

CHAPTER 0: TOMORROWLAND

"Tomorrowland Weekend! Where the Big Bang never happened! You are awaited at Tomorrowland Weekend!"

Carnival barking isn't my style so I paid a bloke to shout this stuff for me.

"Tomorrowland Weekend! No suffering! No hunger! No politics! No war!"

Some of my other employees were putting up the new sign that read "Tomorrowland" and taking down the old sign that read "The Gathering." The Gathering was this annual event in the California desert where people came from all over the world to meet up with family and friends. This year I'd paid for the whole thing myself and jazzed it up to look like a parallel universe where the apocalypse never happened.

"Tomorrowland Weekend! The shoes have shoelaces. The cars have guzzoline. The streets are paved with asphalt! You must have a Firebuddy and a costume to enter."

The Firebuddy was a "lappy" computer I'd invented. I called it a "lappy" cuz it was small enough to fit in your lap. It was Firebuddy sales that had paid for this whole event.

As for the costumes well my plan was that we would all dress up in our best prewar outfits. And instead of camping in boring old tents we'd build

little office buildings and flower shops and libraries and stuff. We were gonna momentarily recreate the feeling of living in a world that was beautiful and boring.

People loved the idea. Hundreds of people were lined up at the gate and I was the gatekeeper.

The next festival attendee waiting in line was an impeccably dressed man. Suit and tie and hat and briefcase. It had been 38 years since the Big Bang so I was sure it had been that long since I'd seen someone dressed up that nice. I remembered being a kid and seeing my dad off to work and he'd be dressed like that.

"What are you dressed up as?" I asked.

"I'm an insurance salesman" he said. "Hi. How are you. How are the wife and kids? Can I interest you in a policy of insurance?" He handed me his business card.

"Nailing it. Where'd you get the suit?"

"Found it in a bunker."

"Far out." I said.

Next guy had on a red hat and a yellow coat. He carried an axe. He offered me a metal bucket full of coins for a Firebuddy but I was more interested in that axe.

"Nice fireman gettup. That axe is in great shape."

"The head's a little loose" he said. He handed it to me so I could take a closer look.

"Looks good to me. Wanna keep your shrapnel and barter me this instead?"

He took me up on the deal and handed me his business card.

A woman in a homemade police officer uniform was next. She looked at me accusingly. "Have you being doing crimes?"

"Crimes against humanity" I replied.

"Remain silent!" she ordered. She handed me a frame holding a torn and stained twenty dollar bill pressed between two sheets of clear plastic.

"You don't have coins?" I asked.

"This is all I've got."

"You're gonna have to take it out of there. And you're not getting any change."

She borrowed my axe to break open the frame. "Head's a little loose" she said.

I took another look at the axe and shrugged. She handed me her business card.

The business cards went into my Pac Man lunchbox. The money went into my Six Million Dollar Man lunchbox. Both were overflowing.

One person was dressed as a race car driver. Another was a movie star. There was a baseball player and a chef and a nun. There was even a thief but to me she looked more like the

Hamburglar.

The prewars were living out their stolen childhood dreams. The postwars were dreaming of a world they'd never known.

The next customer in line was a teenage girl. She asked "Are you Firebird?"

She had a lovely Australian accent. It was nice to hear an Aussie again. When I was a little tacker I lived in the USA. But when the Big Bang happened my family was visiting Australia so I ended up stuck there for 25 years. I kinda missed the place.

"Used to be" I said. "But my Firebird was smashed to bits. I might have to change my name."

"What do you drive now?"

"77 Ford Pinto."

"Ok Pinto" she said. "Will you sign my book?" She handed me a copy of a book I'd written last year called *Awaited: Nonfictional Delusion*. "Make it out to Torkdown."

"Dorktown?"

"Torkdown."

"To Dorktown" I read aloud as I wrote. "Love Pinto."

"How can I get to Tomorrowland?" she asked.

"Buy a Firebuddy" I told her. "And get a costume. What are you supposed to be? A

homeless orphan? You can't wear that here. It breaks immersion."

"Not Tomorrowland Weekend" the girl said. "The real Tomorrowland. Like in your book."

My book was about a world called Tomorrowland. Tomorrowland was just like our world except that in Tomorrowland the Big Bang never happened. A lot of people read that book and got it into their heads that Tomorrowland was a real place you could go and visit. That's what gave me the idea for Tomorrowland Weekend. It would be a chance for us all to live in the world I'd written about. A place to make history and a place to make the future.

"You gotta buy a Firebuddy." I repeated. "You gotta dress up. Then I let you in. While you're in there you might teleport into the real Tomorrowland just like in my book. Or you might just end up camping for a few unremarkable days. No guarantees. Are you buying a Firebuddy or what?"

"I don't have any money" she said.

"Hunkidory!" I shouted.

My hired macho man appeared.

"Take her to the highway. Let her hitchhike back to Australia."

At that moment a skirmish broke out in line and me and Hunkidory got distracted. The girl ran

off.

The race car driver and the movie star I mentioned earlier had knives in their hands and they had the baseball player on the ground. He was unarmed. They'd already cut him up good and they were about to finish the job.

"Show us what he looks like on the inside!" somebody shouted.

But then someone else shouted "No fighting at the Gathering except for in the Cage!"

The fighting paused and all eyes turned to me. I wasn't a fan of the Cage but it was pretty much an institution at this point. The Cage was where instead of fighting in the streets you'd lock two people in a ring together and let them have it out.

"It's not the Gathering anymore" I said. "It's Tomorrowland Weekend. But the rule still applies."

"You don't understand" the race car driver explained. "He's the president of the Hellies!"

Someone shouted "Kill all Hellies!"

I turned to Hunkidory. "What's a Helly?"

Hunkidory grunted.

The movie star said "We're not inside the Gathering yet. The rules don't apply." She pointed to some orange tape I'd nailed to the ground to mark the boundaries of the event.

I had to think fast if I didn't want a dead body

stinking up the line. I went over to the tape on the ground and pulled it up and away from the entrance gate. I unspooled some more tape and walked it around them and back to the gate. I put some more nails in the ground to hold the tape in place. The three wankers were now within the boundaries of the event.

"Welcome to Tomorrowland Weekend" I said.

"See you in the Cage Helly" the race car driver said to the baseball player. He threw his business card at me.

His card read "Kill All Hellies! Dr. Freeky Freedums. President Of The Gillies."

"What's a Gilly?" I asked Hunkidory.

Hunkidory grunted.

The baseball player got up. "You did the right thing. Welcome to the winning side of history." He gave me his business card.

"I'm not on any side of history" I replied.

His business card was covered in blood. It read "Death to Gillies! Count Bartholomew Bubury. President Of The Hellies."

Later that night hundreds of people stood outside the Cage screaming and cheering and banging on the fence. It was my job to step into the center of it all and give a speech to get everyone riled up.

"Welcome to the first ever Tomorrowland

Weekend!" I shouted into the microphone.

The crowd went wild.

"You've come from all over the world to be here tonight. Some of us are here to find them we're looking for and them we've lost. Some of us are here to have a good time. Some of us are here to make money. But every one of us is here because we wanna build a better tomorrow!" I paused for a big cheer but didn't get one.

"Death to Gillies!" someone shouted.

"Kill all Hellies!" someone retorted.

They all started shouting back and forth and I had to shout into the microphone again to get them to shut up.

"Death comes soon enough!" I said. "It doesn't matter if you're a Helly or a Gilly. What matters is that we are all Tomorrowlanders!"

A bottle flew at me from a random direction. It was time to give these primates what they wanted.

"Dollars to wingnuts every one of us here tonight has killed someone at some point in our lives. But here in the Cage we kill each other in a civilized manner!"

Now the crowd was getting worked up again.

"Tonight's Cage match is not just any Cage match. It's a battle between two presidents. In this corner we have Count Bartholomew Bubury.

President Of The Hellies!"

Half the crowd cheered and half the crowd booed.

"And in this corner we have Dr. Freeky Freedums. President Of The Gillies!"

Half the crowd booed and half the crowd cheered.

I handed swords to both of them and got out of there. I handed the microphone to my carnival barker.

"You're not gonna stay and watch?" he asked.

"I'm trying to retain my humanity" I said.

"Good luck with that."

I went back to my trailer and fired up my Firebuddy. Now if you don't have a Firebuddy let me explain what you're missing.

Firebuddies connect with other computers to form a computer network. On the network you can communicate with friends and strangers. You can teach or learn. You can create or consume. You can build a "netsite" to manipulate data in any way you can imagine.

I'd built a "social network" called You Are Awaited. People could share pictures and news articles and comment on them. It started out friendly and positive. But lately things had changed. People had started posting things like "If you're a Helly we can't be friends" and

"Gillies should be lined up and shot."

This wasn't like the old days of Democrats vs. Republicans. I once saw footage of Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley debating. They hurled some insults at each other but for the most part they used big words and behaved like grownups. The Hellies and the Gillies explicitly eschewed intellectualism and had instead decided to be angry at each other in the stupidest ways possible.

Now I know a lot of you readers out there are Hellies and Gillies and I know you care a lot about your cause. And I ain't saying your cause ain't just. I know ideas have consequences and sometimes those consequences are life and death. And I'm sure somewhere people are debating these ideas rationally and if you're doing that then good for you.

But my You Are Awaited topic promotion algorithm hadn't sparked reasoned debate. It highlighted the differences between people. Rather than working out those differences people just decided they hated anyone who wasn't on their side.

Ideas that seem obvious to half of humanity can terrify and infuriate the other half. The algorithm promoted discussions of topics like these simply because it noticed people were more engaged in these discussions. My algorithm had

radicalized both sides and no one was listening to each other.

The Hellies and Gillies weren't just doomed to repeat history. They were downright excited about it. My dream of bringing humanity together had ended up tearing it in half.

CHAPTER 1: DORKTOWN

I answered a knock at the door. It was that girl Dorktown.

"You again? Hunkidory!" I shouted.

"No wait!" she said. "I have a Firebuddy now. Hunkidory let me in." She showed me her Firebuddy.

"I thought you didn't have any money."

"I don't."

"How did you get a Firebuddy?"

"Somebody gave me one."

"You still look like a homeless orphan."

"You're very insightful" she said. "What are you supposed to be? What's with the cowboy hat and leather jacket?"

"I'm a software engineer named John Binns attending a festival called Wasteland Weekend where we celebrate the apocalypse."

She laughed. It was a reference to my book. I mean my name really is John Binns but if your name translated to Potty Wastebaskets you'd change it too. So I go by Firebird.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I have a surprise for you."

"I hate surprises."

"A friend of yours is here to see you."

"I don't have any friends."

"Yes you do. You wrote about him in your

book. But Hunkidory won't let him in."

I thought about everyone I'd written about in my book. After all these years there was one person I still wondered about. One person I always hoped to see at the Gathering someday. One person whose name I hoped I would never see on the Gathering's memorial wall.

Could it be Messenger Kid?

"All right let's go" I said.

When we stepped outside I looked over at the Cage. Spectators had climbed up the sides and onto the top. The entire structure was rocking back and forth. The crowd hooted and hollered like animals. Hopefully tonight this Hellies and Gillies stuff would be decided once and for all and I'd never have to hear about it again.

We headed away from the Cage and toward the entrance gate. The light at the gate was out and Hunkidory was trying to fix it. All I could see was the silhouette of a man who was definitely not Messenger Kid. We were just a few feet away when the light suddenly flickered on and lit up his face.

"G'day mate!" said a maniacal grinning mohawked head.

I leaped back in terror and fell to the ground. "Jesus frigging Crimean Peninsula" I said.

"I found Bruce!" Dorktown said proudly.

Yeah his real name was Bruce but I referred to him as Mohawk Asshole. Pardon my language. Mohawk Hineyhole. The name is kinda stupid but I gave it to him when I was ten years old so what can I say. He got his first name cuz he had a mohawk. He got his last name cuz he killed my family. And if you're wondering how I got my name it's cuz after Mohawk Hineyhole did all that stuff I stole his Stellar Blue 1975 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am and drove it around for a couple decades.

I got up off the ground and pulled out my FP-45 Liberator. I twisted the cocking knob into place and stuck it in Mohawk Hineyhole's face. It was a crap gun and it only held one shot but one shot was all I'd need.

"No fighting at the Gathering except for in the Cage" he said calmly.

Dorktown grabbed my arm. "What are you doing? I thought you two were best mates now." She got out her book and started flipping through the pages.

I was beginning to tire of people treating my book like gospel just because it had the word "nonfictional" in the title. But it was people taking my book seriously that had made this whole festival possible. And Dorktown was sort of right. At the end of that story I'd refrained from

killing Mohawk Hineyhole because we'd become friends in a roundabout way.

I put the gun away. "It's Tomorrowland Weekend" I said. "And you're not allowed in."

"I'm already in" he said. He pointed at the tape on the ground that I'd relocated earlier that day.

Ok he had a point. "Dammit Hunkidory" I said.

Hunkidory looked at the tape and grunted.

"We're going back to my trailer to catch up. Don't let in any more psychotic killers."

"There goes all your customers" Dorktown said.

"Don't you want his autograph too?" I asked Dorktown.

"Already got it" she replied.

To make things weirder Mohawk Hineyhole was wearing a tuxedo. "What are you supposed to be anyway?" I asked.

"I'm a millionaire at a fundraiser for the reelection of president Ronald Reagan" he said.

I sat the two of them down in my trailer and shut the door.

"What do you two want?" I asked.

They both started blabbering.

I pointed at Mohawk Hineyhole. "You first."

"Thought I'd pay you a visit. Have a cuppa

tea."

"I appreciate the buddy buddy act" I told him. "But we both know it's an act."

"All right then" he said. "Give me my car back and I won't tell anyone your secret."

Dorktown looked at me. "What's your secret?"

I ignored her. I reached into my jacket pocket and took out the Firebird's VIN plate. I tossed it to him. "That's all that's left of the car."

He looked at the VIN plate. We both knew it by heart. 2W87W5N565657. He started reading aloud but he wasn't reading the letters and numbers. He was decoding them. He remembered what the letters and numbers meant. He'd loved that car as much as I had. "Pontiac. Trans Am. 2 door coupe. 455 cubic inch 4 barrel V8. 1975." He paused and looked up before decoding the letter "N."

"They ain't never gonna make another car like that again" I said.

"Why not?" Dorktown asked. "Why not make a new Firebird?"

I looked at Dorktown. I looked at Mohawk Hineyhole.

"Norwood" he said. He got up so fast he knocked over his chair. He ran out the door and started yelling at whoever would listen and also at

whoever would not listen.

"There is no Tomorrowland!" he shouted. "John's book is a lie! Tomorrowland doesn't exist!"

"That's the secret?" Dorktown asked. "Nobody can swap timelines?"

At this point I should probably clarify that the reason Tomorrowlanders all believed they could come to this event and teleport into an alternate universe known as Tomorrowland did indeed have something to do with the book I wrote. In the book I claimed it was possible for people to swap places with doppelganger versions of themselves living in a nonapocalyptic alternate timeline called Tomorrowland. I claimed I'd visited Tomorrowland on multiple occasions. I claimed Mohawk Hineyhole had vanished into Tomorrowland and left here in his place a friendly Mr. Rogers version of himself I called Bruce who was now my best mate.

But none of that stuff was true. It was all just advertising. I was selling futuristic computers. I never expected anyone would actually believe the computers came from the future.

"Nobody can swap timelines" I said.

"So that was Mohawk Asshole?" she asked. "Not Bruce?"

"Correct."

Dorktown stood up. "Tomorrowland doesn't exist?"

"It exists in our hearts."

"I came all the way around the world for this."

"Tomorrowland is the friends you made along the way."

"Fuck you" she said. "I'll kill him with or without you." She stormed out.

I followed her out and grabbed her by the arm.

"Kill who?" I asked.

A rising tide of crowd noises emanated from the direction of the Cage. I turned to look. It was covered top to bottom with people and the entire structure was leaning to one side.

"I'd tell you if you'd listen to me for one bloody second" Dorktown said.

I turned to look her in the eye. "Why are you here Dorktown?"

"My name is Torkdown." She held my gaze with fire in her eyes. "And I'm here to kill Mohawk Asshole."

"Why?"

"He killed my pop."

"Who was your pop?"

"You used to call him Messenger Kid."

Just then there was a loud crack and a massive ground-shaking smash followed by terrified

screams. The Cage had collapsed. I felt the heat of an explosion behind me and Dorktown's face lit up orange. But neither of us turned. Neither of us blinked.

Now let me explain who Messenger Kid is. Or should I say let me explain who Messenger Kid was. I refuse to write a flashback cuz time moves forward in a linear fashion. I ain't saying I'm happy about that. Especially when it comes to Messenger Kid. But if that's how time moves then stories should move that way too. Anyway back when the world went to the dogs I found myself stuck in Australia. Aside from my girlfriend I had only one friend out there and that friend was Messenger Kid. Messenger Kid was mute but like they say actions speak louder. He was the kind of friend who'd risk everything for you and not think anything of it. He carried a Bugs Bunny doll around with him everywhere and he'd pull the string on it and it would say phrases and sort of talk for him. The last time we saw him we were having a little dustup with Mohawk Hineyhole. Messenger Kid dropped his Bugs Bunny doll and I've been carrying it with me ever since. I was hoping I'd be able to return it to him someday.

"You came here for my help?" I asked Dorktown.

"I thought we had to get Bruce to swap

timelines to bring Mohawk Asshole back from Tomorrowland."

"Bruce and Mohawk Hineyhole are the same person" I said.

"Then I'm gonna go kill Bruce."

"James Bond once said 'Before setting out on revenge you first dig two graves.'"

"I'll dig as many graves as it takes" she said.

"Are you gonna help me out or what?"

"I had a chance to kill him once."

"Page 129. Why didn't you?"

I couldn't think of any more cool James Bond quotes so I let her go. Dorktown whipped her head around and vanished into the darkness.

Darnit. I should have said "Sit by the river long enough and you'll see the body of your enemy go floating by." Not actually a James Bond quote but Sean Connery might have said it once.

I looked over at the Cage. Or what used to be the Cage. It was now a heap of wood and metal and flames.

I grabbed my axe and found my carnival barker. I asked him what was up.

"The Helly president killed the Gilly president" he explained. "Everyone went berserk and the whole thing fell down. I think we just started a war." Then he ran off.

I turned around and quickly figured out why

he left in such a hurry. Closing in on my left and right were two gangs of monsters dressed as squares. The Hamburglar led the group on the left. The police officer led the group on the right. There were secretaries with torches and farmers with pitchforks and yodelers with nunchucks.

"Death to Gillies!" one side chanted.

"Kill all Hellies" the other side replied.

I tightened my grip on the axe and headed right down the center of this nightmare gauntlet. The two fronts went to war and I was stuck in the middle.

An oaf slammed into me and knocked me down. Then I was crawling through the ruckus my hands and knees. "Pardon me" I said. "Coming through."

As soon as I'd escaped that fracas of foolishness I got up and took off running. Someone shouted "There he is! The guy who saved the Helly president!"

I ran to my trailer but I found it in flames. The fireman was lobbing molotovs. My entire inventory of Firebuddies was burning along with the one that I used every day.

I went around back and hopped into my Pinto Cruising Wagon. 171 cubic inch V6. The thing looked like sex on wheels but it drove like a moose on rollerskates. Silver with yellow and

orange and purple stripes. The paint was perfect cuz no one had the knackers to smash into it. Ford Pintos were famous for exploding on impact. Maybe it was just media hype but it kept the road warriors at bay.

I tried to get the Pinto started. I say tried cuz this car was no Firebird. It had one third the torque. One third the horsepower. And took three times as many tries to get it started.

The angry Tomorrowlanders heard me cranking the Pinto. They came running around back and surrounded the car.

An astronaut used their helmet to headbutt the side glass. The well-dressed bloke who'd tried to sell me an insurance policy climbed onto the bonnet and banged his briefcase on the windscreen. The fireman set the Pinto on fire. I was concerned it might explode but as you can see this page has more words on it so that obviously didn't happen yet.

The engine finally turned over. I floored it and managed to shake off the insurance guy.

Tomorrowlanders were running in every direction. I headed for the main gate. My brand new Tomorrowland sign was on fire and a gaggle of radical librarians was rocking the scaffolding back and forth trying to pull it down.

The movie star was shouting at Hunkidory.

While he was distracted a scary looking deep sea diver in one of those old hard shelled diving suits grabbed the Six Million Dollar Man lunchbox with all my money in it and waddled away. Hunkidory went after him but the movie star tripped him.

As I neared the gate the sign scaffolding finally gave way and started tipping. I stomped on the throttle but the Pinto bogged down. Yeah that darned car actually slowed down when you stepped on the throttle. I just could not get that carburetor adjusted right. I lifted my foot up on the pedal and barely made it through the gate in time to look in the mirror and see my beautiful new sign smashing to the ground. A few burning boards bounced off the roof of the Pinto but fortunately it still did not explode.

I stopped the car and got out. I'd put everything I had into this event. Now the whole thing was up in flames. I guess I should have bought that insurance policy.

I'd tried to build a new world but they'd burned down the new world just like they'd burned down the old one.

I heard someone to my left kickstarting a motorbike.

I heard someone to my right calling for help.

I looked to my left. The deep sea diver with

my lunchbox full of coins was about to escape on a Honda CR250M Elsinore just like the one Steve McQueen used to ride.

I looked to my right. Dorktown was trapped under the burning Tomorrowland sign.

I looked left again. I looked right again.

Dagnabbit.

The deep sea diver rode off on his motorbike as I chopped away at the burning sign with my axe.

CHAPTER 2: BAKERSFIELD

As the sun came up me and Dorktown and Hunkidory surveyed the ruins. There was nothing left of Tomorrowland Weekend.

Me and Dorktown said goodbye to Hunkidory. I promised him there'd be a job waiting for him in Norwood if we got the factory up and running.

I borrowed Dorktown's Firebuddy to send a message to someone who might help us.

He didn't just borrow it. He's writing this whole damn book on my Firebuddy. That means I can help write it!!

Stop it Dorktown.

We took the Pinto to the Woolworth's diner in Bakersfield and ordered some brekky.

"What are we sitting around for?" Dorktown asked. "Mohawk Asshole could be in Norwood by now."

"Do you even know where Norwood is?" I asked. I turned to look at the entrance.

Dorktown followed my gaze. "Oh my god!" she said. "Is that her?" She ran to the door.

"Are you Mad Skelli?" she asked. "Can I have your autograph?"

Mad Skelli had agreed to meet us for breakfast. She was my girlfriend back in Australia. Here in the USA I was still trying to

figure out what she was. One thing I knew for sure was that she was my biggest competitor. She sold computers known as DingoDongles.

Skelli sat down with us and signed Dorktown's book. "Isn't she a bit young for you?" she asked.

"She's not my girlfriend" I said.

"I'm his mission partner" Dorktown said.

"She's the president of my fan club" I said.

"And its only member" Skelli quipped. "What do you want?"

"I need to borrow some money" I said.

"You're the world's first postapocalyptic millionaire. Why do you need to borrow money from me?"

"You're the world's second postapocalyptic millionaire. Who else am I gonna borrow it from?"

"What do you need it for?"

"Tomorrowland Weekend went up in flames."

Dorktown interrupted us. "Fuck Tomorrowland Weekend. Mohawk Asshole killed my pop. My pop was your friend. You called him Messenger Kid."

Skelli looked at Dorktown. "Mohawk Asshole killed Messenger Kid?"

"Yeah."

"You're Messenger Kid's... kid?"

"Yeah. And we're gonna kill Mohawk Asshole."

"She's gonna kill Mohawk Hineyhole" I said. "I'm trying to retain some semblance of humanity long enough to recommission one of the old Firebird factories."

Dorktown turned to me. "Do you know why Mohawk Asshole killed my pop?"

I thought about it for a moment. Then I figured it out. I looked down at the table.

"He was looking for you" she said.

When I got on a boat and returned to the USA thirteen years ago I left Skelli and Messenger Kid behind. They were the only people who knew where I'd gone. When Mohawk Hineyhole showed up here I didn't think about how he must have found me. But we never heard from Messenger Kid again.

"What do you need?" Skelli asked.

"Money to get to Norwood" Dorktown said. "And weapons to capture Mohawk Asshole."

"And money to reopen the factory" I added.

"I'll give you the money to get to Norwood" Skelli said to Dorktown. "You'll have to get your own weapons."

"And the Firebird factory?" I asked.

"Chew on me bloody minge" Skelli replied.

"I thought you two were in love" Dorktown

said.

Skelli turned to Dorktown. "First you said you were gonna kill him. Then you said you were gonna capture him. Which is it?"

"First the second. Then the first. We'll capture him and then we'll throw him out of a helicopter."

That was oddly specific. "Do you have a helicopter?" I asked.

"We'll have to borrow one."

"Do you know how to fly a helicopter?"

"I read a book about it."

I couldn't argue with her on that one. Reading old books is how I learned everything I know.

"Have you ever killed anyone?" Skelli asked.

"No but I've practiced bashing in the skulls of dead kangaroos" she said.

"Cracking skulls ain't all it's cracked up to be" Skelli said.

"You killed Fake Cop." Dorktown was referring to Skelli's ex who was also Mohawk Hineyhole's best mate.

"I did it to save a life. Not for revenge."

A man came to the table and asked if we were enjoying the food.

"Yes!" Dorktown said. "Are you the owner? I wanna ask you something." She got up and walked with him to the cash register. She touched his arm and giggled.

"Sweet kid" Skelli said.

"She's a psychopath" I replied.

Dorktown pointed at an old Barnett Wildcat crossbow that was hanging on the wall. The shop owner took it down and gave it to her. Then he reached under the counter and gave her a single arrow or "bolt" as they refer to them in crossbowland.

"I thought she didn't have any money" Skelli said.

"She doesn't."

Skelli paid for our meal and we went outside. She handed Dorktown a sack of coins. They exchanged a few words I couldn't hear. Then Skelli skedattled.

He forgot to mention that Skelli gave him a kiss goodbye. They're in love!!

Dorktown if you're gonna chime in at least give us some useful information. What did Skelli say to you?

She said "If you fuck him I'll smash your pretty little toes with a hammer."

Skelli definitely did not say that.

Dorktown put her new crossbow in the back seat of the Pinto. "Can I drive?" she asked.

"Nobody drives my car" I said.

"Norwood?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Van Nuys."

CHAPTER 3: VAN NUYS

Not many people have written books in the past 38 years. So nowadays every book that gets written sort of has to be a history book and a philosophy book and a survival book too. I'd be doing you a disservice if I didn't tell you what I know about how things got to be the way they are and offer you some ideas about how to get things back to the way they were.

I hope you're gonna spew on about economics again. That was my favourite part of the last book!!

You're being sarcastic aren't you Dorktown. Listen. Economics is more than just the study of how people spend money. It's the study of how people make choices. The choices we make change our lives and change the lives of those around us. The choices we make could save the world. So economics is the study of how to save the world. It's important. Stop messing up my story.

Our story.

Our story.

We're writing this book in what we call Year 38. The reason we call it Year 38 is cuz the Big Bang happened 38 years ago. The world used to be a much swankier place. I know cuz I was there. I'm a prewar. Mohawk Hineyhole was there

too. Skelli and Dorktown weren't. Skelli and Dorktown were postwars.

The Big Bang wasn't just a war. There were recessions and depressions. There were natural disasters and unnatural disasters. By the time it was all over the governments of the world had bombed themselves out of existence and taken 95% of humanity with them.

The Big Bang took away everything it could. But it couldn't take away our grit or guff or gumption or good old-fashioned American ingenuity.

The human brain has a thing called negativity bias. We focus on the bad stuff to ensure that threats don't get the better of us. Negativity bias made it easy for people like Howard Zinn to catalog all the things that the USA got wrong. Yeah I read that book and yeah I get it.

But I'll bet you a hundred bucks you don't know who Norman Borlaug is. Norman Borlaug was an American who saved a billion lives by inventing new strains of wheat that could feed the entire planet. A billion lives. If positivity bias were a thing we'd all be wearing t-shirts with pictures of Norman Borlaug on them.

When we look back at history it's easy to figure out what the USA got wrong. But the USA was the most prosperous country in history. So

what was it that the USA got right?

I'm gonna figure it out and I'm gonna use it to rebuild the world. I may be a moneygrubbing pig but I got dreams too. Who says you have to suffer and sacrifice? I'm gonna save the world. I'm gonna have a good time doing it. And I'm gonna make a heap of money to boot.

The Firebuddy is just the beginning. Someday there will be a Firebuddy that fits in your pocket. Someday we'll have skyscrapers and jets and rockets again. We'll have space stations in orbit and cities on the moon.

And shiny fucking Trans Ams with big fucking birds painted on the bonnets.

Don't even try to pretend like you don't want one.

I do want one!! Black with a pink bird. But can we get back to the fighting and killing now??

Ok. Where were we?

Van Nuys.

"Van Nuys?" Dorktown asked. "What the fuck? We have to get to Norwood."

"You blaspheme too much" I said.

"'Fuck' isn't blasphemy. It's obscenity."

"Then you use too many obscenities."

"Your book is chock full of obscenities" she said.

"Well my next book isn't gonna be."

"Why not?"

"We can't rebuild the world thinking and talking like savages."

Dorktown rewound and started over. "Ok. Van Nuys? What the fiddlesticks? We have to get to Norwood."

"Pontiac Firebirds were assembled in two locations" I explained. "Norwood Ohio and Van Nuys California. Norwood is all the way across the country. Van Nuys is only two hours away. Mohawk Hineyhole will be headed there first."

Dorktown got out her book again and started flipping through the pages.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"If we've got two hours then I've got questions. Were you pretending to swap timelines with John when Skelli found you at the Gathering in Year 35?"

"I didn't even see her that year."

She laughed. "You're a twat."

"Don't say that word."

"You're a twit."

"I'm a storyteller."

"No you're not. I know for a fact that half your book is true. I just don't know which half. Like at the end of the book you were held at gunpoint by the woman with the paperclip necklace. She blamed you for her husband's

death. She was gonna kill you. How did you escape?"

"I grabbed her gun and shot her."

"How did you find out what was on the film in your parents' safe?"

"There was never any film. But that really was the lullaby my mom used to sing to me."

"Close To You by The Carpenters" Dorktown said.

I pulled off at an old servo in Castaic that looked like it might still be in business. The joint was called Gallion's Corner. "We gotta get some petrol."

"No wait! I'm not done! How did Deadline get to Uranium Springs?"

I winked at her. Then I got out of the car and went in to look for signs of life.

Dorktown found my JVC RC-M90 boombox and Koss PRO-4A headphones in the back seat and tried them out. The JVC had a cassette in it that my dad made for me when I was a kid. It was a mixtape of live recordings of 70s rock performances. Dad used to travel around and go to shows and he would always come home with a prized bootleg.

I found a bloke inside who had some petrol to sell. "Fill her up" I said.

The bloke was checking out Dorktown. "With

pleasure" he said.

"I mean the car you yobbo. She's paying the bill so be nice to her. Where's the dunny?"

"Huh?"

"The restroom?"

"Around back."

I headed around the building and tugged on the door. Locked.

"Just a minute" a muffled voice said.

I paced around for a moment before I noticed the front wheel and fender of a motorbike peeking around from behind the building. Honda CR250M Elsinore. Just like Steve McQueen rode. It was the deep sea diver's bike.

The toilet flushed.

I found an old rusty shelving unit and pushed it up against the restroom door.

"Dorktown!" I shouted. "Dorktown!"

No response.

I ran back to the Pinto while the diver struggled to push his way out of the restroom. Dorktown was relaxing with her feet on the dash and listening to the music on the headphones. I snatched the headphones off her.

"It's him!" I said.

"Mohawk Asshole?" She turned around and went for her crossbow.

"No. The skag who stole my Six Million

Dollar Man lunchbox!"

"Lunchbox? Jesus. I'll buy you another lunch."

"My lunchbox full of money!" I tried to grab her crossbow but she held on tight.

"You have a gun. Go shoot him." She put the headphones back on.

I ran back to the door and leaned against it. I pulled out my Liberator and twisted the cocking knob so it was ready to fire.

When the door opened I pointed the Liberator at him. "Give me back my lunchbox you... chum dumpster!" I yelled.

Wait that's a good one. He just earned himself a nickname.

Chumdumper braced himself against the opposite wall and kicked the door as hard as he could. The shelving unit fell over with me under it.

He pushed his way out of the restroom. He had my lunchbox in his hand. He climbed on top of the shelving unit and trapped me under it.

I couldn't breathe.

"Help" I whispered.

I could see his ugly mug laughing through the thick glass of his helmet. I stuck the gun against his metal suit and pulled the trigger. The gun blew itself in half in my hand. I dunno where the bullet

went but it definitely didn't go into Chumdumpster.

He got up and kicked me in the face. It could have been worse. He had on a pair of red Adidas sneakers. I guess he hadn't been able find a cool pair of metal boots to match the rest of his outfit.

He tottered over to his bike and put my lunchbox into the saddlebag. He came back with a rope. He tied one end of the rope to my ankle. He tied the other end to his bike. He got on and started it up.

He pulled away slowly to tighten up the slack. He stopped and turned to look at me. Then he revved the engine and pulled away hard. He yanked me out from under the shelves and dragged me across the car park. The bike turned onto the road and picked up speed.

I curled into a ball and positioned the edge of my foot on top of the rope so I could crush it under my foot. The rope started smoking. The road surface burned through my shoelace and my shoe and my sock and then it started burning through my skin too.

Finally the rope snapped. I slid into a ditch and Chumdumpster rode off.

My shoe was mostly destroyed and my shoelace was gone. I found a twist-tie on the road and used it to fasten a couple of my shoe's eyelets

together. I limped back to the servo with blood all over me.

Dorktown looked up and took off the headphones.

"How'd you go killer?" she asked.

"Why didn't you come after me?"

"You told me never to drive your car."

"You can drive my car if it's an emergency."

"Me drive Pinto! Me drive Pinto!"

"Only in an emergency. And there aren't going to be any more emergencies."

I got in the car and started it up. I paused and turned to face her. "If you do drive this car don't run into anything."

"Why not?"

"Pintos are famous for exploding."

"Exploding car. Got it."

"What are you listening to?" I asked.

She read from the cassette box. "Rolling Stones. Shattered. Live in Fort Worth 1978."

"Did you know Keith Richards survived the Big Bang? Last I heard he was still alive."

"Who's Keith Richards?" she asked.

I smiled and reached over to unplug the headphones. We rocked out together cruising through the mountains of southern California.

When we arrived in Van Nuys we noticed some folks setting up a flea market in a vacant

lot. We stopped to check out their wares and see if we could get any information about the factory.

One coot had heaps of carburetors piled up in several shopping trolleys. I introduced myself.

"G'day. I'm Firebird. This is Dorktown."

"Tex Phoenix" he said.

"Nice to meet you Tex Phoenix." I popped the bonnet. "You got a carb that will fit on my V6?"

"This ain't much of a Ford town. But I got one that might do the trick."

While he was digging up the carburetor I grabbed two pieces of Bubble Yum from my pocket. I put one in my mouth and tossed the other one to Dorktown. She unwrapped it and put it in her mouth and chewed. Her eyes lit up in delight. Then she promptly swallowed it.

Tex showed me the carb. It had clearly been rebuilt with care. Clean as a whistle. New hand-cut gaskets and everything.

"You built this?" I asked.

"Yessirree."

"Mind if I try it out?"

"You go right ahead."

I got to work putting it on. "Do you build anything else?"

"I'll build you a whole engine if you like."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"Dang near fifty years. I used to work at the

GM plant before the Big Bang. We all did." He gestured at the others.

"That's where we're headed" I said. "Can you give us directions?"

"It's just a few blocks thattaway. But you don't want to go there now."

"What do you mean?"

"It used to be our shop. I had a nice turbo V8 all put together and ready to sell. Yesterday a fopdoodle with a mohawk and a gollumpus in an old timey dive suit walked in acting like they owned the joint. They took my V8 and kicked us all out."

"Why'd they kick you out?" I asked.

"They wanted us to help them make cars. That got our attention. We've been dreaming of reopening that place for years. So we asked how much they were gonna pay us. They said first we had to contribute to a startup fund. We had to pay them to have a job. Then later we'd all share the profits. If there were any profits. We told them to go suck eggs."

"We wanna build cars there too" I explained. "We'll have jobs for you if you want them. Real jobs with paychecks. If not here then in Norwood."

Several other former factory workers overheard our conversation and joined us. One of

them spoke up for the group.

"I'm Rosie" she said. "We all like the idea of jobs and paychecks. But we're getting older. Some of us can't do the jobs we used to do."

"You'll be the managers" I said. "The trainers. The planners. We'll get some macho men and macho women to do the heavy lifting."

"Who keeps the profits?" Rosie asked.

"There most likely won't be any profits."

"But if there are?"

"I make the plans and I take the risks. If there are losses I'll pay them. And if there are profits I'll keep them."

"What if we want a share of the profits?"

I was starting to suspect that she used to be the union boss back in the old days. "I'll give you a cut of the profits but the paychecks will be smaller" I offered.

The group mulled it over for a moment.

"We don't like that idea" she said.

"I don't like it either" I said. "That's how we know we've met in the middle." I held out my hand.

She talked with her compatriots for a moment then turned and shook my hand.

They muttered excitedly. One of them opened up a Firebuddy and started speaking into a microphone handset about the possibility of the

factory reopening. I'd never seen someone use a Firebuddy like that.

I designed the Firebuddy to be a machine that you could build upon. That was the beauty of it. It was a general purpose computer. You could add your own hardware and software and give it new abilities that I never would have thought of.

"Excuse me" I said. "What's that you have connected to your Firebuddy?"

"I call it the Citizen's Buddy" she said. "It's a CB radio only digital. It can use the digital network to hop over gaps in the analog one and it can use the analog network to hop over gaps in the digital one. So messages can travel farther. The other day I was able to relay a message all the way to Albuquerque."

Let me explain something to you postwar out there. Back in the 70s everyone thought truck drivers were really cool. And all those truckers had CB radios. So in the 70s everyone bought CB radios. My parents even had one in their station wagon. After the Big Bang all the copper wire infrastructure was out of commission but a lot of people still had working CBs. So they're still one of the best ways to keep in touch.

"If I had any money I'd buy one" I said.

"If I had any left I'd sell you one" she replied.

"What's your name?"

"Qwerty."

"It's an honor to meet you Qwerty. I'm Firebird."

She laughed. "The inventor of the Firebuddy? The honor is all mine."

I took leave of Qwerty and dragged Tex away from the chattering group.

"Are there enough parts left in the factory to build any cars?" I asked him.

"There are some motors and subframes sitting around. Lots of body panels. Not enough parts to make a complete car. But you could probably get some kind of frankencar up and running."

I put the air cleaner back on and started up the Pinto.

"Carb sounds great. What do I owe you?"

"Put it in my first paycheck" Tex said. "If you survive."

"Survive?" I asked.

"They said they'd cut off our heads if we didn't leave town."

"Cut off your heads?" I laughed. "Really?"

Just then a deuce-and-a-half turned a corner and headed toward the plant. The deuce was towing a trailer behind it. Built onto the trailer was an actual goshdarn guillotine.

"Do you need a ride out of here?" I asked.

"We ain't going nowhere" Tex said.

The deuce had a bunch of floozies riding in the back. They were all giving us the stinkeye as they went by. I call them floozies cuz no matter their gender or race or age every one of them had on a ridiculous blonde wig. I will dub them the Flirty Dozen.

"Now listen" Tex continued. "There's a blondie just like those varmints standing guard out front. But you don't have to go in the front." He reached into his pocket and handed me a single key on an old GM keychain. "This here key opens up the fire exit on the side of the main building."

"We'll go in tonight" I said. "We need somewhere to hole up until then."

"If you head southeast to Burbank there's a little place called the Safari Inn" he said.

When we arrived at the inn the sky had yellow and orange and purple stripes going all the way across it just like my Pinto.

The motel pools are all empty nowadays so I grabbed my skateboard. I set my board on the edge of the pool and dropped in. I immediately slammed into a puddle of muck.

I heard Dorktown laughing at me. I looked up and saw her sitting on the edge of the pool with her legs dangling.

I was in me undies.

Yes you were. But I don't want them to think of you that way.

I don't mind.

Yes but you have more to offer than that.

Anyway Dorktown had my tape player with her. She pressed play. Bruce Springsteen. Rosalita Come Out Tonight. Live in Phoenix 1978. Four different women stormed the stage that night.

I dropped into the pool again. I pulled off a couple grabs and even a little grind. I always skate better when I have someone to show off for.

I climbed out of the pool and grabbed a couple more pieces of Bubble Yum. We popped them in our mouths. Dorktown swallowed hers again after chewing for just a minute.

"That's not how you do it. Watch."

I blew a bubble as big as Dorktown's head. Her eyes widened in amazement and she smiled. And the smile she gave me wasn't the smile she used when she wanted to get something from you. This smile was real and radiant and I never wanted it to end.

"Let me try let me try!" she pried the gum out of my mouth. She chewed it a bit. She tried to blow a bubble but she just spat the gum into my face.

Cute story but it ain't gonna stay that way.

When we got back to the room I set the alarm

for 2:30am. Dorktown promptly fell asleep but I did not. I opened up Dorktown's Firebuddy and read through more of the depressing Hellies vs. Gillies vitriol on You Are Awaited.

When the alarm went off I got up and grabbed the axe.

Dorktown yawned and grabbed her crossbow. "Time to go do some killing" she said.

The Pinto crept toward the plant. I kept the headlights off. We parked a block away.

He was wearing a watch so I asked him what time it was.

"I dunno" he said. "It's broken."

Then I realised he was still wearing the broken watch his dad had given him 38 years ago. In his last book he'd claimed that he'd thrown it away.

I don't see how that's relevant to the story.

You're a goddamn softcock and you're about to prove it.

I pulled a pair of handcuffs out of my pocket. I slapped one end of them onto the steering wheel and slapped the other cuff onto Dorktown's wrist.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"This isn't who you are" I said.

"You don't know who I am!"

"This isn't who I want you to be."

I got out and took the axe with me. Dorktown

tugged at the steering wheel furiously to no avail. I headed for the assembly plant.

The facility was massive and made up of several buildings. But what had once been a shining bastion of progress and prosperity was now nothing but a ghostly collection of blackened husks.

Light was coming out of a large open rollup door in the main building. The sand rail and the Elsinore motorbike and the deuce-and-a-half with the guillotine trailer were parked out front. A goon in a blonde wig was out there too just like Tex said. He was sharpening the blade of the guillotine. He had two prisoners with hoods over their heads tied to the front bumper of the deuce.

Great. Now this is a rescue mission too? Last time I rescued someone she listened to music while watching me get dragged away by a motorcycle.

I went around the side and used Tex's key to sneak in through the darkened fire door. I had some trouble pushing the door open cuz something was leaning up against it. I squeezed my way in but in doing so I knocked over a pile of something.

I was greeted by Tex's mutilated head on a pike just inches away from my face. There were a dozen other heads on a dozen other pikes too.

If you came here to read about grisly murder well then there you go. But before you start wanking off to it I got some stuff I wanna say.

They named the guillotine after a bloke named Guillotin. But he never even built a guillotine. He just came up with the idea. He was horrified when they named the device after him. He didn't believe in the death penalty. He just wanted to improve upon the long and agonizing spectacles that public executions had become. He hoped that performing executions in this abrupt and boring way would discourage the crowds of gawkers from showing up.

It didn't work. People were more excited than ever to watch others lose their lives. Children sang guillotine songs and played guillotine games. Artists made guillotine art. Families used miniature novelty guillotines to slice vegetables. Jokes were made and idioms were born like "Heads will roll."

Doctors performed experiments on the heads. They'd talk to them and slap them and give them instructions to respond to in order to see how long the heads would stay alive. The answer is somewhere between three and thirty seconds. Either end of that range sounds like way too long to me.

The last legal guillotine execution happened

in France in 1977. Just as society was about to cease this savagery for good the Big Bang came along and the savagery started all over again.

I'd much rather drop someone out of a helicopter.

Why do you keep bringing up helicopters Dorktown? You're missing the point. Killing isn't supposed to be fun. Every living being is an enchanted collection of molecules. We should appreciate that.

Now I know at this point in the story I was carrying an axe down a hallway with the intention of taking the enchantment away from a particular collection of molecules. But I'd been considering this for 38 years. And I'd shown him mercy once. Like Dorktown said. Page 129. That wasn't gonna happen again.

We'll see about that.

I was in a dark hallway with several entrances to dark offices. I could see a dim light coming from around a corner up ahead. I rounded the corner and at the end of the hallway there was a door leading out to the main floor. The door had a window in it. Framed right in center of that window was a hacked together Chevrolet Trans Am Pontiac Camaro frankencar. I'll call it the Frankenbird.

It was quite majestic in its way. The nose was

from an '78 Firebird but the tail was from a Camaro. It had side pipes with no heat shields. Gratings were welded on in the places where windows were supposed to be. Tex's turbo V8 engine was jutting out of a hole in the bonnet but they'd piled dual stacked superchargers on top of it too. On the bonnet where the firebird logo was supposed to be they'd painted a bird's skeleton instead. It looked like something I would have drawn in grade school which is to say it looked awesome and scary as hell.

A petrolhead in a blonde wig was working late trying to get the abomination running. He kept trying to start it up but the motor refused to comply.

Then I heard someone snore loudly in the darkened office right beside me. I froze and waited for another snore to make sure he was still asleep. Then I snuck in.

Someone was on a mattress in the center of the office. I inched closer. It was him. Mohawk Hineyhole. Still in his tuxedo.

He'd killed my family. He'd killed Messenger Kid. Who knows how many others had died because of him? It was time to put an end to this.

Damn right it was.

I lifted the axe and aimed for his neck.

Did you hesitate?

I did not hesitate.

You fucking hesitated. And I know why. Laura told me.

They don't know who Laura is yet. You're getting ahead of the story. And this is kind of a pivotal moment.

At this point five things happened in quick succession.

1. The Frankenbird's engine somehow managed to fire up and the entire building started rumbling.

2. Mohawk Hineyhole woke up with a start and gave me a funny look.

3. The head fell off of my axe.

4. The butt of the axe head hit Mohawk Hineyhole in the forehead.

5. A voice from a dark corner of the room said "Dad?"

This was a lot to take in.

I looked up toward the voice from the corner of the room. It was Chumdumpster. He was still in that dive suit. He must sleep in that thing.

Now it would have been nice if that axe head had knocked Mohawk Hineyhole unconscious but instead it had imbued him with a more extreme form of consciousness. He got up.

A light came on in the hallway. I bolted out of the room and slammed the door. I held it shut.

Mohawk Hineyhole and Chumdumpster were tugging on the knob. They were a couple of knobtuggers.

Several members of the Flirty Dozen came around the corner and stopped when they saw me. Every one of them had an AK-47.

I let go of the office door and kicked it in so it would knock over Hineyhole and Hineyhole Junior. I ran out the door that led to the main factory floor.

To my surprise I saw the Pinto coming right for me. Dorktown was driving while handcuffed to the wheel. The blonde goon from out front was hanging on to the bonnet for dear life.

I jumped onto the bonnet just as the Pinto smashed into the doorway. The goon flew off the bonnet and slid down the hall knocking over his comrades like they were bowling pins.

One of the Flirties shouted "Hold your fire! It's a Pinto!"

The Frankenbird's mechanic hadn't even noticed us. He was bent over that big idling engine. He tugged on the throttle cable. Boy howdy that car made a hell of a racket.

I jumped off the Pinto's bonnet. Dorktown went back to smashing into the doorway like some kind of lunatic. I'll forgive her for driving my car. This was an emergency and she was

coming to my rescue.

No I wasn't. I was pissed off. I came to blow up everything with your exploding car.

Including yourself?

Including myself.

I'm glad the car didn't explode.

I started running for the Frankenbird but then I heard some calls for help. It was the prisoners tied to the front of the deuce.

I made a detour and ran outside to free them. It turned out that the prisoners were Qwerty and Rosie. Rosie's hair was chopped off and she had a massive bruise on the back of her neck.

"They got my hair but my meat was too tough for them" she said. It suddenly made sense why the Flirties were sharpening the guillotine when I arrived.

"I've decided not to reopen the Van Nuys facility" I said. "Due to a vermin infestation. If either of you are still interested in a job come find me in Norwood."

They thanked me and ran off into the darkness. I ran back into the building.

Dorktown was doing donuts and chasing the baddies around. Thanks to her distraction I made it to the Frankenbird without being shot.

When I got to the car I slammed the bonnet down on the mechanic's head.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"You're a henchman" I said.

"I'm a mechanic" he said.

I looked at the massive pulsating engine sticking out of the Frankenbird's bonnet. "And not a bad one at that" I said. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"Sure."

"In the past six months?"

He had to think about it for a second. "No."

"Well I don't know how you got this highly improbable motor running but if you ever decide you wanna work for someone who's not a murderous fopdoodle come find me in Norwood Ohio. My name's Firebird."

"I'm Superturbo" he said.

I hopped into the Frankenbird and gave it the bejeezus. Dorktown followed me in the Pinto. We flogged it out of there and began the race for Norwood.

CHAPTER 4: SELIGMAN

Mohawk Hineyhole came after us in the sand rail. Chumdumpster took off on the Elsinore. The Flirty Dozen piled into the deuce-and-a-half and they made sure to bring that guillotine with them.

The sand rail and the Elsinore didn't have headlights so they stayed behind the deuce. The Pinto didn't have headlights anymore either after Dorktown smashed into that doorway so Dorktown stayed behind me.

The Pinto had a new carb and the Frankenbird had a toey doublesuperturbocharged V8 so it didn't take long to put some distance between us and the bloodthirsty boofheads.

We headed out of town on what was left of Route 66. We stayed off the highways to avoid the skags who would be blocking the roads and charging tolls. And don't tell me we should just pay the toll. Sometimes the toll was something more than money. Especially for someone like Dorktown. That was a toll we were not gonna pay.

We needed petrol so we stopped at Roy's Cafe in Amboy just as the sun was coming up.

"Give me the bloody key" Dorktown demanded from the driver's seat of the Pinto. She did not look at me when she spoke.

"Will you fill up my tank?" I asked.

"Give me the bloody key" she repeated.

"Will you at least promise not to go on a murderous rampage?"

"Give me the bloody key before I rip the goddamn steering wheel off of this bloody car!" she screamed.

The owner walked up to us. "If you two ain't buying no gas you'd best be on your way."

I gave Dorktown the key. She took the cuffs off and got out of the car.

"What the fuck happened?" she asked.

"Please watch your language." I looked up. I could see the deuce's headlights approaching in the distance. "Mohawk Hineyhole and Chumdumpster and the Flirty Dozen are gonna be here any minute. They want the Frankenbird back. They wanna get to Norwood before we do. And they wanna cut off our heads. We need petrol right now."

Dorktown handed the owner some coins. "Fill up both cars." Then she turned back to me. "What the fuckity fuck happened?"

"Tex and the other factory workers are dead."

"And Mohawk Asshole isn't."

"Mohawk Hineyhole had an army with him" I explained.

"Of course he had an army" she said. "He's the president of the Gillies."

This statement only filled my brain with more questions. "I thought the president of the Gillies was killed in the Cage."

"He was. Mohawk Asshole was the vice-president."

"What's a Gilly?"

"A Gilly is someone who cuts the heads off of Hellies."

"What's a Helly?"

"A Helly is someone who drops Gillies out of helicopters."

"What is it with you and helicopters?"

"It's how Hellies kill people. Drop the bad guys out of helicopters. You know. Like Pinochet used to do."

Oh now I get it.

Pinochet was a Chilean dictator propped up by the US government. My mom worked as an advisor to him for a few weeks back in the 70s. She persuaded him to allow a free market economic oasis to bloom in South America. It kind of worked. By following her advice Pinochet saved Chile's economy. But he was also a murderous monster who stole millions of dollars and killed thousands of people. He was famous for dropping people out of helicopters. Pinochet tried to be a fascist capitalist but there's no such thing. "Laissez faire" literally means "let people

do their own thing." Pinochet thought he could force people to be free. But that's not how freedom works.

"Are you saying you're a Helly?" I asked.

"Of course I'm a Helly" Dorktown replied. "Aren't you?"

"The only thing I know for sure about Hellites and Gillies is I am neither one of those things."

"You have to be one or the other" she said. "Only evil can benefit from a compromise. It's like mixing water with poison."

I smacked my palm on my forehead. "If all you have is a line defined by two points then yeah maybe you gotta pick one side or the other. But there are other dimensions. Three points and you have a triangle. Four points and you have a tetrahedron. My ideas are three dimensional."

"Whatever. It was your book that got me interested in politics in the first place."

"I don't write about politics" I said. "I write about economics."

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"Politics is the art of pretending economics doesn't exist. Economics is the science of proving politics shouldn't exist."

"You ripped that one off from Thomas Sowell" she said.

The deuce's headlights were slowly getting

brighter. And it was now light enough out that the sand rail and the Elsinore would be getting here before those headlights instead of after them.

"We're in a bit of a hurry" I said to the owner.

"I'm squeezing this here handle as hard as I can" he said.

I went back to the Frankenbird and opened the door.

"One more thing" Dorktown said. "While I was chained to your car I opened up my Firebuddy. You were still logged in to You Are Awaited. Count Bubury sent you a befriending request. Want me to accept it?"

"The president of the Hellies?" I asked. "Tell him to go throw himself out of a helicopter. Are you ok to drive?"

"I'll sleep when Mohawk Asshole is dead."

"Ok then follow me."

"Where to?"

"My Firebuddy factory in Seligman. I have weapons there. Keep your speed up so they can't follow us. Mohawk Hineyhole doesn't know the location of the new factory and I wanna keep it that way."

I was concerned cuz last year he invaded and took over of my Firebuddy factory. He kept making computers in there but the quality went way down and he never did anything to improve

on my design.

The pump finally clicked off. We got back into our cars and took off. We'd only gotten a few kays down the road when I noticed the Pinto was lagging behind.

We pulled over. I got out and ran back to talk to Dorktown.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I dunno" Dorktown said. "I'm stomping on the pedal but nothing's happening."

"Ok. If those drongos start to catch up to us then pull over. I'll turn around and pick you up and we'll leave the Pinto behind."

The Pinto took its time but we made it to Seligman by midmorning. I headed for the old airport and Dorktown followed. I pulled off to a big vacant space beside the crumbling runway. Or at least I'd made sure it looked like it was vacant. Me and Dorktown stopped and got out of our cars.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"My Firebuddy factory" I said with arms outstretched. I pulled out a remote control and pressed a button. A massive hinged door slowly lifted up off the ground in front of us revealing a ramp leading down into my underground factory.

"We can drive the cars in" I said.

We drove in and I shut the door behind us.

My factory manager Laura came over to greet us with her three year old kid Lucy stumbling alongside her.

I moved the boombox and headphones and tools and jerrycans and all the rest of my stuff out of the Pinto and into the Frankenbird.

You skipped something.

What do you mean?

The Tim Tams.

Right. I noticed that Dorktown had eaten an old package of Tim Tams I'd left in the glovebox of the Pinto.

You were furious!!

I didn't say you could eat them.

You went to look for them and you freaked out when you found out they were gone. You took the empty wrapper out of the glovebox and saved it.

So what?

Something was special about those Tim Tams. I figured out what it was. They were the Tim Tams you bought for your sister 38 years ago. You said in your book that you ate them on the day she died. Page 6. Just like you said you chucked your dad's broken watch. Page 34. But you still had the watch. I bet you still have that Hot Wheels Trans Am too.

I do.

Your mother was holding it in her hand when

Mohawk Asshole blew her to smithereens.

That's right Dorktown. Let's get back to the story.

I took Dorktown to the weapons room where we had five Martin Warthog compound bows stashed.

"Are these the weapons we came for?" Dorktown asked. "This isn't Sherwood Forest. Mohawk Asshole has guns."

"Next time I'll build a gun factory."

We cleaned out the weapons room and packed everything into the boot and the back seat of the Frankenbird. Then I made the mistake of lying down on a couch and dozing off.

I talked to Laura while you were asleep.

She's not the only one you talked to.

Now who's getting ahead of the story??

You lied to me.

You lied to me too.

You're ruining the story.

The story sucks.

It's not just a story. It's life.

Life sucks.

You don't know how it ends yet.

Are you gonna tell them or should I??

Fine. You tell my story. I'll tell yours.

When you introduced me to Laura I immediately knew who she was. She was wearing

a necklace made out of paperclips. You described that necklace in your book. Laura's husband made it for her. Laura is the woman who had you at gunpoint. She blamed you for her husband's death. You told me you grabbed her gun and shot her. But she's alive. Not only that but you're friends. You work together.

I was trying to tell a good story.

You were trying to make us think you're someone you're not.

Ok. I didn't kill Laura. I didn't kill Mohawk Hineyhole. The truth is I've never killed anyone. Does that make me a bad person?

No it just makes you a bad killer.

You've never killed anyone either.

Yeah but when I do I promise you I'm gonna be really fucking good at it.

Let's hope it doesn't come to that.

Oh I hope it does.

To the readers at home I apologize on behalf of both of us for our nonlinear narration style. I think it's safe to assume that what you'd like to hear about next is the stuff that happened next. So that's what I'm gonna tell you.

We left the Pinto at the factory and took off in the Frankenbird. Dorktown was quiet. She typed on her Firebuddy as we drove.

She didn't even notice when I stopped to

check on a family in an overturned Volkswagen Beetle convertible. The family was all dead so we continued on our way.

A bit farther down there was a burned up tanker truck on its side blocking the road. We had to drive on the shoulder to get around it.

The next servo we found was the old Texaco station in Ash Fork so we pulled off there. The owner of the place was outside rebuilding a transmission. He was a bit younger than me but probably still a prewar.

Dorktown grabbed her crossbow and ran inside. I followed her. We sat down at the counter. The owner followed us in and cleaned off his hands. His nametag read "Nothing." Mr. Nothing had a Citizen's Buddy behind the counter. People really were using the things.

"You got any food here?" Dorktown asked.

"Burgers and hot dogs" Mr. Nothing said.

"I'll have fifty burgers for takeaway" she said.

"You hungry?" I asked.

She ignored me. She opened up her Firebuddy and started typing on it some more.

I heard a helicopter approaching. I hadn't heard that sound in a long time. I went to the window and looked up at the sky.

It wasn't just one helicopter. It was a dozen of them. Bringing up the rear was some kind of

dual-rotored behemoth the likes of which I'd never seen.

Hueys and Loaches and Kiowas followed by the last of the ACH-47A Chinooks. Nicknamed "Easy Money."

Thanks for the clarification Dorktown.

Mr. Nothing handed Dorktown her order. But she wasn't done yet. She kept typing on her Firebuddy.

The ACH-47A Chinooks were known as "Guns-A-Go-Go" because they were loaded with .50 caliber machine guns and rockets and grenade launchers pointing in every direction. They were armoured too so they could take abuse as well as dish it out. They only made four of them and Easy Money was the only one that made it home from Vietnam.

Ok then.

When Dorktown finished typing she grabbed her sacks of burgers and got up. She pushed the Firebuddy over to me. "Shit's about to go down. You might wanna update your story."

"Our story?"

"Your story."

Dorktown ran outside and I followed her.

The helicopters landed one by one on the main drag of Ash Fork. The smaller helicopters were black with warplane-style mascots and the

words "Flagstaff Helly Club" painted on them. The Chinook was painted olive drab.

Two blokes stepped out of the Chinook. Or I guess I should say they stepped out of Easy Money. Both of them had M1911 pistols strapped to their sides. They took off their helmets and strutted toward us. It was Count Bartholomew Bubury and one of his flunkies.

Dorktown turned to me. "Mohawk Asshole has an army" she said. "Now I have one too."

She turned away and ran up to Bubury. She gave him a hug. They exchanged a few words. Then she started visiting each of the helicopters and tossing out hamburgers to all of the crew members.

Bubury and his flunky walked up to me.

"Nice to see you again Firebird" Bubury shouted. "This is vice-president Jocko."

Bubury and Jocko held out their hands to me but I didn't take them.

"Have you switched sides on me?" Bubury asked.

"I was never on your side."

Jocko drew his 1911 and put it against my forehead.

Bubury brought his face close to mine. "You're lucky I owed you a favor" he said. He'd had onions for lunch. "Cuz you just cashed it in.

Next time I see you you're going for a long walk out of a short helicopter."

Bubury turned and started walking back toward Easy Money. Jocko put his piece away and followed him.

I ran back into the Texaco and checked Dorktown's Firebuddy. Dorktown had used my You Are Awaited account to accept Bubury's befriending request and communicate with him. She told him she was deliberately driving the Pinto slowly to allow the Gilly army to keep up with us. She told him that they could expect to find the Gilly army at my factory in Seligman.

Dorktown was using my factory as bait.

A message from Laura popped up. "Mohawk Hineyhole has the factory surrounded. We're trapped. They've got both the main door and the evac tunnel. The weapons room is empty."

"Split up the cash and hand it out to the employees" I replied. "Tell them we'll have jobs for them in Norwood if they want them. That goes for you too. I'll be there in fifteen minutes." Seligman was thirty minutes away.

The helicopters took off. I begged Mr. Nothing to loan me some petrol. I told him it would save the lives of dozens of factory workers. He shrugged. I promised to pay him back triple. No dice.

I sat down and folded my arms and laid my head down. Then the voice of a ghost on the CB radio warbled up through the fizz. And it sounded like the voice said "Firebird."

I looked up.

A second voice responded. "10-9. Did not copy. What did you say his name was?"

This time the radio was loud and clear. "His name is Firebird."

"10-4" the second voice said. "Firebird is gonna build Firebirds in Norwood Ohio. And he's gonna need workers. I'll pass the word along. They're gonna wanna know though. Does he subscribe to the bargaining theory of wages or the marginal productivity theory of wages?"

"Marginal productivity theory" I muttered to myself. I put my head back down on the table for a moment. Then I lifted my head up again to continue muttering. "But then again no talent is fungible. Even the market theory gets a little weird when demand is specific and supply is small."

Mr. Nothing noticed the Firebird symbol on my jacket. Then he looked outside and saw the Frankenbird. Then he looked at me again.

"You're Firebird!" he exclaimed. He grabbed the handset on the Citizen's Buddy. "Marginal productivity! But he may be tempering that view

with the insight that talent isn't fungible" he shouted.

"10-4 on the marginal productivity theory of wages" the radio replied. "Eastbound and down. Over and out."

"You've been all over the air today" Mr. Nothing said. "All the truckers out here know about what you tried to do in Van Nuys. Everyone knows you're on your way to Norwood to try again. They're all hoping you can pull it off. Oh boy. Have I got something to show you."

"I have to get back to Seligman" I said. "I need fuel."

"I'll give you as much fuel as you can carry. Just let me show you something first." He motioned to me and I grudgingly followed him into his office.

The office walls were covered in GM and Pontiac memorabilia. Flags. Neon signs. Badges. Patches. Stickers. Framed and autographed prints from Smokey and the Bandit and even Hooper. He even had the actual Bandit Trans Am jacket that Burt Reynolds had owned. Who knows how he got a hold of that. He may have murdered Burt Reynolds for it.

"Ever since I saw Smokey and the Bandit I wanted a Trans Am" Mr. Nothing said. "Everyone's rooting for you. Why are you turning

around?"

"I have to go fight two armies at the same time" I explained. "I'm gonna lose. But I might save the lives of a couple dozen factory workers."

"Then we'd best get you back on the road. The sooner you lose this battle the sooner you can win the war." He ran outside and started filling up the Frankenbird.

I followed him out. I opened the boot. I got out a bow and put it in the passenger seat. I shook his hand. "Thank you."

"The name's Nothing" he said. "And don't think nothing of it."

"Well Mr. Nothing if you ever need a job you know where to find me."

I got into the Frankenbird and put the pedal to the metal. First. Second. Third. Fourth. Redline and beyond. The Arizona sun was beating down and the temperature gauge was maxed out. But that engine knew just what it could give and just what it could take.

I promised myself if the Frankenbird made it to Seligman in time for me to save my employees I'd go back to Van Nuys and give Tex Phoenix's severed head a kiss on the lips. And maybe that Superturbo bloke too.

I whizzed around that burned up tanker truck. I flew past the dead family in the upside down

bug. I somehow caught up to those Helly helicopters from hell and by the time I got to the factory I was just ahead of them.

I slowed down the Frankenbird and sized up the situation. In the distance I could see the deuce-and-a-half with the guillotine trailer and the sand rail and the Elsinore parked by the main door of the factory.

Mohawk Hineyhole and the Flirty Dozen were all trying to pry open the factory door. Then Chumdumpster just grabbed the door and lifted it up. This door was made of steel and thick enough to drive a truck over.

Mohawk Hineyhole was then able to stroll into my factory and start doing god knows what in there. My employees were all still trapped so hopefully he wasn't murdering anyone.

The factory's evac tunnel was a hundred meters long. The exit hatch was in the floor of a shack. The shack's door was open. One of the Flirties was in there trying to figure out how to open the hatch. He had an AK-47s on him.

I headed for the shack and floored it. When I got close I stomped on the emergency brake and spun the car around. I put the car in reverse and looked behind me. The Flirty in the shack saw me coming and started shooting.

The Frankenbird smashed through the shack

and knocked the whole thing down. I grabbed the bow and jumped out of the car but the Flirty was right there pointing his AK-47 at me. I was about to get killed by a dork in a blonde wig.

Then the Flirty looked up to the sky and a big hole appeared in his face. The helicopters had arrived and they were strafing the place with .50 caliber machine gun fire and rockets and grenades. The deuce and the sand rail were the next victims. Their tires popped and their fluids went spraying.

The rest of the Flirty Dozen or maybe now I should call them the Flirty Eleven took cover and got out their guns.

I pressed the button on my remote to open the evac hatch. Laura was down there with Lucy in her arms. She directed my employees out one by one.

I looked toward the main entrance. The door was now fully open. The Flirty Eleven were at war with the helicopters but they were losing and getting turned into cherry pie. Chumdumpster had noticed what I was up to and he was headed my way on the Elsinore. The Pinto came flying up out of the factory entrance ramp piloted by Mohawk Hineyhole. I bet it felt good to steal a car of mine for once.

I fired an arrow at Chumdumpster but it just

bounced off his suit.

Then the ground suddenly sunk in as the entire roof of my factory collapsed with a crash. I looked down into the evac hatch. A whoosh of dust blew up into my face just as Laura and Lucy climbed out.

"Is that everyone?" I asked.

"Yeah" she nodded.

Sorry world. No more Firebuddies for a while. And screw you Dorktown.

Ok now I kind of miss the way Dorktown used to read what I'd written and go in and type stupid stuff between my paragraphs.

The helicopters were all coming in for a landing and kicking up dust. We were far enough away from the main door that the Hellies hadn't noticed us.

Chumdumpster was coming right for me and the Pinto wasn't far behind him. I grabbed a 2x4 that used to be part of the shack and swung it at him. I knocked him off the bike. Me and Laura and Lucy all got into the Frankenbird.

Mohawk Hineyhole got out of the Pinto and checked on Chumdumpster. Well he checked on his son I guess I should say. Chumdumpster was ok cuz of that silly suit. Mohawk Hineyhole looked toward the factory to see how his pretty army was doing. They weren't doing so well.

The helicopters didn't stay on the ground long. They all started taking off again. It was not yet clear to me what the Hellies were up to but I think Mohawk Hineyhole knew. We got out of there while the dust was still blowing so no one saw us leave.

Then a human being fell out of the sky and landed with a massive thud on the Frankenbird's steel mesh windscreen. Lucy screamed and started crying. I slammed on the brakes.

The sad sack's face was right in front of me. It was one of the Flirties. I looked up at him. His blood was dripping all over me but he was still alive. For a few more seconds at least. He looked me in the eye. His mouth moved but he wasn't saying anything.

Me and Laura got out of the car and looked up. The Gilly soldiers were falling from the sky.

CHAPTER 5: AMARILLO

That night I snuck the Frankenbird out of Seligman with the headlights off. Once I was far enough away I turned the headlights on and picked up the pace.

I kept my eyes to the sky looking for helicopters but because of that I didn't notice that Mohawk Hineyhole was discreetly following me in the Pinto with Chumdumpster behind him on the Elsinore. I figured this out when they stopped being discreet about it and the Pinto started ramming the Frankenbird. Mohawk Hineyhole was clearly not afraid of blowing himself up in the Pinto as long as he could take me with him.

To make things worse they hadn't been as careful about sneaking out of town as I was. They had one of those little round helicopters on their tail. I think it was a Loach but my helicopter expert has gone AWOL. Fortunately it had no guns mounted on it so it wasn't shooting at us. I kicked it in the guts and the Frankenbird left them all behind.

I was outdriving my headlights probably going 200 kays when I saw that upside down bug. The upside down bug with the dead family inside. The upside down bug that was right before the wreckage of the tanker truck. The tanker truck that was splayed out across the entire road.

I stood on the brake pedal and all four wheels locked up. The tanker truck came into view but the Frankenbird wasn't stopping. The Frankenbird bumped into the tanker trailer but not hard enough to do any damage.

I'd almost died but I didn't have time to dilly dally. Mohawk Hineyhole and Chumdumpster would be here any minute.

Then it hit me. They'd be here any minute. At top speed. With no headlights.

Now I know you probably bought this book cuz you like action and adventure. I hate to tell you this but that's not what this book is about. It's about my life and Dorktown's life. Our lives haven't always been good. Adventures don't always turn out how you want them to and action is something we'd all rather avoid if we can. So you're not supposed to enjoy this part.

I turned off the Frankenbird's lights. I slowly drove around the tanker. I turned around and parked fifty meters beyond it. I shut off the motor. I got out of the Frankenbird and waited.

A minute later I heard the Pinto's engine approaching. The engine was screaming. Tex's carb was at the top of its game. The Elsinore and the chopper joined in the chorus.

Then there was a massive thud that shook the ground under my feet. No explosion. Just a thud.

Then there was a smaller thud and silhouetted against the stars I could see a humanlike figure spinning end over end. It was Chumdumpster. When he hit the ground his metal suit made a splash of sparks. He skidded right by me and off into the distance.

I grabbed my bow and walked back to the wreckage.

I'd wanted to make Mohawk Hineyhole explode just like he'd made my family explode all those years ago. But that's not what happened. On the other side of that trailer there was a human being named Bruce Barbagallo tangled up and dying inside a crumpled heap of steel.

Now I'm no doctor but my diagnosis was that Bruce didn't really have legs anymore and he had about five minutes left before he found out which religion was the right one.

"Where's Steven?" he asked.

"Steven? Is that your son?"

"Yes. Steven."

I went over to the remains of the Elsinore and got my Six Million Dollar Man lunchbox full of money out of the saddlebag. "He went off his bike and slid halfway to Gallup."

"Tell him I love him more than anything."

"I'm not gonna tell him that."

"Please. Tell him I love him more than

anything."

I sighed. "Ok."

The Loach came down for a landing behind us. The landing was slow and hesitant at first. Then it was sudden and awkward. I nocked an arrow and readied my bow but to my surprise it was Dorktown who stepped out.

I lowered my bow. "You stole a helicopter?"

"I borrowed it" she said. "Is he dead?"

"No."

"Good. Then there's still time to kill him." She reached into the mangled Pinto and started tugging on Bruce's arms.

I forced myself between them. "Dorktown stop it" I said. "You're gonna tear him in half."

"Do it you cunt" Bruce said.

"Listen to me. Chumdumpster is Bruce's son."

"And I'm Messenger Kid's daughter."

"I know but if Chumdumpster is still alive he's gonna come for you."

"I don't give a rat's ass. Are we gonna assassinate this asshole or what?"

"We're not assassinating anyone" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't political."

"If you kill a president it's gonna be political."

Ok she had a point there. "Yeah but if you drop him out of that helicopter this war is never

gonna end."

She turned and went back to the helicopter. She returned with the crossbow and pointed it at me. "This war ends when we win it" she said.

I readied my bow and pointed it at her. "Is this what your pop would have wanted?"

Bruce spoke up. "Your pop? I thought you looked familiar. Your pop was the dumb guy."

"He wasn't dumb!" she shouted. "He was the smartest man I ever knew."

"He couldn't talk" Bruce said.

"He talked with his hands!" she replied.

"Your pop knew where John was. But the only way I could get it out of him was if I had you there to translate."

"You tortured him and killed him while I watched."

"Yes I did. And it was only when I realized I was torturing the wrong person that started waving his hands around and telling me what I wanted to know."

"He was the only person on earth who loved me and now he's dead."

"I did what I had to do" Bruce said.

I didn't expect him to say that. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"I was saving the world" he answered.

"From what?"

"From you" he whispered.

I didn't have to include this part so consider yourself lucky. I'm writing this book so I get to be the hero. But everyone's the hero of their own story. Even the villains. Especially the villains. All of history's greatest atrocities were committed in the name of truth and justice. The most dangerous person on earth is someone who's sure that they're right. But how can anyone be sure?

Fuck it. Who gives a shit.

I turned to face Bruce and shot an arrow into his heart. I could tell you about the look in his eyes or the sounds that he made but I really don't wanna do that.

I looked up and saw Steven standing there looking at me. Don't worry. Chumdumpster is not gonna stay Steven for long but for the moment he's Steven.

Steven's impressive tumble had been a death defying one but his metal suit was leaking blood from all of its seams. He looked like a robot oozing hydraulic fluid.

I'd witnessed Bruce killing my family and now Steven had witnessed me killing his. We all become an orphan someday. If we're lucky.

"Your father wanted me to tell you that he loved you more than anything" I said.

I backed away but Steven didn't come after

me. Instead he reached into the car and tried to revive his now very totally 100% dead dad.

Then Dorktown turned her crossbow around and pointed it at her chest.

I threw my bow aside and ran to her but she pulled the trigger before I could get there. Fortunately she had the thing so close to her chest that the bolt didn't have anywhere to go. The crossbow flew out of her hands and she fell backward onto the road. She hit her head and and it was lights out for Dorktown.

I crouched down beside her. The bolt was lying on her chest. It had ripped through her clothing and she was bleeding but it hadn't broken her sternum.

"If you die there won't be anyone left in my fan club" I said. I picked her up and started carrying her to the Frankenbird as quickly as I could.

Chumdumpster shambled after us but he was so slow I was able to keep just ahead of him. So he turned back and climbed into the Loach. The rotors spun up and the thing took off but he clearly had no idea what he was doing. As soon as the helicopter left the ground it flipped over and landed on its side sending pieces of the rotors flying in every direction. Then the whole thing exploded but Chumdumpster emerged from the

flames like he didn't even care. I guess I shouldn't say he emerged from the flames cuz in fact he took some of the flames with him. He was on fire.

I got Dorktown into the Frankenbird and started it up. Chumdumpster hobbled over to that upside down Volkswagen convertible. He lifted it up and flipped it over. He threw out the dead dad in the driver's seat but left the rotting corpses of the wife and kids sitting right where they were. He got the car started and came after us. Yeah he was still on fire.

We had no problem staying ahead of him but it was clear he was never gonna give up. When I stopped for petrol in Albuquerque I heard two truck drivers talking about a flaming metal monster they saw on the side of the road having a picnic with three dead bodies.

The rest of the night was a blur. At some point the next morning fell asleep at the wheel. I woke up in terror when road signs and fenceposts started smacking into the Frankenbird's bonnet. I stopped the car and got out. We were somewhere in Texas.

I looked around a bit and figured out that we weren't just somewhere in Texas. We were somewhere special in Texas.

Dorktown woke up and joined me. "What is this place?" she asked.

"Cadillac Ranch" I answered.

"What's Cadillac Ranch?"

"This place."

Cadillac Ranch is nothing more than a place where some cars are lined up and buried halfway in the dirt sticking up almost vertically. The place is strange enough as it is but to make it even stranger someone had left an old piano sitting out there as well.

"You were out for ten hours" I said.

"I told you I'd sleep when Mohawk Hineyhole was dead."

Yeah that's right. She didn't curse.

We climbed onto one of the cars and had a seat in the boot. Dorktown's arm was pressed against mine. It was nice. I usually tried not to touch her but I liked it when every now and then she'd touch me. But don't go getting any ideas. If you haven't figured out what we are to each other by now then you ain't never gonna figure it out.

"I'm a murderer Dorktown."

She grabbed my hand. "You're not a murderer. You're just a killer."

Not much happened for a while.

There's a thing called narrative filigree where a writer will just write a bunch of fancy stuff to take up some space. I would try that here but I'm not a writer. I'm just someone who's trying to tell

you a bunch of stuff that happened.

Words. Words will get you into trouble. Words will keep you up at night. The weather wasn't hot or cold or stormy. No red-tailed hawk cried out above us. No roadrunner dashed in front of us. Nothing to see. Nothing to hear. Nothing to do. Texas was flat and lovely and I sat there with Dorktown and her arm was pressed against mine.

Hey Dorktown. What did Skelli really whisper to you?

She said "If you kill someone you don't have to live with them anymore. You have to live with yourself."

Dorktown climbed down from the car and took a seat at the piano. She started playing and singing. I didn't know she could play. I didn't know she could sing. And if I had known that she could do that stuff well I sure as heck would never have thought that she would.

The song she played for me was Close To You by The Carpenters. The lullaby my mom used to sing to me as a child. The piano was out of tune and some of the keys were missing but it didn't matter.

When she was done she got up and said "I'm not letting you give up on your dream."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it's not just your dream anymore."

CHAPTER 6: NORWOOD

There never was and there never will be another century like the twentieth. In the twentieth century things were invented more quickly than ever before. Millennia of stagnation and then all of a sudden in the twentieth century every decade was totally unlike the one before it. Hundreds of generations of subsistence farmers and then out of nowhere someone's kid builds a rocket that lands on the moon.

Yay another rant about economics!!

I appreciate your enthusiasm Dorktown.

In just a hundred years we figured out more stuff than we had figured out in the entire hundred thousand years that preceded it. Sure there was fire and the wheel. Agriculture and domestication. Spoken language and written language and the printing press. But that ain't much to figure out in a hundred thousand years.

Here's a list of some stuff that was either invented or widely adopted in the twentieth century. Indoor plumbing. Electricity and the light bulb. Antibiotics. Vaccines. Anesthetics. Surgery. Birth control. Air conditioning and refrigeration. Washing machines. Telephones. Photography. Transistors. Radio and rock'n'roll. Movies. Television. Computers. Cars. Airplanes and jet engines. Rockets and space travel. Nuclear power.

And Norman Borlaug's miracle strains of wheat.
You forgot about that one didn't you.

The twentieth century?? I wasn't even born yet!!

Were you even listening?

Norman Borlaug saved a billion lives.

That's my girl.

Most of the stuff I mentioned was invented in the USA. Why did so many Americans invent so many great things? What was it that the USA got right?

If we asked Karl Marx he would have said it was capitalism that led to all that progress but then he would have gone on to tell us that it was doomed and destined to be replaced. He turned out to be right. People did replace it. They replaced it with anarchy. Anarchy is just like capitalism except every now and then some communist comes along and seizes your means of production.

What's your point??

The point is we're not just going to Norwood to build cars. We're going to Norwood to pick up where the twentieth century left off.

Me and Dorktown took turns driving. Yeah I let her drive. How could I be expected to save the world without a good night's sleep?

Our last petrol stop was in Indianapolis. We

found a servo run by a sheila named Dignity. The walls of the servo were covered with impressionist paintings for sale.

One of the paintings was of a plain brick building but it looked familiar.

"What's that one?" I asked.

"The General Motors plant in Sin City. Norwood Assembly."

"I'll take it" I said. "That's where we're headed."

She got the painting down for me. "My dad worked there" she said. "He lived for that job. He died for that job. What's left of him is still in there. They called him Snuffy. During the Big Bang they hit the place with neutron bombs. They killed everyone but left the buildings intact."

"We're gonna reopen the place. We're gonna build cars there again."

"You're Firebird!" she said. "I've heard about you. Everyone has. I always thought it would be a great idea to start the factory up again."

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

"There's a thousand ways to lose all your money and die. Last thing I need is one more."

"But you're already an entrepreneur" I said.

"Not because I wanna be. Because I have to be."

"You could come work for me. I'm gonna

need someone in the paint department."

"You came all the way from California to reopen the plant" she said.

"Yeah."

"You're serious about it."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Lots of people say they're gonna do something. Or someone should do something. Not a lot of people actually do it."

Dignity gave us directions. It wouldn't be hard to find. Northeast on Route 22. Look for the General Motors signs.

Norwood was part of Sin City. If you're a prewar like me you might remember Sin City from back when it was called Cincinnati. It had WKRP and a nice zoo. Yeah I know WKRP wasn't a real radio station but it was a great TV show.

As we pulled off the Sin City exit we were listening to Manfred Mann's Earth Band playing *Blinded By The Light* on Burt Sugarman's *Midnight Special* in 1977. *Blinded By The Light* was written and originally performed by Bruce Springsteen. I know that sounds like an exciting musical discovery but if you're planning on checking out his version be prepared to be disappointed. Bruce used a rhyming dictionary to throw the song together. Manfred Mann's Earth

Band cut out half the lyrics and doubled the length of the song. Their version is more about the emotional buildup than it is about the lyrics. The lines they left in were the good ones.

Is he saying "douche"?

No Dorktown. He's singing about going out for a cruise in a deuce coupe on a Friday night with your mates.

I'm pretty sure he's saying "douche."

Anyway it's a cover that's far better than the original.

Sin City was a surprisingly unpopulated town unless you counted the skeletons. The factory was in a lot better shape than the one in Van Nuys. Aside from some intrusive vegetation it looked like it had been abandoned yesterday. We parked the Frankenbird right out front and got out.

I got goosebumps from my head to my toes for I was standing on hallowed ground. Norwood Assembly. Birthplace of the Camaro and the Firebird. In operation from 1923 all the way up until the Big Bang put GM and the rest of the world out of business in 1981.

The buildings were made of brick and glass. The facility took up sixty acres. Through the years the place had grown quite a bit so there were older and newer sections. The main building was three stories tall and held thirteen miles of

conveyors.

We walked right in the front door. The skeleton receptionist said "Hello Mr. Firebird." And while we're imagining things let's pretend I asked her for my messages. "Ah yes. A Mr. Chumdumpster called. He says he forgives you for killing his dad and he's turning around and going home."

We stepped onto the main factory floor. The place was dusty and had no power but the line itself was completely intact. Before us were hundreds of partially assembled cars!

The cars in the factory were Firebirds but they were like no Firebirds the world had ever seen. Sleek and low and aerodynamic like something from the future. They were the third generation cars. New for 1982.

Bodies came from Fisher Body across the street. Engines came in on trains from Flint Michigan. Radiators came from Buffalo. Windscreens came from Toledo. Roofs came from Kalamazoo. The plant employed thousands of people and turned out hundreds of cars a day.

Dorktown shouted to me from one of the offices. "Bloody rippa! Come here!"

I ran to her. There was a skeleton sitting at a desk. Dorktown pointed to a piece of paper. I picked it up. It was a letter in a child's

handwriting dated November 1981.

"Dear Norm Inouye and John Schinella and Bill Davis and all the people who help make Firebirds. Thank you for making Firebirds. Firebirds are my favorite car. The bird on the hood is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. When I grow up I want to work at the Firebird factory. How are Firebirds made? Love John Binns."

Yeah that's my name. Yeah I wrote that letter. One month before the whole world blew up.

Then Dorktown handed me a package. It was addressed to me at my parents' house in New Jersey. The bombs must have hit before they got a chance to pick up the mail. I opened the package. It contained a Firebird t-shirt and a letter.

"Dear John. Thank you for your letter. I'm the one in charge here at the Firebird factory in Norwood Ohio. You asked how Firebirds are made. I don't know. Nobody knows. There's no way anyone could plan all of this and if even if they could plan it all today they'd have to start all over again with a new plan tomorrow. Thousands of people from all over the world play their part but they don't even know what part they're playing. Most of the people who produce the steel and plastic and rubber and vinyl have no idea that they're helping to make Firebirds. They're just out

to make an honest buck. Everyone is interconnected in unknowable ways. Even you. If you do well in school I'll have a job here waiting for you. Yours truly. Snuffy."

"John Binns reporting for duty" I said.

I went out to the car and got the boombox. I set it down on a bench and pressed play. Earth Wind & Fire's Let's Groove live in Oakland 1981. I remember hearing this song for the first time in fourth grade. I was walking up to the bus stop. The high school kids were playing the song and breakdancing. When I heard the opening vocal I freaked out. Robots singing! It was the coolest thing I'd ever heard.

Me and Dorktown found the last car on the line and went to work. The body was hanging from the overheard conveyor and the drivetrain was resting on the floor conveyor. It was a black 1982 Trans Am with a V8 and a manual 4-speed. Its VIN started with 1G2AW87H0C. Then there was the N for Norwood. Then 000001. It was serial number one. The first of the new V8s.

The drivetrain was supposed to be raised up into the body but we didn't have any way to power the lifts and conveyors. So we rigged some tiedown straps and pulleys and managed to bring the body down onto the drivetrain instead. We mounted the suspension components and wheels.

Then we moved the car onto floor jacks and jack stands. We bolted on the exhaust and steering components and brakes. We scavenged up a working battery and got the fluids topped off. But something still wasn't right.

There were no big bonnet bird decals anywhere in the place. They'd been discontinued in favor of smaller decals or no decals at all. But screw that history. We were gonna make our own history. And make our own future.

I punched holes in some barrels of paint and did some mixing and stirring. I grabbed a couple of brushes and asked Dorktown to close her eyes.

I still knew how to draw the bird by heart. I must have drawn it a thousand times back in elementary school. Under the bird I wrote "Firebird Phoenix Year 39." It wasn't quite Year 39 yet but that's how they used to market cars. It was like you were buying something from the future.

I told Dorktown to open her eyes.

"A black Trans Am with a pink bird on the bonnet!" she cried. "Just like I wanted!"

She hugged me and then she hugged the car. Then she noticed the writing on the hood.

"Firebird Phoenix" she said. "You named it after Tex. Like you named the Firebuddy after Laura's husband."

"Buddy was a brave man."

"In your book you said you forgot his name."

"I didn't forget."

"I know. Laura told me. She said that when you showed her your computer with his name on it that's when she forgave you."

Dorktown got in to the Firebird Phoenix and I got in next to her. I reached into my pocket and pulled out her pop's Bugs Bunny doll and placed it on the dashboard. I won't say what happened next. All you need to know about Dorktown is that she is one tough cookie. She's a psycho. You do not wanna mess with her.

I was a bloody sook.

She means she was crying.

Sangfroid only gets you so far.

You and your Aussie slang.

It's French for "cold blood."

Dorktown put the bunny in her pocket. She turned the Phoenix's key but it wouldn't start. We realized we forgot the petrol. So I brought the Frankenbird in and siphoned its juice.

We got back in to the Phoenix and this time it started right up. Dorktown sped out the back door and started spinning donuts in the back lot. We had huge smiles on our faces. Then we brought the Phoenix back into the building.

We got out and looked at the next car on the

line. "Each car has 4500 different parts from 450 different vendors" I said. "We're gonna have to reverse engineer the build process and resurrect the supply chains. Once we get some power in the place it will make everything easier. Tomorrow we'll...."

Dorktown interrupted me. "This place isn't gonna be here tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"The Helly and Gilly armies are gonna do the same thing to this place that they did to your other factory."

"I thought the Gillies were dead."

Dorktown laughed. "Like twelve of them maybe. There are thousands of soldiers in the Gilly army. When Chumdumpster gets here he'll have the local Gilly militia with him. The Hellies have militias too with helicopters ready to go. They're gonna come here and they're gonna kill both of us."

"I thought the Hellies were your friends."

"They used to be."

"What happened?"

"Bubury showed me his willy."

"What did you do?"

"I laughed at it and stole one of his helicopters."

"I thought you said you borrowed it."

"I never said I had permission."

And wouldn't you know it was at this very moment we heard helicopters approaching. We went outside to get some idea of what new unpleasantness was about to unfold.

Easy Money was back. Just like last time there were several other helicopters as well. But this time the smaller helicopters had Ohio state flags painted on them alongside the words "Sin City Helly Militia."

Easy Money landed right in front of us and the rest of the choppers came down all around it.

"They're just here for me" Dorktown said. "Keep out of sight."

"Stuff that" I said. "You're my mission partner."

We walked up to Easy Money as Bubury and Jocko climbed out.

Jocko had two sets of handcuffs with him. I figured we were about to die so I reached into my pocket and handed Dorktown my last piece of Bubble Yum. She put it in her mouth and started chewing.

"Wanna go for a ride?" Bubury said.

"I'm so excited" I said. "This is my first time in a helicopter."

"And your last" Jocko said.

Jocko sat us down in some canvas seats

mounted in the cargo hold and cuffed our hands to the seat frames. Then he joined Bubury up front and we took off.

I pondered my existence and its inevitable end as we gained altitude.

"I feel like I should say some last words or something" I said. "How about this. Even when being alive sucked it was way better than being a rock or something."

Dorktown started blowing her first bubble.

"Nah that's no good. Ok how about.... Attachment leads to suffering."

Dorktown's bubble grew bigger.

"Too dark. How about...."

Jocko sauntered back to the cargo hold and lowered the loading ramp.

Dorktown's bubble popped.

Now remember those handcuffs I put on Dorktown back in Van Nuys? Well it turned out she still had the key in her pocket and she'd used it to escape.

While Jocko's back was turned Dorktown stood up and gave him a good hard kick. He lost his balance and fell out of the helicopter. "Create fucking value" she said.

She quoted my book. Well she paraphrased it at least. I wasn't gonna fault her for the obscenity under the circumstances.

Dorktown set me free too.

"Thank you... Torkdown."

"That's not my name anymore Pinto. I go by Dorktown."

We went up to the cockpit. Dorktown hopped into the copilot's seat still chomping away on her gum. I started pushing random buttons.

"What's this one do?" I shouted.

Bubury drew his 1911. When he took his hands off the controls Dorktown took over flying the massive dual rotor armored helicopter.

At this point the flight became much more interesting. I don't know if Dorktown was bad at flying the thing or if she didn't care whether we lived or died.

Little bit of both.

I grabbed Bubury's hands and made sure that no matter where that gun was pointed it wasn't pointed at us. I managed to drag him out of his seat and rip the gun out of his hands. The chopper tipped upward and the gun slid out the back of the open cargo hold. That part went ok.

The next problem was that me and Bubury were sliding toward the back of the helicopter too. We grabbed on to anything we could. We kept trying to fight each other with our feet but that was hard to do. Then Easy Money started tipping sideways and Bubury landed on top of

me. Then we tipped sideways the other way and I landed on top of him. We kept grappling and kicking and punching and wrestling but the flight hurt more than the fight. Then we tipped forward. We slid all the way back up to cockpit. I popped my head in to check in on Dorktown. I looked out the front window. All I could see was ground coming toward us.

"How are we doing?" I shouted.

Dorktown gnawed on her gum and shrugged. She pulled the Chinook out of its nosedive but then we started flying straight up instead.

Me and Bubury slid to the back of the cargo hold again. This time we ended up most of the way out of the open cargo bay door. I grabbed on to the frame of the chopper and Bubury grabbed on to my foot.

I hoped that any second now Dorktown would regain control of the helicopter and we'd level out. But we just kept climbing and climbing. The edge of the stamped steel frame was digging into my fingers. Bubury's feet were dangling in the air. The engines were screaming and the wind was smacking us in the face. Bubury had a firm hold on my shoe.

But ever since Chumdumpster had dragged me behind his motorbike that shoe had only been held on to my foot by a twist-tie. And so that shoe

slipped off. Bubury exited the chopper and tried to learn how to fly. He failed to do so.

Dorktown got Easy Money leveled out and started to bring us down while I acquainted myself with the many guns and rockets and grenade launchers that we had available to us. I started pointing those guns and rockets and grenade launchers at the helicopters on the ground and pulling the triggers. None of the Hellies were expecting this so they all went running in various directions while I disabled or destroyed their aircraft.

Dorktown landed Easy Money.

I grabbed a pair of binoculars and scanned the horizon. The Helly problem was mostly solved but I had discovered a new problem.

Chumdumpster was approaching the factory in the Zombiebeetle. He was still on fire. Well I doubt it was the same fire from the helicopter crash. This was probably some gimmick he came up with and added to his outfit. I wonder if it stays on fire while he sleeps? Anyway it was pretty scary.

Chumdumpster was accompanied by hundreds of blonde soldiers in dozens of vehicles painted up in livery that read "Buckeye Gillies." I found it a matter of great concern and great surprise that one of those vehicles was an M1

Abrams tank. And of course they'd made sure to bring along that stupid guillotine.

"Are the Hellies gone?" Dorktown asked.

"Yeah but now the Gillies are here" I said.

"And they have a tank."

"A tank?" Dorktown asked.

"They're just here for me. Take the Firebird Phoenix and get out of here."

"This ain't one body's tell. It's the tell of us all."

"Huh?"

"This isn't just your story. It's our story."

"Our story" I said. "Ok then. We'll both take the Firebird Phoenix and get out of here."

I took a bow out of the boot of the Frankenbird. Dorktown got into the driver's seat of the Phoenix and I got in the passenger seat. Dorktown burned rubber out of there and we headed out to the front of the factory.

Chumdumpster was coming toward us but he wasn't gonna catch us in that bug. So he sent the three fastest cars from the Buckeye Gillies after us instead.

Dorktown stepped on it. At every turn more Gilly vehicles closed in around us. Dorktown did a couple laps around the factory but they had the place surrounded. The only amusing thing about all of this was that there was no way those half-

century-old clunkers were gonna catch the Phoenix. The race ended when Dorktown tried to lap them and they all blocked her.

The Gillies had rounded up all the escaping Hellies. When we got out of the car all those Helly prisoners started cheering. Not because they liked us but because they thought our car was cool and they thought it was funny that we'd thrashed the Gillies.

I caught a few of the Gillies cheering for us as well. We had brought the future to their doorstep. They'd never seen anything like this sleek and shiny ghoul of a vehicle that had just bested their best.

Chumdumpster pulled up in the Zombiebeetle and stepped out just a few meters away from us. I grabbed my bow and nocked an arrow.

Now as you may recall I'd shot an arrow at him once before and it had just bounced off his suit. This time I had a better idea.

I aimed for one of his red Adidas sneakers. I got him right in the Achilles tendon and he went down. The Hellies all broke into laughter.

A mob of blonde lackeys rushed to his aid but he pushed them away. "Just cut off their damned heads already!" he snarled.

The Gillies took my bow away and prepared the guillotine. They lined us all up. Me first. Then

Dorktown. Then the Hellies.

One of the Gillies who was lining us up stopped to say something to one of the Hellies.

"It's good to see you again" he said. "It's been a long time. I wish it could be under better circumstances."

"Do what you have to do" the Helly replied. "We're all just doing the best we can."

The Gilly hugged the Helly and that was the end of that.

The last time we almost died which was like ten minutes ago Dorktown quoted my book. Or paraphrased it. Anyway I said "Create value." If you didn't read my last book I don't blame you. It was just an advertisement for Firebuddies. Then again I guess this book is really just an advertisement for Firebirds.

But the fact is I might be going away soon. If I'm gonna go through all this trouble to write something down before I die and you're gonna go through all this trouble to read what I wrote before you die then I'm gonna make darn sure I say at least one thing that's at least a little bit useful to you so here it goes.

CREATE VALUE.

You'd be surprised how long I had to run around on this earth screwing up before I figured out the significance of those two words. It would

have been nice if someone else had figured it out sometime in the hundred thousand years before I was born and passed it on to me when I was a kid but that's not how things worked out. The way things worked out is I'm the one who figured it out so now I'm passing it on to you. Pay attention.

Create value. Create value for yourself. That's happiness. Create value for people who don't pay you. That's kindness. Create value for people who do pay you. That's work. Create value for people you like. That's friendship. Create value for people you don't like. That's self-preservation.

My relationship with my pop wasn't transactional like that.

Now who's the softie Dorktown? You have a point. But it's undeniable that an employee's relationship with their boss is transactional right?

Yeah some relationships are transactional. But that sucks. They shouldn't have to be.

They don't have to be. But they usually are.

And you're ok with that??

I never said that this is how things ought to be. I just said this is how things are. I hate it just as much as you do. I gave you my advice. Take my advice if you wanna improve your life.

We would improve our lives more if we all came to see life as inherently valuable.

Any time someone speaks of "value" you

should always ask "To whom?" All value judgements are subjective. My life is valuable to me but not as valuable to you. I do truly wish from the bottom of my heart that all of my fellow humans would give me everything I want without me having to offer anything in return. But I bet most of you out there are reading this because you think I've got something interesting to say and not because you think I'm an inherently valuable human being.

There are a lot of boring people out there with nothing to say. They write books too. Should I tell you to go read those books instead?

Why did those people write? Mostly because they wanted to be seen and heard. Why do you think I write? Yeah it's nice to be seen and heard. But it's more than that. Most of all I'm trying to create some value for the world. It makes me happy to know that I might have improved your life a little bit with my words. Do I expect something from you in return? Yes I do. I want you to become the best person you can be.

I figure if I create some value for the world maybe some value will come back to me. I ain't talking about karma cuz there ain't no magical guarantee this strategy is gonna work. You gotta put your value out there. You gotta try till you die. Whether it pays off or not.

So there's your meaning of life. You've spent your whole life looking for it and I bet you didn't think you'd find it today. But trust me you just did.

Have fun. Be nice. Leave the world a better place than you found it. CREATE VALUE.

Yeah but did we die??

Huh?

Did we get our heads cut off or what??

Oh right. Wouldn't it be funny if I just ended the book here? Like Two-Lane Blacktop. Did you see that movie?

I've never seen a movie.

If we live I'll show you one.

The Abrams tank pulled up next to the guillotine. The hatch opened and three blokes got out. The last one out of the tank was the executioner. He wore a dirty canvas hood with holes cut out for his eyes.

The weird part is he winked at me through one of those eyeholes.

The executioner put me in the stock or whatever you call that thing that holds you in. I dunno I'm not a guillotologist. He tried to pull the little lever thingy and kill me but it was stuck or something. While he messed with it I got to live for a few more seconds.

Dignity emerged from the crowd wearing a

blonde wig. She approached the guillotine. My head was still stuck in the thing but I was kind of able to squirm and look up at her.

"Oh hey Dignity" I said. "I didn't know you were a Gilly."

"I'm not" she said. "I stole a wig."

"Well you look great. What can I do for you?"

"I wanna build those cars. Just like my dad did. I'm here for the job."

"We're about to have an opening for a CEO."

"I was hoping for something more entry-level" she said.

"I was too" I said. "But none of us is anything more or less than what we pretend to be. I met your father by the way. He offered me a job 38 years ago. It turns out I wrote him a letter when I was a kid."

Her mouth dropped. "You're... John Binns?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you said your name was Firebird?!"

You might be wondering where this unlikely conversation was going. We both thought it was going exactly nowhere. But it was at this moment that the conversation started going somewhere because one of the Gillies overheard it.

"Firebird?" the Gilly asked. "Wait. That's Firebird?"

"I heard about him on the CB!" another Gilly shouted. "He's the one that wants to reopen the factory!"

"My mother used to work here" one of the Hellies said.

"Mine too!" a Gilly replied. "What was her name?"

Chumdumpster interrupted but it was kind of hard to hear him over the noise the crowd was making. "Cut his fucking head off!" he cried. "Cut his fucking head off!"

A heap of Gillies gathered around the Firebird Phoenix. "This is it! This is the new Firebird! He built it just like he said he would!"

The executioner started acting weird again. "Get in the tank" he muttered. He said it just loud enough that only I could hear him.

I looked at him.

"Get in the tank" he repeated. He lifted up his hood for a second. It was the bloke who built the Frankenbird. Superturbo!

"Dorktown! Easy Money!" I shouted.

Superturbo set me free and we climbed into the tank. Dorktown grabbed Dignity's hand and they ran to the chopper.

Superturbo pointed to a crawlspace in the front of the tank. "If you crawl into that hole you'll find the controls. Ever play Battlezone?"

Did I ever play Battlezone? What kind of a question was that? I guess he never checked the high score at the boardwalk arcade in Wildwood New Jersey summer 1981.

I crawled into that hole he pointed to and sat down. I grabbed the joysticks and started running over cars.

Superturbo manned the Abrams' machine gun and Dignity womanned Easy Money's machine gun. Easy Money took to the sky and I started running over cars. The cars I couldn't catch got holes in them instead.

The Gillies and the Hellies all scattered on foot. All except the one who couldn't scatter. Chumdumpster.

I headed right for him. He saw the tank coming and started crawling toward the Zombiebeetle.

Did you hesitate??

I did not hesitate.

You frigging hesitated.

Chumdumpster is dead. I killed him in sangfroid. How do you pronounce that word anyway?

"Sahfwah."

There's no way that's how you pronounce it.

You're changing the subject.

CHAPTER 7: DENOUEMENT

Once the battle was over some of the Hellies and Gillies came back with their hands in the air and asked if they could work for us. And they weren't the only ones.

A school bus pulled up and we were joined by Laura and her kid Lucy and the workers from the destroyed Firebuddy factory. Hunkidory and Qwerty and Rosie came along too. They'd even picked up Mr. Nothing along the way. He was wearing that Bandit jacket he murdered Burt Reynolds for. And there were faces I didn't recognize. People who'd heard about what I was trying to do and wanted to be a part of it. Even a convoy of eighteen-wheelers who had heard the news showed up with horns blaring.

That night we set fire to the guillotine. We cheered when the blade dropped because we knew it would never drop again. We cooked over the fire and turned a symbol of death into a source of sustenance.

I got out the boombox and pressed play. John Stewart. Mother Country. Live in Phoenix 1974. Heads weren't gonna roll tonight. Heads were gonna rock.

Dorktown looked at me. "I told you it's not just your dream anymore."