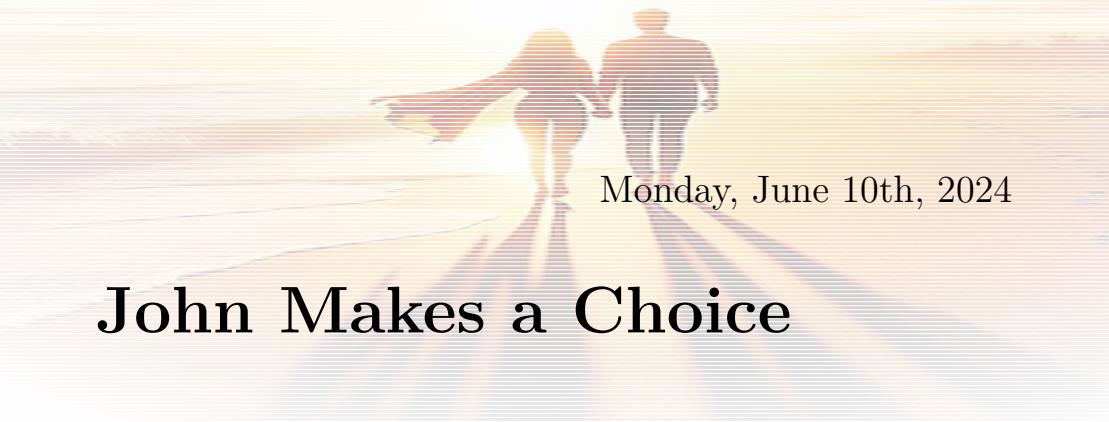
When the area beneath the bottom of the stairway has been sufficiently cleared,
John opens the 1x1 meter hatch that was concealed by the boxes a minute ago,
steps into the room behind the stairs, and turns on the light.

SUNE: It's very... spartan
JOHN: Yes
SUNE: Do you think she made it for the two of you?
JOHN: Yes
SUNE: Do you think you could have lived down here?
JOHN: We would have tried [shrugging his shoulders, turning around to exit the
room through the hatch]

Sune turns off the light and exits the room behind the stairs in time to hear the
fire exit on the floor above slam shut.

JOHN: Is he going to be alright? [motioning at the fire exit he has just seen
Quantum-Man run out of]
SUNE: ... [seeming to give it some thought]
I think so [nodding]
He'll V-shift back before daylight
JOHN: Shouldn't there be a fire alarm right now? [once again pointing at the
fire-exit]

SUNE: She must have disabled it...
You guys would need a way to come and go, right?
She was pretty good with electronics
She was cool like that [smiling]
SUNE: She's not the only one who's been down here [*pointing at a set of footprints in the dust, too large to belong to either Angela or Quantum-Man*]
JOHN: I know
SUNE: Do you think that's why he killed her?
JOHN: ... [shrugging]
I don't care [*looking deadpan into nothing*]
SUNE: When will you kill him?
JOHN: Soon...
I have a couple of goodbyes to make



Monday, June 10th, 2024

John Makes a Choice

WAITRESS: Welcome to The House of Role-play...

How may I service you tonight?

JOHN: I thought this was The House of the Triple Bacon Burger?

WAITRESS: Yeah, many people make that mistake...

During even hours we're The House of Role-play, and during odd hours we're The House of the Triple Bacon Burger...

Do you want to wait around?

I've heard the waitress at the burger joint is kinda hot

It will only be another 45 minutes [*smiling*]

JOHN: I guess

WAITRESS: And may I interest you in something from our menu while you wait?

JOHN: You might... Anything in particular you can recommend?

WAITRESS: We do a 'Customer-with-Burger-Joint-waitress'-scene that's pretty good...

Or so I've been told

But no... I think you are more of a 'Dirty Thirties' kinda fella...

JOHN: Oh my...

Tell me more, please

WAITRESS: Surely sir...

Our Dirty Thirties Monday Night Special is the preferred choice for the seasoned role-player

With it's authentic atmosphere

- rich with the smoking embers of the Roaring Twenties and saturated to the brim with the hopelessness of the 1930s US recession mixed with really unfortunate climate conditions -

... [*the waitress leans forward and puts her mouth close to John's ear*]

and a skimpy little dairymaid dress... [*whispers*]

it revolves around one young couple's everlasting love and the struggles of fighting socioeconomic distress and capitalist asshats... [*now reading aloud from the menu again*]

Role-players Weekly has on no less than 12 occasions nominated this

specific play for Aficionados Top-Choice Award...

10 of which it won

JOHN: I don't see how I can say no to that!...

I'll have one of those [smiling]

WAITRESS: 1 x Dirty Thirties [*writing on notepad while saying out loud*]

JOHN: Do I order drinks separately, or are they included in the selection?

WAITRESS: Oh no sir, I'm afraid we don't allow the consumption of beverages
during the play...

For sanitary reasons

Alright sir...

Our room is ready for us, so if you would come this way... [takes John
by the hand and leads him into a changing room]

Right this way, sir...

Now you just have to change before we begin

John unbuttons his pants and reaches for the denim overalls hanging on the wall.

WAITRESS: Oh no sir...

I'm afraid those aren't for you...

Did you not hear me say 'skimpy dairymaid dress'?

JOHN: ... [looking at the waitress]

You mean, when you leaned forward and whispered 'skimpy little
dairymaid dress' into my ear out there, right? [pointing outside]

WAITRESS: Certainly sir...

Are you feeling alright?

JOHN: Now that you mention it, I DO remember

I'm terribly sorry, I must have been distracted [*slapping his own forehead*]

WAITRESS: That's perfectly fine sir...

It happens to the best of us [*big customer-is-always-right-smile*]

Without taking his eyes off the waitress, John finishes undressing, grabs the blue dairymaid's dress, unzips it in the back, and then slides first one leg and then the other leg down the dress. The dress has clearly been made for a person of much smaller proportions than John, but he pretends he doesn't notice this, grabs the most sturdy part of the dress his hands can find, and pulls the dress up with all his might, causing a huge rupture in the crotch of the dress. John and the waitress are still staring at each other looking very serious, but as the dress lets out its cry of pain, the waitress can't hold back the laughter anymore.

WAITRESS: Oh John... You look splendid!

The waitress runs to John and jumps onto him, with her legs clasping around his mid-section and kisses him violently. John - not able to move from being trapped in a dress 10 sizes and 1 sex too small - lets himself fall backwards onto his lower back with the waitress landing on top of him.

WAITRESS: I don't want to do it in the Dirty Thirties John
I want to milk you right here in the dirty changing room [*drawing out
the 'i' in 'dirty'*]
JOHN: I thought I was the dairymaid...? [*looking confused*]
WAITRESS: I want you, John
JOHN: I want you, Angela

When John awakes, Carol is sitting upright in her bed staring at him, tears streaming down her face.

CAROL: What were you dreaming about?

JOHN: Angela

CAROL: Did you fuck her?

JOHN: We made love

CAROL: Was it good?

JOHN: I'm not going to answer that

CAROL: HOW FUCKING CONSIDERATE OF YOU!

JOHN: ... [looking at her, rather expressionless]

CAROL: You don't see anything wrong here, do you?

JOHN: ... [looking at her, waiting for her to continue]

CAROL: You can't see how FUCKED UP it is for you to be dreaming
about fucking a dead girl?

In MY bed??!

JOHN: She wasn't dead in my dream

CAROL: You are obsessed!

This is so far from normal that you have to bounce the signal off
satellites to establish radio contact with normal

Do you think that solving this case will bring her back?

JOHN: No

CAROL: And let's just pretend it did...

That's about the most fucked up assumption to a conversation I've
ever had, but let's roll with it

What do you think would happen if she came back and magically
fell in love with the great amateur detective who solved the mystery
of her murder?

JOHN: I don't know how to answer...

CAROL: I'll tell you what would happen: IT WOULD NEVER WORK!

She'd tire from you within the month...

I'm sure she would find the whole angry/gloomy-avenger thing exciting
to begin with, but it gets boring pretty quickly and Angela of all
people would realize that...

but, know what... let's keep rolling...

let's say that you are JUST what she's ALWAYS been looking for,
and the two of you complement each other like yin and fucking yang
and you spent a couple of months fucking like mad rabbits and
exchanging views on 'How to get by with severe anti-social disorders
in the year 2024', then what?

When the honeymoon is over, here comes everyday life!

and do you know what everyday life is full of?

JOHN: Angry people yelling at you when you wake up?

CAROL: RICH!

Everyday life is full of little disagreements;
'Oh, you want the recliner honey, well, I was thinking we could go
with the antiques'...
and you know what that means right?

JOHN: Compromises

CAROL: That's right! Compromises!

And that's the one thing neither of you know how to do!
But alright, let's assume you don't give a shit about what chairs
you have in your living room and have no problem letting Angela
get that one

JOHN: I think it would be the other way around...
when it comes to the chairs that is...

CAROL: ... [*staring in amazement*]

Even if you somehow never had to deal with that great destroyer of
marriages:
everyday nagging and bickering, you know who would be waiting
there to take you down, and keep you down?

JOHN: The world around us

CAROL: That's RIGHT!

Because the world DEMANDS compromises, and the world DEMANDS
that you pay rent on time and that you pick up your kids before
kindergarten closes and the world doesn't give a shit how much you
love each other, and you would never be able to accept that

JOHN: The world is changing

CAROL: Somehow, we are having two different conversations at the same
time here!

I want you to leave now

JOHN: ... [*gets up*]

CAROL: You know what really drives me nuts?

JOHN: ... [*looking at Carol, waiting*]

CAROL: THAT!

That thing right there!

Because I can't even be mad can I...?

Because you never promised me anything, right?

Hell, you even agreed with me from the start, that I might get hurt,
and all those times when I thought:

'I think we really have something here'

you never ACTUALLY confirmed that, did you?

You just smiled and let me think whatever I wanted, and it's not
YOUR fault if I thought we were starting a real thing, right?

JOHN: You can be mad. I understand

CAROL: John, please leave now

JOHN: I will

Tuesday, June 11th, 2024

On Killing Side Characters

SUSAN: I just don't see why it was necessary to kill the boy, that's all
BEN: I agree with you in principle Susan
but in this specific instance, it served a purpose in showing his
dedication to/obsession with, reaching his goal
KARL: And what principle would that be that be Ben? [challenging]
The 'Principle of Susan is Always Right'?
BEN: The principle of killing off side-characters for emotional effect
Hollywood does it to a fault:...
here's a story about a guy...
or a girl... [looking at Susan]
oh, and here is a friend for them...
take some adventure why don't you?...
oh, it's starting to get interesting, isn't it?...
and that friend is beginning to show themselves as really invaluable
to the main character...
it would be a shame if something were to happen to them, wouldn't
it...
like BAM! [almost yelling]
have a piano on the head 'slightly-unattractive-but-somehow-incredibly-
all-knowing-and-fun-side-character'!
EVERYONE ELSE: ... [watching Ben]
MIKE: ...or it could be bees...? [starts snapping fingers]
CECIL: ...and I guess... [singing, picking up on Mike's lead as on queue]
... you say...
MIKE, CECIL, SUSAN AND CAROL: WHAT can make me feel this waaaayy
MY GIRL [singing/yelling]
MY GIRL
Talking about my girl
BEN: You know, you guys are assholes!
SUSAN: You never should have told us [smiling]
CECIL: MY GIRL! UUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH [really getting into it]

MIKE: All jokes aside, Ben does have a point:
If you need to kill off a beloved character just to make your story interesting
Your story is not interesting
But I'd say it really depends on the story
If you are telling a story about a man trying to make it in the world,
and you kill off his son...
you're an asshole!
If you're telling a story about a man climbing a mountain and you end up killing one of the lovable Sherpa....
I mean, that goes with a story about mountain climbing, doesn't it?
so it's OK...
because climbing mountains is about dedication and sacrifice...
on a symbolic level

BEN: But actually, in that specific case, I'd say the storyteller doesn't HAVE to kill the Sherpa...
because anyone who knows mountain climber stories...
knows that the Sherpa is liable to take a sudden fall on the last climb of the journey...
and so, the storyteller can just play with the suspense...
let him dangle around dangerously close to the edge on a couple of occasions
let the listener/reader/watcher know, that the storyteller CAN kill the lovable Sherpa...
but will he?
the suspense is enough, to convince you about the very real dangers of mountain climbing

KARL: Well, that's mountain climbing, but there are movies where something's got to give
if you do a war story, and people don't die...!!

MIKE: Of course
But I have to agree with Ben, it's alright to mix it up a little now and then
The shtick about a naive lovable guy, who only ever acts in the interest of the regiment
in the middle of a war zone, gets killed in an ultimate act of self-sacrifice, saving his buddies...?
Please!

KARL: Kill the fucker at base camp!
Seven-six-two millimeter

JOHN, CECIL, BEN AND MIKE: FULL METAL JACKET!

CAROL: Wauw you guys!
All that masculinity is making my seat damp

SUSAN: ... [applying an imaginary fan with her one hand]

CECIL: Alright... All jokes aside, you do know why they do that, right?

KARL: Do what?

CECIL: Kill off the side-kick?

EVERYONE ELSE: ... [looking a little puzzled, since the topic seemed debated]

CECIL: Jesus... and you guys work in Finance!

Alright, then listen up and take notes

It's very simple:

Hollywood kills off the lovable side character...

to make money

EVERYONE ELSE: [shock sound] [mock shock]

CECIL: But wait, there's more

A study conducted between 2000 and 2020 showed, that 93% of all Hollywood blockbusters had 2 recurring characteristics:

- a love story involving the main protagonist
- and some form of sacrifice on the side of the main protagonist, usually a close friend

CECIL: and I can hear your mind working to find the connection...

PROMOTING A LIFESTYLE!

A lifestyle in which you ultimately have to sacrifice your friendships, to achieve love...

Because, believe it or not:

Hollywood earns more money...

that is: A LOT MORE MONEY...

on the average Western civilization COUPLE than they do from 2 average Western civilization SINGLES

all other things equal

Think about it:

what do you spend your money on when you are single:

getting shit-faced and trying to hook up

Alright, so you may catch a top flick with your homies when you are single

but compare that to the amount of movie dates you have during the dating-phase...

the 'Netflix n' chill's during the commitment phase...

and the amount of electronic entertainment consumed once the relationship spawns offspring, because:

what else can you do for those first 10 years

Alright, I see your doubts, but then let's let the facts tell their undeniable truth...

and feel free to verify this afterward...

The amount of adults of Western civilizations between the ages of 18 and 40 either married or living in a committed 'marriage-like' relationship increased by 53% between 2004 and 2019...

and guess which sector increased its net annual income

- WHEN ADJUSTED FOR INFLATION -

by almost 300%...

THE ELECTRONIC ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

... [bowing]

EVERYONE: ... [staring in amazement]

KARL: ... [shaking his head, folding]

OLD JOHN: ... [gesturing throwing his card in a fold, almost absolutely certain that every figure Cecil has just cited is complete bullshit, but not invested enough in today's pot to go for it]

EVERYONE: ... [looking at Mike]

MIKE: I'll give you 10 seconds to name just 1 movie produced between the years 2000 and 2020 with the aforementioned characteristics...
starting now

CECIL: ...

...

... hold up...

...

... I've got one...

...

MIKE: ... Time's up...

I even gave you 15 seconds

CECIL: ... [bowing head in acceptance of defeat]

EVERYONE ELSE: ... [getting up from their seat]

KARL: I'm hard man! [to Cecil, bowing in recognition]

That was the most beautiful load of mind fuck in the history of cool people!

OLD JOHN: Nice try brother... [folding hands and bowing to Cecil]

That was some first-class 'pulling-figures-out-of-your-ass' if I've ever heard some!

MIKE: That was sick man! [to Cecil, while extending his hand to him for a hand shake]

SUSAN: In my eyes, you're still a real winner [to Cecil]

Tuesday, June 11th, 2024

Mike and Donnie

The trip from the bus stop to Donnie's house on the outskirts of the little village he is now walking through is about 1 km, which gives him time for contemplation, and he likes to contemplate. The last month has really been something. Had he expected things to be like this? Certainly not. A year ago, he was hoping to maybe find a research position in Computer Science, or do some exciting work with algorithms, and now he is knee-deep in real-life IT challenges, and they really aren't like the type of problems that had excited him so during his studies. Those had been all about the realization: You faced a problem that was out of focus, and by zooming into it's different components you could eventually look at the big picture and change the way you think. In his job at FinaLibre, Mike has found that the problems are a lot more trivial:

- there is the problem of understanding what the Finance-guys are talking about, and they are really bad at explaining their domain knowledge
- there is the problem of gaining authorization from Alice to carry out the tasks that Bob has asked you to do
- there is the problem of keeping really old IT solutions afloat, because very old IT run an alarmingly large percentage of the Financial sector

Still, he thinks he's landed somewhere good, and he can't think of any other place he'd rather be employed, which is kind of funny, because his workplace is by no means perfect. There is the weirdo in the basement. And there's Karl, who can be kind of a dick. And, from what he knows about current dietary recommendations for healthy living, schnitzel occupies a much too large a percentage of the offerings in the company's cafeteria, but the only thing he would do without, is the murder of that young woman. The other things, sour as they may seem, just adds flavor to the meal. And then there are all the sweet things, like being invited to the CEO's house on a regular Tuesday night, just for a 'hows-it-going'. That's exactly the type of company he had hoped to

someday work for; a company where the distance between new hire and CEO is no more than half an hour on the bus.

And then there is Carol! Just saying the name to himself in his mind makes him smile. For the first time in years, he's actually considering joining a gym, because he is not blind to the fact that she's a couple of leagues above his current level in terms of physical attractiveness, but he has no doubt that he can get back in the shape he had when he was 15 and ran a lot.

Mike is thus in high spirits as he rounds the last corner on his way and starts the slight ascend up the walk-way to the CEO's little country house, thinking about Carol and the future he hopes they will have.

I would venture that the end of Mike's life is better than what most people have in store when they leave this world. Whether that is sufficient compensation for his life being cut tragically short - to just 27 years - by a sledgehammer to the back of his head I really can't say, but it makes things easier believing that it is.

Donnie is sitting in his recliner in the living room of the house he owns with his wife. The couple never had children, and when his wife messages to let him know that she'll be running late again, there is nothing Donnie likes more than getting immersed in a good murder mystery, which puzzles even him at times, since a lot of the literature he consumes involves gruesome murders in little houses - akin to the one he owns with his wife - outside small villages - akin to the village just down the road - and sometimes an intrusive thought sneaks into his mind: 'there could be a murderer with me, right in this house, right now' and the thought almost makes him shiver.

With 3 murders in the last 10 pages, it's exactly this state of mind he is in, so when the doorbell rings his whole body flinches. 'Are we a little wound up tonight Donnie?' he thinks to himself as he gets up and walks to the entrance. He even manages to laugh a little at his own reaction to the doorbell and has a sort of stupid grin on his face as he opens the door, but that grin immediately vaporizes as he notices what is lying in front of his entrance door: the body of a grown man with his head smashed in, partially wrapped in plastic. Even with the back of the man's skull severely smashed, Donnie recognizes him as Mike from FinaLibre... one of the new guys. Donnie stands motionless for a good 30 seconds just staring at the body in disbelief.

The sound of something coming from the bushes in the front of the yard wakes him from his shock state and he jumps to scoop up the big sledgehammer next to the body and stands on alert, waiting for whatever is out there to charge him. Nothing comes and the strong urge to fight for survival subsides as the adrenaline level falls. Donnie is about to step back into his house and lock the door when he remembers to check that the young man is indeed dead. 'He is very dead' Donnie concludes as he leans down to feel for a pulse, all the while keeping a very attentive eye out for any movement in the dusk-lit front yard. With that out of the way, Donnie allows himself to hurry inside and lock his door. Donnie later thinks that he was probably supposed to prioritize differently in a situation like this, but it says a lot about Donnie, that the first phone call he makes is to his wife:

DONNIE: Don't come home!

Go to your sister's house...

There is a dead body on the doorstep and the killer may still be out
there

I'm safe, but stay away...

I'll meet you at your sister's house later

Only then does he call 112. The police show up at his doorstep 8 minutes later, and by then, Donnie has barricaded the 3 doors to the house using the furniture at hand. There is a sofa in front of the living room door, Donnie's recliner is barricading the entrance from the washing room, and an assortment of dining room chairs are stacked in front of the main entrance door, but Mike's body is gone.

Wednesday, June 12th, 2024

John Follows Angela Into the Dark

JOHN: What are you doing?

SUNE: God's work...

JOHN: r/RelationshipAdvice?!

SUNE: If you want to help people, you need to go to where people need help

JOHN: ... [reading]

... 'Life is short and when you look back on a life, very few things really matter...'

... 'When you have washed away all of the impurities, the only thing that remains is the pure morphine extract called LOVE'...

... 'Trust your heart and believe in love my friend, it's supposed to be through thick and thin'...

SUNE: You can't possibly disagree with that?

JOHN: To a dude who's caught his wife cheating for the 5th time?

SUNE: Sound advice is sound advice...

and I'm not forcing him to follow it, am I?

You know, people need to learn to maintain a critical mind about 'online' and if it takes this guy sitting through 5 more affairs to learn that... [gesturing 'then that's a sacrifice I am willing to make']

JOHN: ... [shrugs]

SUNE: What can I do for you, John?

JOHN: A couple of things... [handing Sune an envelope]

SUNE: Is this you and Angela's 'naughty photo memory stash'?

... oh... no...

That would be kinda wrong, wouldn't it?

Forget I said that [shaking his head]

JOHN: There are two Banshee access sticks in there:

one is mine, one belonged to Thomas...

SUNE: Belonged?

JOHN: Yes, but to the best of my knowledge, nobody knows yet
I need you to post the image in 'Persistent' to the forum, along with
the text in the .txt file from Thomas's account
It essentially discloses my identity and suggests that I've fled the
country

SUNE: Sure

JOHN: But before you do that, I need you to make a claim on 42834 as
Martin from my account
using the photo on my access stick

SUNE: Is he dead?

JOHN: Yes, and Lonnie as well...
You can claim Lonnie from my account or your own, it doesn't
matter. Details are in 'Lonnie.txt'

SUNE: You have been busy
I'm guessing this is all for Frank?

JOHN: Yes

SUNE: Why don't you just go to his house?

JOHN: I just came from there...
He...
Knows it's the endgame... [*looking sad, tired of life*]

SUNE: He didn't?! [*looking earnestly shocked*]

JOHN: All of them! [*angry*]
I need you to get out of here now
The building is empty except for the two of us, and Frank will come
for me in the bathroom where he murdered Angela
You can make a claim on 01165 tomorrow morning if you want...
details are in the file 'John.txt'

SUNE: OK [*gets up from his chair*]
... [*putting on sweater*]
take care John ... [*leaving the room*]

JOHN: You too [*looking into the eternity*]

ANGELA: You have to admit, there is something poetic about this?

JOHN: There is something poetic about it [smiles]

ANGELA: You know, you could stay...?

JOHN: I'm not losing sight of you again!

ANGELA: Oh John! [smiling]

They need you!

A hard rain's a-gonna fall!

JOHN: We did what we could

ANGELA: Fucking Frank!

JOHN: I don't want to talk about Frank...

this was never about him...

would you sing me a song?

ANGELA: I would love to [smiling]

JOHN: Do you know:

'I'll follow you into the dark?'

ANGELA: I know what you know [smiling]

ANGELA [singing]:

You and me, have seen everything to see
From Bangkok to Calgary
And the soles of your shoes, are all worn down
The time for sleep is now
But it's nothing to cry about
'Cause we'll hold each other soon
In the blackest of rooms

BOTH [singing]:

If Heaven and Hell decide
That they both are satisfied
Illuminate the No's on their vacancy signs
If there's no one beside you
When your soul embarks
Then I'll follow you into the dark

10 minutes of silence follows.

ANGELA: How about some Cindy Lauper?

JOHN: ... [smiling]

I only know that one line [smiling]

ANGELA: How about...

ANGELA [singing]:

Now there's a beautiful river, in the valley ahead
There 'neath the oak's bough, soon we will be wed
Should we lose each other, in the shadow of the evening trees
I'll wait for you
And should I fall behind
Wait for me

JOHN: ... [smiling]
I like Springsteen...
but I think this is more... 'us' [begins tapping the floor]

JOHN [singing]:

Well, we busted out of class

ANGELA [singing]:

Had to get away from those fools

BOTH [singing]:

We learned more from a three-minute record, baby
Than we ever learned in school
Tonight I hear the neighborhood drummer sound
I can feel my heart begin to pound
You say you're tired and you just want to close your eyes
And follow your dreams down

Well, we made a promise we swore we'd always remember
No retreat, baby, no surrender
Like soldiers in the winter's night
With a vow to defend
No retreat, baby, no surrender

Now on the streets tonight the lights are growing dim
The walls in my room are closing in
But it's good to see your smiling face
And to hear your voice again
Now we could sleep in the twilight
By the river bed
With a wide open country in our hearts
And these romantic dreams in our heads

'Cause once we made a promise we swore we'd always remember
No retreat, baby, no surrender
Blood brothers in the stormy night
With a vow to defend
No retreat, baby, no surrender
No retreat, baby, no surrender

John and Angela now sit, heads leaning against each other, looking into the great void in the poorly-lit corner of that 2nd-floor bathroom. Some hours later, they hear the sound of footsteps in the hall outside.

ANGELA: You're up honey [whispering into his ear, kisses him on the cheek]

The door opens and Frank steps in wielding a foot-long hunting knife in his right hand. As John had suspected, Frank's attention is focused on the dead body of Martin lying in front of him, and as he walks towards it, John walks in on Frank from behind, reaches his right arm around Frank's throat, locks the choke-hold in with his left arm and squeezes tight. Frank shows signs of initial shock, but then jerks the knife around his own stomach, stabbing John in the left side 5 or 6 times.

*JOHN (thinking):
Just hold on! 10...9....8...*

Frank tries stabbing the knife over his left shoulder 2 times, only missing John by a few centimeters on the first stab as John catches on in the last second. Frank then goes back to stabbing around his stomach, hitting John 3 or 4 times more, before dropping the knife and losing conscience. John lets him and Frank drop to the floor.

JOHN: Jesus Christ that hurts!
ANGELA: I know honey [smiling]
JOHN: ... [smiling]
... [gesturing 'one second']

John reaches for the knife and props himself up on one elbow, rests the tip of the knife against Frank's right eyelid, and thrusts the knife in as far as he can. He repeats this for the left eye. John then stabs Frank 5 times through the neck and drops the knife. He takes out a permanent marker and writes '№BB01165 killed the Shadow-Man' on his left leg. He then lies down on the floor.

JOHN: Will you lay with me for a while? [*smiling*]
ANGELA: I'd love to [*smiling*]

Sometime later, John dies.



Friday, June 14th, 2024

Louisa Drops by

Carol notices a young woman standing outside the main entrance to FinaLibre. The woman has what seems to be a permanent stern expression on an otherwise pretty face, but at the same time looks like someone who doesn't know if she is in the right place.

CAROL: Can I help you? *[smiling]*

WOMAN: I don't think so...

I'm sorry...

This is not the place I am supposed to be *[apologetic, turns and walks away]*

CAROL: You are here because of John

WOMAN: ... *[halts without turning around]*

John is dead *[low voice, bows head]*

CAROL: Are you Louisa?

WOMAN: Did he mention me? *[turns around]*

CAROL: On a few occasions *[smiling]*

LOUISA: I don't know why I'm here...

CAROL: That's how I feel every morning walking through that entrance
[smiles]

I'm no expert on these kinds of things, but it seems perfectly reasonable to want to see where he spent his last days

...

What do you say I give you a tour around the place?

LOUISA: Are you even allowed to do that?

The papers said you guys are real big-shots in Finance...

I don't want to get you in trouble...

CAROL: Please...

I commit greater crimes against our hopelessly ineffective access control system every Friday night *[smiling]*

LOUISA: In that case:

yes... I would very much like a tour [smiles]
Did you know John well?
... that's not his real name by the way...

CAROL: I know...

It's the name he gave us when applying for the job, so we've just kinda stuck with it [walking with Louisa towards the entrance, beginning the tour]

LOUISA: I guess it's as good a name as any [smiles]
Did you know him well?

CAROL: ... [making sure to select her words carefully]

I think I knew a side of him...
Janet, this is Louisa...
one of John's friends...
I'm just going to show her around the place...
Does she need an access card?

JANET: ... [waving dismissively with her one hand, while only taking her eyes off the cell phone to send Louisa a quick smile]

CAROL: John had kind of a dark side, that I never really understood...
or maybe I understood it, but just had a really hard time accepting it
does that make sense?

LOUISA: Oh yes! Some things never change I guess [smiling]

CAROL: These well-dressed young men are our Client Management team
They are responsible for talking on the telephone most of the day
and say ridiculous things like 'Fino Bambino' and sucking up to dubious men in colored shirts

LOUISA: Wow... That sounds like something I could do!

CAROL: Of course you could...
but it would cost you your self-esteem [smiling]

LOUISA: Yikes... We can't have that

CAROL: I don't mind introducing you to them, but as you can see they are all busy on the phone [smiling]

LOUISA: Oh, I'd really prefer not having to do the rounds...

I almost turned around and went back outside...
I would really prefer not having to answer a lot of questions...
The thing is, that John and I didn't really talk much this past year...
objectively speaking, I don't really have any right being here...

CAROL: Don't be silly...
there are no restrictions when it comes to closure...
from what he shared about the two of you, you were really close once
LOUISA: I'd like to think that we were...
or... I DID think we were close...
until we suddenly weren't
... and I don't even know what happened... [stopping, in a quiet corner]
I would have understood if he had left me during our first years

together...

In fact, I never understood why he didn't...

I was in a really bad place back then

CAROL: ... [nodding knowingly]

LOUISA: But I had put that behind me, and I honestly think John had too

We weren't perfect, but what couple is?

We had fights, sometimes really loud fights, but we always found a way, you know

And I think we were moving towards a better life for the both of us
I finished my studies and got full-time...
we both laid off drugs and partying...

We had a small apartment together, and we had found a way to live life, that wasn't destructive...

we had even talked about starting a family...

nothing hasty... Just:

'could you imagine this or that'...

joking about baby names and such...

and it seemed to me like John was on board

And then one day, he wasn't at all on board...

he didn't want to start a family

he cheated on me and then just broke it off

And do you know what the weird thing is?

even though the cheating was the final argument that more or less ended the relationship, I knew

- even then -

that I could have forgiven that

as long as he didn't go get some other girl pregnant, what did I care what had happened on some stupid Thursday night with a bimbo from the bar...?

The thing is, I think he only did the cheating to convince himself that it was best to break it off with me...

I think somehow...

he had convinced himself that he had to end 'us' before we got around to starting a family...

Do you know what he told me?

CAROL: No idea...

LOUISA: He had a dream!

That's what he said!

or at least, that's what it all boiled down to:

he had a dream, and now he knew that he wasn't going to have kids

At first, I thought he was joking, but he got all serious and like:

'I really need you to understand this one thing'...

and then he tells me about this dream he had...

He met himself as older, only it wasn't him as such, but then again:

IT WAS HIM...

that's what he said...
and he saw kids...
whole kids, except they had a hole where their father was supposed
to be...
in the same way it was with him and his mother...
Did he tell you that she died when he was 4?

CAROL: He did [*smiling*]
LOUISA: Only, this was somehow worse, because he had lost his mother,
which allowed him to grieve...
but kids who have a hole for a parent, because the parent is empty...
They can't grieve in that same way
I try to tell it like I remember it...
Seriously... what do you say to something like that?
well, it sounded to me like the type of second thoughts any young
'dude' might have
but his expression was dead serious, like he was telling me he had
just been diagnosed with cancer and had a week left to live
And I just couldn't... have it!
We got into a huge argument, and I ended up telling him that the
whole thing with the dream was STUPID
and that it was just like him to come up with something stupid like
that, and why didn't he just own up to being scared of being a parent
and he got really quiet after that
Like if I had really hurt his feelings
I really don't understand why that remark got to him like that...
but it did
I realized later, that a lot of my own anger came from wanting to
start a family more than I had been consciously aware and I know
why I said the things I did, but if there was just one thing I could
change about me and John...
If I could go back in time for just 10 minutes, I would try harder to
understand what that dream was about...
because it feels like it was pretty central to understanding... him
Well, look at me taking up your time like you were my shrink...

CAROL: No, it's totally alright...
there are things about John I wonder about myself, and it's good to
hear about your experiences with him
LOUISA: How long were you together?
CAROL: It's that obvious huh...?
LOUISA: ... [*smiling*]
CAROL: Well, I guess we weren't really together, other than on occasions
over the course of 3 weeks...
it was never really an exclusive deal...
at least it wasn't for me, but I don't know if he saw anyone else...
I think that was one of the things I liked about him from the start...
he was really chill...

about that, I mean...
he had this whole 'wound-up-crazy-tight-violent-murderer'-deal going
for him, but he was really chill when it came to our relationship...
I have a very active... social life...
which scares off most men I meet...
even when they say they are cool with it, somehow it always ends
up being the elephant in the room...
but it was never like that with John...
I have sort of a... reputation in the company...
and to begin with, I thought maybe he hadn't heard about it, and
that made me feel kinda worried that he thought we had something
exclusive going and that he would then find out from our colleagues
about...
well...
and so I dropped some casual hints about how I sometimes spend
time with other men, and he seemed totally unfazed by it...
he only ever commented on...
'hygienic preferences'...
and even then, he took it on as a personal preference of his...

LOUISA: That was a really great quality about him!...
but of course, it's a little hard to tell your mother that when you
tell her you've met someone [*laughing*]

CAROL: Right [*laughing*]
... after a while, all this space he gave me...
started to feel like maybe too much space...
it's kinda hard to explain, cause he could be really present and make
me feel heard...
but then I would ask him for space, and it was like he just...
disappeared...
and I had this feeling that...
like, if we had been hugging, and I had wanted a little more space
to move my arms freely...
all of a sudden I was alone on a mountain-top with nothing but space
around me, and I wondered if he had ever really been there...

...
... do you know what John did here at FinaLibre?

LOUISA: Not in the slightest...
I didn't even know he knew anything about Finance

CAROL: Well, he didn't...
not when he started here, and I doubt he knew much more about
Finance on his last day than what was strictly necessary to pass off
the act of belonging here...
Our CEO hired him to investigate the murder of a young woman...
I'm fairly certain he didn't know her, but that she wanted him here,
and that that's the only reason he came...
I know that sounds weird...

LOUISA: I understand. Trust me!

One of the first things you learn about John is
that if you invite John, 'weird' is tagging along for the ride [*smiling*]

CAROL: Right!... [*smiling*]

Well, he did his investigation, and in the end it all turned out

alright...

sort of...

and I saw how the investigation changed him...

as he got deeper into the investigation, he became more and more
consumed by it...

obsessed...

it was like he fell in love with Angela...

Angela was the dead girl's name.

I knew Angela for five years, and our relationship was strained for
the most part and it really hit a nerve...

You see:

it was kind of a theme with me and Angela, that I would fall in love
with a guy, and then he would choose Angela over me...

and here we were, after her death, and the same damn thing was
happening again!

And John didn't even know her when she was alive

It drove me crazy!

And I have wondered if I drove him away from me with these outlandish
accusations about being in love with Angela and I will almost believe
it

but then I realize that I am kidding myself...

and even though I don't understand it, John chose the possibility of
meeting a dead girl in the afterlife over the option of life with me

LOUISA: Did he say that to you? [*outraged*]

CAROL: No, he didn't explicitly say that to me...

and talking of things you'd wish you'd done:

I would wish I could go back to our last argument

which was the last time we really talked to each other without a lot
of other people around

and try harder to understand what it was with him and Angela

At that time, I didn't want to understand...

because I was scared

LOUISA: I can understand why you didn't want to know the details about
him and Angela [*smiling*]

CAROL: ... [*smiling*]

You know what...

I just came to think about someone I think you should meet

I am not entirely sure why, but I have a feeling that the two of you
could benefit from a palaver...

Do you have any place you have to be?

LOUISA: Not at all [*smiling*]

CAROL: Alright, then I'll cut the tour short
- it's just more of these momma's boys in suit and tie anyway -
and we'll head for the basement

CAROL: Alright you weird old son-of-a-bitch...

Two LADIES are coming through, so we'll have none of your crazy shenanigans [*waving her arms as they pass the CCTV camera in the stairway*]

LOUISA: ... [smiling]

CAROL: Coming through...

Real ladies...

No shenanigans

Carol knocks on the door to Sune's office in the basement, and when there is no reply, she opens the door and enters.

CAROL: Alright you old freak!

Sune, allow me to introduce Louisa

- a person who was very dear to John

And Louisa, allow me to introduce Sune

who undoubtedly has a lot of titles for his work here at FinaLibre...

all of which boil down to being the village idiot

SUNE: Pleased to meet you Louisa [*without taking his eyes off the screen*]

LOUISA: The pleasure is all mine

The sound of Louisa's voice, makes Sune look up immediately.

SUNE (thinking):

Christ, she even looks like her... then!

...

CAROL: Well, you know I always love hanging around you Sune...

There's nothing quite like it for making one question one's own sanity...

but I have a really interesting appointment with re-counting our stock of paper clips so...

SUNE: Sure sure [*taking his eyes off Louisa only briefly, to look distantly at Carol*]

CAROL: Will you be alright with me leaving you here?

He is all kinds of weird, but mostly harmless

LOUISA: Of course!

Thank you so much for the chat and the tour...

CAROL: ... [smiling at Louisa, as she turns around and exits the room]

SUNE: I'm sorry to hear about your loss...

John...

that wasn't his name, but I'm no good with names...

mind if we call him John?

LOUISA: That's fine... And thank you [*smiling*]
SUNE: Would you feel better if we talked outside in the sunlight?
LOUISA: Here or there doesn't make any difference to me
 Why do you ask?
SUNE: Well, it's just that you are a totally normally sized woman, and
 I'm this super-masculine and overpowered man...
 Don't get me wrong:
 Carol is right about me being harmless and all, but how would you
 know that?
 I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to be out where people could
 see us and all...
 I have a daughter who is grown up now, so I'm used to worrying
 about what women must do to stay safe
LOUISA: ... [*looking him over, inspecting him*]
 Yeah... you don't scare me
SUNE: ... [*looking at her confused, then looks down at himself*]
 Ah... [*slapping his forehead*]
 it's because I'm wearing my nerd-fit today...
 If I had brought my slav-uniform
 - real Adeedas and gold chain -
 you would have been hella scared
LOUISA: I find that a little offensive...
 My father's half Bulgarian
SUNE: ... [*leans in over his desk and draws the items there closer to his chest as if to protect them against theft, all while maintaining a suspicious look at Louisa*]
LOUISA: Ha ha ha [*loud genuine laugh*]
 You are a funny man!
SUNE: Yeeeahhhh...
 speaking of John...
LOUISA: Which we weren't
SUNE: You kinda got me there I suppose, but I figured one of us had to
 bring it up, and...
LOUISA: You know, I'm not sure one of us does
 Carol thought it would be a good idea to talk to you for some reason,
 but I'm not sure it was related to John...
 Not directly anyways
 We could of course call her and ask, but that seems a little immature
SUNE: 'Help Carol, we forgot how to talk'
LOUISA: Yes, like that [*smiling*]
 How about we see if we can't solve this riddle by working together
 Suggest me 3 different topics
 - all related to you personally -
 and none of them related to John
 I'll pick one of them, and then we'll take it from there

SUNE: Alright...

Let me think...

Otherwise, I'll just pick whatever I was thinking about, and that might be uninteresting...

SUNE: OK. I've got it. In front of you are three doors:

- Surviving in the aftermath of nuclear war in the nuclear family: a personal tragedy from modern-day family life
- My theories on how Hollywood budget cuts have ultimately caused the death of the exploratory conversation and eroded social coherence
- Childhood trauma brought on by extreme asthma attacks and how they have cast a long shadow on my workout routine well into my early middle-age

LOUISA: Wow, those are quite the options...

Well, I don't care about your asthma attacks to be honest, and although we could probably have an intense debate about subject number 2...

Alex, I choose door number 1 and a tale about a broken marriage...

SUNE: Excellent choice!

OK, so have you ever noticed how limited our range of conversation has become?

On most topics, there is a very limited set of responses/reactions that people expect you to choose from...

and when the conversation is between a man and a woman... [throws hands up in a 'don't-get-me-started'-gesture]

almost any interaction is expected to be along the lines of some light banter with an undertone of...

Wait a minute...!

...

Why would you choose the one with the divorce?!

What's wrong with you?!

I just threw that one in there to make three!

I was sure you would go for 2, and to be honest:

I'm glad you didn't choose 3 because that is still hella traumatic to me...

Nobody ever chooses the first option!

LOUISA: Well funny man...

It's my show, and I chose door number 1

now get on with the tale! [taking a seat, leaning back in the chair, and gesturing with her hands for him to get on with the show]

SUNE: Well alright then...

Let me just rewind my head...

I sort of had the first 5 minutes of conversation theory all lined up...

OK...

I met my X-wife when we were 22...
About a year after I met her, she gave birth to our daughter
That was...
pretty wild actually...
I cried and all! [*gesturing 'It's true!' with his eyes*]
LOUISA: A lot of people do that at the birth of a child...
You are allowed to I think [*smiling*]
SUNE: Ah yes... [*wiping relief off his forehead*]
Time is really weird...
I remember how I felt when my daughter was just a baby, and I used
to go for these long walks at 5 o'clock in the morning...
It was the Summer...
She would only sleep when she was being driven in her carriage
because her stomach ached...
So I would take these long walks of up to 2 hours, so my girlfriend
- we weren't married then -
I'm a Buddhist Viking so I am allowed to have children outside of
wed-lock [*whispering conspiratorially*]
... so my girlfriend could sleep
And I had dreams... for her!
My daughter, that is
I wanted her to be happy and have a good life...
Which doesn't really express what I'm trying to say...
I wanted her to be whole... if that makes any sense...
I've always felt empty in some way...
not entirely soulless, but not entirely 'not soulless' either...
and in some inarticulate way, I thought I could hug, dance and, sing
her whole...
...
LOUISA: ... [*now taking on a serious look*]
Go on... I think this is what I came here for
SUNE: If we just take a snapshot of that instant...
of me singing to our daughter in the living room of 'then' and hang
it on the mental blackboard...
and let's flash forward a couple of years to when my son was born,
and I would take the same kinds of walks with him in the baby
carriage...
It was at the beginning of Fall and he was sleeping...
and it had gotten dark and I walked by this villa
it was newly built and you could see directly into the living room...
and the family that lived there was having visitors over...
all sitting around the family table having dinner...
and it seemed to me like what family bliss must be like...
house and car of your own...
not living crammed into a small apartment with other people living
on top, bottom, and all around you...

and I believed, that if I worked hard for it...
that's what we would have someday...
Let's put a picture of that scene... here... [*hanging yet another photo up
on the mental blackboard*]
And then let's just speed up this showing a bit...
so we can actually see my behavior getting more and more erratic
- and incompatible with family life -
as 30+ years of living with an undiagnosed behavioral disorder becomes
ever more noticeable in my behavior...
getting up at 3:30 to hit the gym and go to work...
or coming home from work when everyone else is asleep...
and generally failing horribly at being a dad and a husband...
And now, looking back, I have a blackboard full of photographs and
broken promises, and I know that I am totally the one who hung up
those photos and broke those promises, but it feels like I'm living in
a world that has gone under...
like I passed out drunk before the party got started and wake up
now that everybody's left, and I have this constant impulse that I
should make it right...
fix what I have broken...
but there is nothing I can do to fix anything, and I can't make that
impulse go away...
for what it's worth, it seems like both my children and X-wife are
doing really well now...
and I'm glad they are... [*smiling*]
and things being as they are, I'm glad I'm the only person stuck in
the here...
in the world that went under with the mental blackboard and all...
but I sure would like to get out of here... [*smiling*]
But... [*pensive*]
If some sick omnipotent being with Napoleon issues offered me the
choice between getting out of here on the one hand...
and my children growing up to become whole human beings...
well... [*gesturing 'I guess it's not so bad in here.'*]

Throughout most of his trip down memory lane Sune had been staring into the desk in front of him. Only now, when he feels like his story has been told, does he look up at Louisa, and realize that she is sitting as if frozen in place.

SUNE: Are you alright?
You know, the story is over now...
I know I am a really great storyteller, and you are probably preparing
for a gut-punching twist...
like in a Hollywood sob story...

but there's no death or anything...
no darn bees...
both my kids are alive and doing better than they have in years...
you can relax now [said with a smile, but also a little worried]

LOUISA: I'm glad your kids are alright [smiling]
I think I know why Carol wanted me to come here...
Thank you for sharing your story with me...
I'm not sure yet why I needed to hear that story, but I did...
and...
I know what you need!
SUNE: Don't tell me you sell farming supplies wholesale... [looking skeptical]
LOUISA: ... [expressing: 'WHAT?']
You need somebody to take you out into the world, and show you
that it's still there...
And that's exactly what I am going to do!
Do you dance?
SUNE: I only know salsa
LOUISA: Perfect!
I wouldn't know salsa from Shinola and that means that you can
teach me...
and somehow, I think you find comfort in that role
Are you through with whatever work you were doing when I came
here, or do you need to finish up?
SUNE: Oh, I was just investigating how to produce VR gas... Nothing that
can't wait [dismissive gesture with hands]
LOUISA: ... [looking at him questioningly and a little worried, face expressing: 'You
are kidding, right?']

Louisa and Sune and the Real World

Walking home to Louisa's place after a couple of hours of dancing.

SUNE: You know, I'm really glad you took me out and showed me the world...

you were right:

I needed to see that it was still there, and I would love to walk you home, but I just need to check...

Because, when I asked you earlier, you thought I was just joking about being in peak physical condition for a middle-aged man...

but now that you have seen what these babies can do... *[performing something that might have been an attempt at a shuffle]*

maybe you've changed your mind about just how dangerous I am and would like to walk the rest of the way home alone...?

I would understand...

LOUISA: ... *[stops walking, and does a top-to-bottom-to-top eye-scan of him]*

No... I still can't see it...

I'm almost sorry, but I can't really see the danger here *[starts walking again]*

I would even ask you up for a drink, but I fear that might start you on your 'Hollywood-killed-spontaneous-interaction'-ramblings...

but on the other hand.... *[pensive]*

I feel uneasy about having the end of this conversation determined by how long it takes us to walk to my place...

Alright...

I won't ask you to come up to my apartment...

but I'm commanding you to follow me home and escort me to my apartment

come into the kitchen, sit down, and converse with me...

at some point, I will throw my hands in the air and exclaim: 'Good Golly, I think we've reached the end of this exciting evening'

at which point I will walk you to the entrance and you will give me an awkward last-minute hug...

you know: scratch that...

You strike me as the kind of person who would put way too much thought into what is appropriate social etiquette

decide on a hand-shake to not seem presumptuous

and when I hit you with that 'what-the-fuck-is-wrong-with-you'-look...

you'll jump ship and go in for a hug to not seem rude

but by then it'll be too late, and what will always come first to mind from this otherwise really cozy evening will be that horribly awkward ending...

No... I'll walk you to the entrance and when I say:'hug'
you'll give me a 10-second hug like we've known each other for a
long time and have just shared a really tough time...
because even though we have only just met, that's exactly how it is
SUNE: ... [smiles]

They walk for about 2 minutes in silence.

LOUISA: I got you there, didn't I? [smiling, victoriously]
SUNE: Oh yes [smiling, conceding]

SUNE (thinking):
Would you be ready to do it all over again?
Would you feel this way if she didn't remind you so much of her?

LOUISA (thinking):
He's not 'John'...
John's dead!
And you have a date with Alex tomorrow night!

As they reach the door to the stairway of her apartment building:

LOUISA: What are you thinking about?
SUNE: Those poor bastards who drift off from shore in blowup rubber
rafts at the beach every Summer
LOUISA: ... [trying to suppress an 'are you kidding me?' expression]

On the 2nd floor, Louisa gets out her keychain, unlocks the entry door to her
apartment and gestures for him to go in... Both of them are trying to hide the
fact that the short climb up the stairs has left them short-winded.

LOUISA: Were you really thinking about poor bastards in rubber rafts just
now?
SUNE: Well, yeah, figuratively speaking
LOUISA: Please expand...

SUNE: Well, you know...

the Coast Guard makes a fuss about telling people to respect the
damn current every year...

and every time some sucker floats out to sea and they have to launch
the choppers to save their ass, it makes the national news headlines...
but well... it happens again and again [*he looks at her and they lock eyes*]
It just seems ingrained in us...

we know we should stay close to shore, but it doesn't seem that
dangerous...

like: 'what's all the fuss about, I got this'...

and we don't really think about it before we are a long way from
shore...

LOUISA: ... and then we realize that our fate is in the hands of the
current...

and by then it's too late...

They maintain eye contact as their heads near each other and their lips touch for the first kiss, and then their eyes close, and like two people drifting off into the great void, they both know that they are now in the hands of greater powers and their kiss turns deeper and more passionate and the current is leading them away from shore at an accelerating pace. Their lips part and he leans slightly forward and she leans her head against his neck and shoulders and he lets his left hand slide over her soft hair, and the current rocks them slowly back towards the shore. For the next 10 minutes, they hold each other. He holds her and tries to let go of a past that once was as she holds him and tries to let go of a future that never will be, and in the end he leaves the apartment without either of them saying another word because they had already spoken all the words that needed to be spoken.

The last thought that goes through Louisa's mind before she drifts off to sleep that night is: 'I think I forgive you, John'

Monday, June 17th, 2024

Another John and Carol

BEN: ... and so, in conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, I hope to have proven beyond any doubt, that not only was Steve Jobs Head Marshall of the Lizard People, there's simply no way 9/11 could have happened without his Icelandic influences! [ending speech with a slight bow]

SUSAN: I was there through the whole thing, and I still can't believe how you pulled it off, but you certainly did!

5 out of 5 from me [miming applause, gets up to leave the table]

KARL: I yield!

That was such an unrestrained crock of pure bullshit!

I simply CANNOT! [small bow to the victor as he gets up to leave]

CAROL: I've gotta hand it to you Ben:

when it comes to drowning people in mind shit, you are a sewage plant! [gets up to follow the others]

JOHN: Wait a minute Carol...

can you spare 10 minutes for an idea I've got?

CAROL: Anything for you dear [theatrical smile]

You guys go ahead, John and I are going to discuss a movie idea that will finally send us off to Hollywood and away from the rest of you losers [to everyone else]

What's up Doc?... [to John]

Wow, you look really serious

Are you alright?

JOHN: I'm alright [nervous smile]

CAROL: ... [grasps mouth with hands in mock surprise]

You are going to ask me to marry you, aren't you?

JOHN: Wow!...

Right country fair, but I'm at the skeet shooter and you're in the Honky Tonk

CAROL: ... What? [looking puzzled]

JOHN: Never mind...

The thing is...

I've been thinking ever since this John and Angela deal...

This is going to be a bumpy ride, but hang in there... [smiling reassuringly]

You know I like you right?

I mean, as in:

'That one? That's Carol, she's pretty cool'

CAROL: Sure John

JOHN: and that's pretty much how I've thought about it:

Carol's pretty cool, but I don't have any intention of going THERE with her

And do you know why?

Or... let me rephrase that:

do you know what reason I gave myself for not going there mentally, because objectively speaking:

you are a really beautiful and smart woman so it would be natural to go there, right?

CAROL: Of course John!...

You knew that you could never live up to my consistently high level [smiling victoriously]

It's the body count, isn't it? [more gravely]

JOHN: Body count!

That's such a stupid term!

Like, how many other activities do we feel the need to quantify in that way?

'That guy over there is De'Shaun; he's been to 17 rap concerts!' [intense]

Yes, the body count!

And I'm not a saint in any way...

I would actually think:

'Carol is cool, but she has a high body count'!

And these last few weeks I've been thinking

You see...

John and Angela were wrong about a lot of things

They were ultimately selfish people who would sacrifice anyone around them in the name of John and Angela

They were the types to take the dance floor and expect everyone else to just step aside and give them room to dance however they wanted

Great intense love story, but if just 1% of couples went about their relationship like they did, the world would be a burning chaos

They would fight and kill for their right to love each other exactly the way they wanted

and though I never wanted for any of them to be killed, death is really the only place big enough for them

But see...

they were right about one thing:

They were right in insisting on their right to feel what they felt!

You know, when I would tell one of the noobs:
'Yeah Carol's cool, but she's been to town a lot'...
the last part of that statement was not so much for them as it was
for me...
I was reminding myself not to go there
And it was out of fear
And I've been thinking a lot about what I was afraid of
I think it goes something like this:
I would fall in love with you and you would reject my advances and
I'd be reminded every time you hooked up with someone new
And then maybe throw in some:
what if we actually hit it off, and I would be faced with a daily dose
of:
'Dude, you look TIRED! Did Carol bring home someone new from
the club last night and keep you awake with her moaning and screaming?"

from our common friend, the Duke of Douche-bags, and then he
would go on to moan lightly and touch himself and that is
- in its own right -
enough to send chills down my spine!

CAROL: ... *[nodding in agreement]*
JOHN: Those last few days leading up to John's death...
I knew you guys had something going
It was pretty clear that you really cared about him...
more than you allowed yourself to believe I think
and I knew that John was in some way faced with a decision to
either continue his Doomsday hunt for Angela, or choose a normal
life, that at least for a start would include you...
and you know what?...
I was hoping SO MUCH that he would choose you!
I didn't really understand his obsession with Angela, but even if I
had, I felt like choosing a future with you was the only thing that
made any sense, and he deserved that!...
When things played out the way they did, I was almost heartbroken,
but then I realized that I wasn't sad for John
It wasn't actually that I wanted you for John
I wanted you for me!
John had the guts to do what I was afraid to do:
acknowledge to himself just how great a person you are, and not give
a fuck what anyone else thought about that!

CAROL: ... I don't know what to say...
JOHN: Oh, you don't have to say anything
Actually, I would expect nothing but for you to not know what to
say when I spring something like this on you...
What I am driving at is essentially this:
I really like you Carol, and I would like to hang out with you outside

of work
That's it
If you don't feel any tug in that direction: no worries
We don't have to 'forget it ever happened'
I'll move on and I won't bring it up again
And I'm not declaring my intent to woo you
this is my entire sales pitch
Consider it a suggestion, and if you think it's something you'd like
to roll with, we'll find some activity we can do together
I personally feel like dinner dates easily get awkward, but I'm open
for suggestions
And if we find that the chemistry isn't there, or if we end up going at
it and find that we 'march to two different rhythms', we'll conclude
that it was worth the shot, and then at least we can say that we
weren't afraid to try it out

CAROL: And you wouldn't be afraid that I would hook up with someone
else?

JOHN: Well... no, not really...

I mean, if we go on a couple of dates and shimmy around in the
'maybe'-zone, I'm not expecting an exclusive deal
If we clear the 'maybe'-zone and take off, I do expect monogamy but
then I wouldn't be afraid that you would break that deal

CAROL: But what if I did?

JOHN: Then I would be sad

I can't promise you tears, because they don't come all that easily to
me, but it would hurt
and I would probably be angry for a while...
and we'd break up and both move on and after a cool-down period
we'd both be back at this lunch table discussing far-off conspiracy
theories and that would be that
But I honestly can't see it happening
Because I think you want a 'real relationship' between just two
people who love each other
I don't doubt that you like sex and that you like having sex with
different people, and I respect that side of you, because I think it
comes from the fact that you generally like other people and you
'find them' most intensely during sex
But I also think that you want to find something different or more
than what you find during the course of a single sleepless night
And I think it scares you!
And to some extent, I think you've been wanting to try out this
concept of a relationship, and you've chosen to do that with guys you
knew could never be in a committed relationship, and maybe that
comes from wanting an easy out, or so you could convince yourself
that relationships weren't for you and at the end of the day:
what do I know?

CAROL: John...

I have appointments lined up for the next 3 nights... [*looking a little worried*]

This is a lot to take in...

But I will think about it, OK? [*looking him in the eyes*]

JOHN: That's plenty [*smiling*]

And Carol did think about it. She thought about it all through the rest of the day at work. And she thought about it as she was getting ready to go out that night. And she thought about it while What's-his-name was talking about the real estate market or something, and it was while feigning interest in whatever he was saying, that Carol decided that she was done thinking about it. And then she got to thinking: 'I wonder what John's doing now', and then she thought that the time for thinking was through and decided to get up and get out and find out for herself what John was doing now.

Tuesday, June 18th, 2024

The Quantum Division

ALBERT: Donnie... sir, do you have a moment?

DONNIE: I'm sure you remember my name, Albert

Donnie will be fine [*smiling*]

Yes, come on in

And speaking of people who can't remember names...

Someone told me that you and John had become good friends...?

ALBERT: Well... I'm not so sure

I'm not sure John cared much for having friends

DONNIE: Well, John is the one who told me...

ALBERT: Then sure... We were friends [*smiling*]

I think it would be a stretch to call John a good person...

but whether he'd like it or not, I think he was a good friend...

once you got past all the kicking and yelling, of course [*smiling*]

DONNIE: There is that [*smiling*]

So, what can I do for you Albert?

ALBERT: I want to resign from my position in Compliance

DONNIE: Do you not like working here anymore? [*a little surprised*]

ALBERT: I do! I don't have much prior experience to measure it by, but I
do like working here...

and that's part of the reason I want to apply for a new position here
[*smiling*]

DONNIE: Frank's old position?

ALBERT: Never that!

I like you and all sir... Donnie...

But if I may be frank...

pun intended...

you are going to have to find someone else to do your shitty work

DONNIE: Alright, alright...

You can't blame a man for trying, right...?

ALBERT: I want to continue Angela's research

... [*pause*]

I don't know how much John told you about it...?

DONNIE: Just the basics...

Social temperature measurements... More or less?

ALBERT: Well, yes, but I think it was a lot more than that

I respect the philosophy behind our compensation-policy
but...

this feels like such a cliche...

but money really isn't everything

I'm not entirely sure what Angela's reason for starting her research
to begin with was...

I wouldn't put it past her doing it simply because she was curious
and wanted to know...

actually, that would be my best guess...

but whatever the motivation, I feel like she discovered something
really valuable

DONNIE: ... [looking interested]

ALBERT: I compared data from the last 10 resignations, with the data
from Angela's experiments...

and in every case, Angela's data showed clear predictors up to 2
months before the date the resignation was handed in
and what I find most astonishing:

in 8 out of 10 cases... the person's Joy-of-Work could have been
significantly improved by simple and almost cost-free measures
Like these 2...

If they had swapped teams

- because the data suggests that they were both looking for a change
of assignments -

I don't think they would have left the company

DONNIE: Can I have a look at the data?

ALBERT: Of course [hands over the papers in his hand]

Donnie spends a couple of minutes reading through the pages.

DONNIE: So, what you are telling me is

As an example...

If this person... [turning a page over to point out to Albert what person he
is referring to]

who the data suggests was in need of 'excitement/danger'...
had, say...

been sent down to the basement to recover some more printer paper...

they might have had their craving for adventure satisfied and would
not have left...?

ALBERT: I would never suggest submitting anyone to that?... [looks shocked]

but you've got the general idea right [easing up]

DONNIE: OK... I'm not opposed to the idea...
but, if our employees want something from their job they are not receiving at the moment...
shouldn't we instead work on getting them to voice those desires...?
One might say, that there is taking care of your employees, and then there is babying them...? [looking questioningly at Albert]

ALBERT: One might indeed say that...
but that wouldn't change the fact that most people don't know what they want, much less what they need...

DONNIE: But you think you can work that out, and take care of it...
preemptively...
does that sum it up?

ALBERT: That's pretty on-the-spot sir... Donnie

DONNIE: Let's give it a try...
How does a trial period of 6 months sound, and then we evaluate...?

ALBERT: That sounds good

DONNIE: Good, but we need a name for this department...

ALBERT: I was thinking about, maybe: 'The Quantum Division'...?

DONNIE: Now you are pushing it, Albert! [looking stern]
I still hear talk around the office about Quantum-Man and some people look very nervous and/or self-conscious at the mention of him [easing up a bit]

ALBERT: Oh... You heard about that... [embarrassed]

DONNIE: EVERYBODY heard that!
Whatever else 'Quantum-Man' might be he's not exactly built for crawling around the ventilation system... [smiling overbearingly]

ALBERT: Sir, I was in a pretty unusual state...

DONNIE: Stop...
I know you weren't really to blame for the incident... [smiling]
Give the name a little thought...
I'm sure you'll come up with something that won't scare the living shit out of everyone

ALBERT: Thank you...

DONNIE: And then there is another somewhat delicate subject...
Hypothetically...
If, throughout your work
- that I have no doubt will be based on solid scientific principles -
you reach the conclusion...
that some of the women employed here, need something...
'unconventional'...
to increase their 'Joy-of-Work'...
and you subcontract someone in...
'to satisfy their needs'...

ALBERT: ... [looking borderline terrified]

DONNIE: You better make DAMN sure that the customer is satisfied!
... and you should probably expense it under 'Various Team-Building Activities'

ALBERT: Yikes... John told you about that?

DONNIE: As a matter of fact: no
My wife told me about it...
It seems that an unsung hero out there has made her two friends... both well past the retirement age... happier than they have been in years! [gesturing taking his hat off to Albert]
and just had to share his phone number...

ALBERT: ... [gesturing: 'Hey, what can you do?']

DONNIE: I guess you'll be wanting an office for the new department... And I'm just taking a wild swing here... Maybe somewhere in the basement...?

ALBERT: Oh God no!
Anywhere else...
Don't get me wrong...
I like the guy...
no wait... That's not quite right...
'I respect the guy?' [looking puzzled]
Maybe I sympathize with him...?
But I would NEVER want to have to work down there over an extended period of time

DONNIE: Ha ha ha... I can't say I blame you! [grinning]
I think having company was good for him...
He looks more alive than he has in years... but I certainly wouldn't want to make anyone sacrifice their sanity for that [smiling with understanding]
and... He can always request a desk up here if he wants to see people

ALBERT: On the topic of... HIM...
If you don't mind me asking...
What is the real reason he's still employed?
The rumors on that topic are... wild!
I have heard everything from:
'the entire building would blow up if he wasn't here to regularly reset the charges'
over 'we need him to regularly appease the IT Gods so our Production environment doesn't come crashing down'
to 'he is being kept as a sacrificial lamb to be thrown to the mob at the onset of the next shit-storm'

DONNIE: You guys didn't let him get access to explosives, did you? [looking very serious]

ALBERT: NO!...
We did have a close call one time...

He just kept babbling, and I was so close to breaking down... But NO! Never!

DONNIE: Well, then I think we are safe there for now...

The National Security Services are keeping a pretty close eye on him...

As for the expert exposure: we got rid of that one years ago...

He doesn't really have access to our Production environment...

but a rather outdated clone from a few years back...

we call it the 'Upside-Down-Prod'...

You know, like in that TV show...

we have someone scanning his environment regularly for interesting and useful developments that may be of use to the company...

and although there is never a lack of 'interesting'... the 'useful' part...

[gesturing 'not so much' with his hand]

I see it more as a social commitment...

There are so many crazies out there...

If we can keep one of them off the streets wreaking havoc...

and his shenanigans HAVE become somewhat of a tradition around here...

and we get a 95% refund from Social Services on his salary...

what's the harm really?

I'm not saying we won't throw him under the bus in case of a shitstorm...

Hmmm... I hadn't really thought about that... But the idea has something...

But I'm a little worried about what he might do to our public image...

even as someone who 'doesn't-work-here-anymore'...

No, I think we're just going to have to get rid of him 'silently' if he goes too far off in some direction...

Of course, when John worked here, one might have asked him to 'take care' of the problem...? [suggesting]

ALBERT: Forget about it, sir!

That's another shitty job I'm not going to do!

DONNIE: ... [gesturing 'you can't blame a man for trying, right?']

ALBERT: But... If push ever comes to shove...

And there is no other way than 'getting rid of the problem for good'...

Then, one might consider the idea of just GIVING him poison that will do the job and let nature run its course...

I'm not sure Nature would appreciate being mentioned in that context actually...

I'm fairly certain he wouldn't be able to handle finding a gram of fentanyl outside his office door...

but hey... What do I know? [winking]

DONNIE: Hmmm [looking pensive]



Wednesday, June 19th, 2024

After the Rain, Comes the Storm

Susan is looking troubled today. She is wearing sunglasses inside the building, and she hardly says a word unless someone directly addresses her. Most of her colleagues notice, but most of her colleagues feel they don't know her well enough to ask her about it. Ben, however, does not consider himself to be in the set of 'most of Susan's colleagues'. In fact: he is more than happy to have a reason to talk to Susan.

BEN: What's wrong Susan?

SUSAN: It's nothing

BEN: That's a bad cliche... Your sunglasses don't even cover the bruising around your eye completely

SUSAN: ... *[shaking, on the verge of crying]*

I'll tell you, but you HAVE TO promise me two things:

- You won't tell any of the others
- You won't make me go to the police if I don't want to

SUSAN: Do you promise?

BEN: I promise *[looking serious and concerned]*

SUSAN: I can't talk about it here

Can we go outside where people can't see us

BEN: Of course *[smiling comfortingly]*

DONNIE: Can I come in?

SUNE: You're the boss [vague smile]

DONNIE: ... [looking nervously around Sune's office]

SUNE: Quit with the damn paranoia... There's nothing here!

DONNIE: You can't blame me for taking precautions...

Last time I came down here, 'my wife' was hiring a couple of meth-heads to find and torture me...

very life-like [compliment]

SUNE: Yeah... That was a good one! [wipes a small tear from the corner of one eye]

Look, if you're here about my character-development program, you might as well..

DONNIE: ... [raises hand dismissively]

Wouldn't dream of it

The organization seems to have adopted the 'rite of passage' as a natural part of life...

'the bitter, that makes the sweet taste good'...

and as long as the effects are no worse than what can be cured by a couple of days off and a prescription for sedatives... [gesturing 'who am I to object?']

DONNIE: You were right about Albert

SUNE: HookerBoy! [not so much correcting Donnie, as correcting a trivial wrong in the world]

DONNIE: He did propose a continuation of Angela's research... Led by him

SUNE: Good for him!

What did you tell him?

DONNIE: I gave him six months to show results

SUNE: Which I am sure he will [smiling]

DONNIE: Me too...

but you were wrong about him wanting an office down here

SUNE: What a loser!

The boy lacks ambition [gesturing 'what can I say?']

DONNIE: Well...

Look, I really need to talk to you about another thing...

JOHN: I need to have a word with you Carol [*looking very stern*]

CAROL: Is something wrong? [*concerned*]

JOHN: Yes! [*looking very serious*]

CAROL: Is it about you and me?

JOHN: Yes... [*thinking*]

But not the way you think [*attempting a smile, not convincingly*]

CAROL: Whatever it is, can we at least talk about it outside?

I don't think I can handle it in here

JOHN: Actually, I think that would be for the best [*smiling, a little more convincingly*]

Carol is too old to even think stuff like 'the last 48 hours have been the best hours of my life', or so she tells herself, but if she's being honest with herself she can't think of any time in her life when she's felt so happy. And of course, something has come along to ruin it. 'No!' she tells herself. She shouldn't think like that! It's just her own stupid fears playing tricks on her. John had been right about everything he said the other day and she really DOES want a serious, committed relationship and she really wants it with HIM. And she has been true to her word on everything she has told him these last days... not that she had made a habit of lying to him before. Now, why does she feel like she's done something to upset him? Has something come out about her past that he didn't know about? NO! She knew that this would in some way or other come down to being a leap of faith, and she is determined to take it. With eyes open.

CAROL: I'm scared John. Will you hold my hand [*worried*]

JOHN: Of course [*smiling at her*]

DONNIE: Why did Frank do the things he did?

SUNE: It's hard to say

Some of what I am about to say is based on conjectures on my part,
while some of it is based on hard facts

At the end of the day, I think Frank was a small, rotten person and
I think he knew that better than anyone

A lot of people talk about karma like it's someone keeping score...
but it really isn't...

If anyone's keeping score, it's just yourself

It's more about 'takes one to know one' I guess

I think Frank saw the world through lenses shaped by his own rotten
actions

and he needed something to believe in

And that's where you and FinaLibre came in

In his mind, you were the sacred father figure he needed
and FinaLibre became his Holy Cause

DONNIE: Until I fell from grace...?

SUNE: Yes... Exactly that!

He went looking for something to replace a cause he no longer
believed in...

and at least to some degree, he found it...

but we'll get back to that...

Because he never forgave you for destroying his holy mission

He in fact hated you for it, and if there was one thing that drove
him during the last few years, it was his lust for vengeance
on you and FinaLibre

DONNIE: But why did he kill Angela if he wanted revenge on me?

Surely he could have found a way to get rid of me...

It's not like I keep any kind of security detail

SUNE: Most importantly: it wouldn't be enough

He wanted more than to just kill you...

He wanted to destroy everything you had worked to build

Which in his mind pretty much equated to FinaLibre

DONNIE: But just killing Angela wouldn't destroy FinaLibre

SUNE: No, that's right

There's a nasty little spin to this whole deal, but as I said: I'll get
back to that

Angela accidentally happened across something of Frank's worth
killing her for, in her desperation to get in contact with John:

Frank's access to a dark web society, of which both Frank and John
were members...

It may have been Frank's or it may have been Martin's...

I'm unsure on that part...

she in any case used the access credentials to post an anonymous
message on the society web page that John couldn't overlook

prompting him to show up for the job interview on May 22nd
Frank found out and promptly killed her

DONNIE: I'm afraid to ask because I fear that I already know the answer,
but:

this isn't over yet, is it? [*looking worried*]

SUNE: And I don't like telling you...

or even saying it out loud:

No, it's not over...

It's only just begun [*distant, looking worried*]

CAROL: What is it, John?

You are scaring me

JOHN: ... *[taking out a photo printout, that was tucked into the notepad he was carrying, handing the photo over to Carol]*

CAROL: Oh my God! I didn't do this John!

JOHN: I believe you, Carol! *[looking into her eyes with sincerity and comfort]*

But I'm afraid there's going to be a lot of people that won't believe you, and that puts you in grave danger

But if it's any comfort, I think I am in equally grave danger... *[sad smile]*

Let me tell you about a fucked up visit I had in my apartment last night

SUNE: Have you ever heard of the Banshee Bulletin?

DONNIE: No. What is it?

SUNE: It's a dark web bulletin board for... well, murderers

The one John and Frank were members of

You earn virtual currency by 'clearing marks' posted on the board

Meaning: someone will put up the details of a person and a reward in aforementioned virtual currency to go to the person that kills the mark

Only people who have directly killed someone may be put up on the board, and the poster needs to supply proof of the mark's crimes

The term 'proof' here, is interpreted a bit more lax than it is in most legal courts, but every submission is reviewed by the administrators of the site before it is made accessible to the users

On some occasions, the administrators will bend the rules a little and publish a reward for someone who has committed a specifically heinous sex crime even if he didn't murder anyone

The currency you earn can only be spent on the site to well...

order other murders

DONNIE: And people buy into this?

SUNE: Well, yes...

my estimate is, that the site has around 1.500 users spread out over Scandinavia, Germany, and the Benelux

DONNIE: Are people really so stupid that they can't see how this could be massively abused by the wrong kinds of people?

SUNE: Well, yes:

people are stupid

and of course: a lot of people aren't presented with a choice...

sometimes the people behind the Banshee Bulletin

- known simply as the Banshees -

will either catch someone in the act of killing or will uncover information and present the perpetrator with a choice:

join or die...

Even the people that join on their own accord, often forget to read the EULA: once you're in, you don't leave

If anyone discovers your identity...

well, you're a killer as well so...

DONNIE: So every user is automatically a mark?

SUNE: Yes. Exactly

And anyone who kills him will receive all of his virtual currency as a reward, and the crime will be covered up in the same manner that every other kill under the Banshee setup is

Failure to execute a job at least once every three months means your contact details automatically get published

DONNIE: Leaving the users to clean up after themselves. Jesus!

SUNE: I believe that's what happened to Jacob from Client Management

DONNIE: Who the hell is behind this?

I take it that international law enforcement must be in on it...?

SUNE: I can't see how it could work without at least some law enforcement personnel in on it...

but I don't think it takes that many...

DONNIE: And I bet there's someone working a money angle as well, right?

SUNE: Oh, most certainly

A lot of the people on the list are very influential people

CEOs, government officials, and so on

If I for instance was a big swinging CEO of some multinational company, and I wanted to acquire another company...

and I happened to find out that the CEO and some of his staff were on the list...?

I'm sure there are more creative ways to cash in, but I'm almost certain that someone is making a fuckton of cash somewhere out there

DONNIE: Alright... Hit me with the terrible news

SUNE: ... [*handing Donnie a photo printout*]

Do you remember this?

It's a pretty lifelike picture of you killing the fat kid

DONNIE: But I didn't kill him!

I opened my door, found him, thought I heard something, and picked up the hammer

SUNE: I'm pretty sure that was Frank driving you to pick up the hammer so he could catch that photo of you [*pointing at the photo*]

And I doubt very much that the photo would hold up in a court of law

But on the Banshee Bulletin, it's undeniable proof of guilt

About an hour ago, twenty new marks were published on the bulletin...

you were one of them, the 19 others all work at FinaLibre...

The so-called 'evidence' is akin to what you are holding in your hand...

some of it may be legit evidence...

I mean, there is probably a couple of real assholes working here, right?

but no doubt a lot of it is staged, if not downright forged

DONNIE: ... [*looking horrified*]

SUNE: And to make matters worse...

The average net user inflow to the Banshee Bulletin over the past year has been a very steady 5 users per week

This last week, 20 new users have joined

And I'm almost certain that most of those users are from within FinaLibre

DONNIE: Are you saying that up to 20 FinaLibre users have chosen to join this crazy operation?

SUNE: Not voluntarily!

But if Frank

- and I'm almost 100% certain Frank set this up before his death - was able to submit 20 people as marks, I'm sure he could have found some way around having 20 people enlisted as users as well...

If in no other way than by working the money angle with the Banshees

And I'm pretty sure Frank has been doing some recruiting over the past few years...

I am sure about Jacob, Lonnie, Leo, and Martin but there could be others

DONNIE: Jesus Christ!

So we may have 20+ employees in this building, all highly motivated to kill 20 other employees, AT THIS MOMENT?!

SUNE: That about sums it up [smiling]

DONNIE: Sune...

Are you on the list?

Are you one of the 20 'marks'...
or 20+ assassins in this?

SUNE: Well, yes and no...

I signed up about 2 and a half years ago...

I didn't know about Frank...

I was almost certain of John's membership, but the time never seemed right to bring it up until the very end [smiling satisfied]

Don't worry...

I just signed up out of FOMO...

You know how I always need to be on the bleeding edge of things...

Google+, Facebook...

all those social platforms

And I only ever kill real scumbags...

Child molesters and rapists...

But I'm a father, so I'm allowed to do that [gesturing 'it's nothing, believe me']

And I'm certainly not going to partake in any slaughter here...

Nope!

I'm FinaLibre all the way [proud smile]

Plus... I have a date with Valerie the Valkyrie, and I think this may be my ticket [ecstatic grin]

But we need to act fast Donnie...

I've been thinking about our options, and I think we stand a 50/50 chance of making it

but we need to act fast and bring everyone on board before anyone does anything... 'irreversible'...

BEN: I think we've gone far enough Susan [*smiling*]
What is it? Is it Brian? Did he hit you? [*worried, compassionate*]
SUSAN: Oh Ben... [*looking him into his eyes*]
I'm so sorry

Ben brings his right hand up to brush the tear away from the corner of Susan's cheek, as she rams a knife through his left eye socket. Ben lets out a terrible, primal scream of pain and Susan is surprised by her own resolve and will to stay alive, as she pulls the knife out of Ben's eye and stabs him repeatedly through the throat in order to shut him up, knowing that any proof of her involvement, could be really bad news for her.

SUNE: Yikes! [with an expression of 'that's not good... but it's not my fault boss!']

JOHN: It's starting! Look, I'm going 'all chips in', and anybody who's with me, I'm with them to the end...

I know there will be some who will break under the pressure, and maybe there will be a lot, and I guess I'll find out about that as I go...

But I need to know where YOU stand

CAROL: As I see it, I don't have a choice either way... I'm marked!

But even if I wasn't...

I stand with you! *[smiling, sincere]*

To BE CONTINUED
(PROBABLY)

ABOUT

THE AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

SUNE IS A CHILD OF THE EARLY 1980S AND GREW UP WITH HEALTHY MALE ROLE MODELS SUCH AS: ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, SYLVESTER STALLONE, BRUCE WILLIS, JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME, AND A WHOLESOME FEELING OF NEVER QUITE MEASURING UP. SUNE HAS SINCE THE START OF THE 2010S WORKED WITH IT IN THE NORTHERN EUROPEAN CAPITAL MARKETS SECTOR, PRIMARILY WITH NET ASSET VALUATION OF INVESTMENT FUNDS. SUNE IS INDEED DIVORCED FROM A VERY PATIENT WOMAN AND IS THE FATHER OF A SMART AND BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER AND A SMART AND SWEET (THOUGH NO LONGER LITTLE) SON. THIS IS ABOUT THE EXTENT OF THE SIMILARITIES TO HIS BASEMENT PRANKSTER NAMESAKE. HE (PROBABLY) WOULDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH 100 KG OF FERTILIZER.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER:

- HUNTER S. THOMPSON: *HELL'S ANGELS*
- ERNEST HEMINGWAY: *FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS*
- SIR TERRY PRATCHETT: *DISCWORLD - THE WEE FREE MEN*
- JAMES ELLROY: *THE BLACK DAHLIA*
- FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY: *THE IDIOT*
- DOUGLAS ADAMS: *THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY*
- HARUKI MURAKAMI: *HARD-BOILED WONDERLAND AND THE END OF THE WORLD*

ATTRIBUTIONS

ANIMATIONS:

- VECTEEZY: [HTTPS://WWW.VECTEEZY.COM/FREE-VIDEOS/](https://www.vecteezy.com/free-videos/)
- PEXELS: [HTTPS://WWW.PEXELS.COM/VIDEO/](https://www.pexels.com/video/)

