

terrible : )

: ( happiness



Looking out the window, he watched what was to be the last sunset of his life. If he had only known he may have taken a picture or written a poem or just enjoyed it for what it was. But no. Philip sat on the edge of his unmade bed and stared through the dirty pane of glass as if he were watching a bad rerun on an old TV set, only this time hed never see it again. But how could he know such a terrible fate was in store for him that night. How could anyone know? Days blend with the next one, creating an ongoing collection of reruns ad nauseam infinitum dominos spiritous. This wasn't 1981 when cable went off the air at midnight and fade in for the morning cartoons. No, we're living in the Age of Nonstop Information Input. 24-7-365 was the game now. Gone were the days of taking a break from world events, beer commercials, baseball games and bad sitcoms. This was mainlining mainstream 'round the clock. Consume. Expand. Repeat. Fuck yeah.

Sure, Philip was tired of the same old thing, day in and day out, week in and week out. Who wasn't? Who wasn't tired of living with their piss poor decisions and empty bank account. Who wasn't tired of jackass politicians running the country into the red and asking for more blood from the Good People of this Mighty Nation. Who wasn't sick of being sick and watching their loved ones curl up into catatonic in the corner. Who wasn't scared about what tomorrow would bring, or wouldn't, and who would make it to see another tomorrow and remember another yesterday. Come to think of it, why would anyone want to reflect on Days of Yore. They certainly weren't of the halcyon, salad or golden variety. No, these days were grim, glum, and godforsaken. These days were clouded with distant memories of a hope now faded, a bulb that burnt out long ago and never replaced. These were times plagued with desperation of the worst kind, fears no human should bear witness to or wish upon their worst enemy.

From his 32nd floor apartment window, Philip counted the varying shades of orange in the vast collection of clouds that hung languidly above the polluted city below. "How poetic," he mused. "All that has brought me up to this point in life seems so surreal, as if it all happened to someone else. But here I am, sitting in my bedroom, wearing my slippers, looking out my window."

And then, almost on his cue, a bird slammed headfirst into the dirt-smearred window

and plummeted thirty-two stories to its demise, landing on the roof of a parked minivan. It all happened so abruptly, Philip couldn't even tell what kind of bird it was. "Shit," he fell back, almost falling out of his slippers. After a moment of laying sideways on the mattress, he moved to the window for a better look, not that he'd be able to see straight down the building to the sidewalk, but he felt it was important to try nonetheless.

Upon impact, the bird had smudged the blank slate of grime on the window glass, leaving an imprint of its final flight for Philip to inspect. He touched the area of impact with his right hand, for no other reason than to make a humane gesture, as if to say, "You were a living thing. You lived a good life. You did nothing wrong. Rest in peace." or something to that effect. He gazed downward, his forehead resting on the glass, his glasses awkwardly tilting upward distorting his view.

"Damn things," he muttered, taking off the bifocals and rubbing his eyes. It wasn't the first time he'd thought of getting contacts or the laser treatment, but it seemed there was always some issue or another, whether it be convenience or expense, why he never moved forward with the idea. Besides, he thought he looked fine with his current frames. They were a bit wide thus making his face look narrow and puny, but the design was "hip" and if anything were considered the look of the times, however dismal those times may be.

Still, the bird and its sudden death hung heavily on his mind now. More so than the changing hues in the clouds and evening sky, more so than his clunky glasses, and even more so than the rumbling in his empty stomach, which possessed his mind from the moment he awoke until eating what scant meal was available to him. Food was scarce, proper food that is, and that's just how it was, for everyone, save the wealthiest and most insulated from the burdens of everyday folk. But that wouldn't stop Philip from dreaming, lusting over real food, even if it was just freshly cooked and steaming inside his imagination. A man can still dream, can't he?

But how could it have come to this, he wondered, still contemplating the bird's lonely epitaph on his window. How could the lives of so many amount to so little? He was no philosopher, nor scientist or politician, but he did spend many hours during the dreadfully long days bemusing such topics, swatting them back and forth like a good volley of tennis. It was a game he played with himself, taking on each adversarial role, trying to avoid a "good" and "bad" side, but rather keeping the conversation democratic and fair, friendly even, figuring if he didn't have many friends he'd better make due with himself.

Down there, on the streets, the people... meandering listlessly, driving in circles, searching for something, anything to hope for, anything that would scoop up their crumbling lives and whisk them away to a better place, a place where the air

fresh, the trees green, the food abundant. Oh, there it was again: food.

Philip decided to see what was stale and otherwise inedible inside the refrigerator. The door inched open and dull light fell onto the cheap linoleum flooring like spilled soup. From shelf to shelf, remnants of past meals decaying like ancient relics in some museum. Moldy, rotten, putrid... Why not just throw them out, he considered. But he knew why and the reason was as sad as the crusty heel of sourdough wedged in the bottom shelf. It was better to have something than nothing, even if what you had was shit. It gave Philip some bizarre and inexplicable comfort knowing that he was caretaker to a collection of spores and bacteria living inside his very own icebox. It gave him something to look at when he opened the door, knowing well before doing so that its contents were beyond what even the most desperately depraved malnourished creature would consider edible. Still, the sight of such decay was a reminder that uneaten food is never quite that. It eventually is consumed by some form of life, some form of creature, the beast of time, perhaps. What was it he'd heard some folks say, compost happens? Indeed it does, and with great haste it would seem, especially on the shelves of Philip's fridge.

But what was different this time, besides the violent and unexpected death of the feathered friend, as the man-of-the-house stood in front of the dull light spilling onto his slippers, was

discovering a newly formed leftover, a dark-gray fuzzy lump on the bottom shelf in the back, hiding behind a jar of store brand olives. Not only had he never noticed the fuzzy lump before this evening, but he had also overlooked the thread-like spindles growing down behind the crisper bins and to god knows where. Hopefully it was all contained inside the fridge, Philip thought, but there was a chance that whatever it was had already found a way out, into the kitchen... and into the apartment. Strange times indeed.

It was never easy on Philip when such disturbances, however benign or urgent, sprang forth and surprised him. One morning, during an inordinately hot summer spell, he awoke as he typically did, early and groggy, to find two or three maggots wriggling on the beige living room carpet. This before that first sip of morning coffee would test anyone's patience, and it had Philip instantly thrown into an emotional tailspin. Where there's one maggot there most certainly would be more, he deduced, and rushed to the wastebasket.

Like a trail of breadcrumbs leading to safety, a parade of maggots inched out from the rotting and rank sack of trash. Hundreds, maybe thousands of larvae were writhing just under the wastebasket lid in a heap so huge Philip's stomach flopped over and again like a dying fish gasping for life's last bit of breath. Only instead of gasping for breath he exhaled a garbled mess of distaste and without much hesitation, which was a surprising

feat for someone typically paralyzed by too many choices and tough decisions, he grabbed the wastebasket and whisked it out the door, all the while moaning and whimpering down the hallway and into his floor's trash room. He slid the heavy door to the side and chucked the entire wastebasket clear into the deep well of festering, fly riddled garbage.

He quickly checked his hands, arms and clothes for maggots, and found a few clinging on. Shaking his limbs erratically, the maggots flew in different directions, landing on the floor and against the wall. He closed the garbage door and went back to his apartment, keeping a mindful eye for stragglers along the way.

Back in his apartment, he cleaned what needed cleaning with bleach and hot water, ridding every surface of the pasty larvae, despite how natural they were in the cycle of living things. "Baby flies. Disgusting," Philip muttered disapprovingly and flushed the remains of such down the toilet, relinquishing them back to the bowels of nature. His hateful eyes followed the spinning water as it sloshed about, inevitably disappearing into the plumbing. "Rot in hell you squirmy little bitches!"

It took Philip another hour before he could remotely contemplate the idea of sipping coffee, let alone eat breakfast. In fact, the episode with the maggots stuck with him for quite a while, affecting not only his appetite, but his sleep cycle and general mood. Maggots began to creep into his mind –

figuratively speaking of course – and thus end up in his cereal, his bed sheets, his dreams. As much as he tried to shake these thoughts, this plague of maggots if you will, he could not stop thinking about the wastebasket and how heavy it was. There must have been a million maggots inside that thing, he guessed. But they were all gone now, save for the imaginary ones creeping around inside his brain, and no amount of excessive drinking or meditation seemed to rid them from his thoughts. He became increasingly irritable and edgy and exactly three weeks from the day of the incident, Philip decided it was time. Enough was enough. The maggots had to go. But how? It was all too bizarre to think about at that moment, so Philip simply did his best to keep busy with other things, which proved to be more useful than he had anticipated.

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“It’s a good thing, this world wide web, as they have coined it,” he concluded. “Who this they is I’m not certain, but they sure do provide a great service.” Philip sat down in front of his brick-and-mortar computer (that wasn’t the brand name, but an attempt at explaining its age and general technological design) and turned it on. Then went and made some coffee.

The computer took about 7 minutes to boot up, sputtering and wheezing like an old tractor, gears and pistons barely turning over, until the

monitor lit up and asked for his username and security passcode. Back with a hot mug of store-brand mud, the cheap stuff, Philip typed logged in to the operating system.

User: Terrible Happiness  
Passcode: zucchiniSoundoff99

How strange and random his secret information seemed, or would seem to anyone who happened to watch him log on to his computer. Who would know? Nobody... or at least that's what the general population would like to believe. But the current Government Party had an altogether different concept of what was personal and what was private and, more importantly, what was of use to them. If Philip had known that the WWW (world wide web) was in fact invented, instituted, maintained, and monitored by the current Government Party, the very political institution Philip despised more than anything, he might have changed his tune long ago. In fact, he may have tuned out just to spite those fat, nasty fuckers sitting high on the hog in their Great Republic's headquarters had he known what they were plotting, what they were planning...

Alas, ignorance is bliss, and life is short, and those two quips combined formed the perfect mantra for the Great Republic, a mantra which our boy Philip boiled down to this: Enjoy life's pleasures. You never know when they'll rape you again. The rape is a reference to the botched and

bungled Election Cycle (E-Cyc) of 3308. “Has it really been that long?” he dismayed, slurping on his now luke warm cup of weak brown water. “Shit... time flies when you’re having fun.”

Philip let out a little sigh, then a chuckle, then stared at his computer screen for a while, thinking about better days and happier times, wondering if they ever did exist or if he had just dreamed them into reality. He supposed he’d never know for certain, or even live to care about such things, since at this point in history everything felt hopeless and and about as useless as a wet paper bag. Such was the sentiment of millions, if not billions of people living under the rule of the current Government Party of the Great Republic. Where did it all go wrong? It reminded him of a poem from simpler times, a poem by Robert Frost, he recalled the ending went something like:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

As Philip reflected on this last stanza from Frost’s indelible treasure “The Road Not Taken”, he wondered if the poet had lived long enough to witness the state of things here in the year 3314, had he’d have taken the other road... what then? History, Philip believed, was just a series of good

and bad decisions lined up, day after day, leading us to our bitter or sweet demise. He cared not to count how many roads he had not taken, but suffice it to say that the road to hell was paved with them, of this he was certain.

Regardless, the computer screen before his watery and weary eyes faded back into view and it was time to top off his mug with more coffee, if he could even call it that, for he wasn't certain where the beans were coming from or if they were in fact beans altogether. He decided to look into it while standing in the kitchen.

“How could they sell beans that weren't beans?” is what he wanted to know, holding the bag up to the ceiling light, wondering why he never thought to check. They looked like coffee beans should or at least what he figured they should look like, but their uniformity and almost perfect sheen stirred Philip's curiosity enough to delve further into the inspection, however cursory and unprofessional it may be. Hell, he had the time to kill so why not?

“I'll need a magnifying glass... or a microscope...” he decided. Opening the kitchen drawers, rummaging through the crap, it struck him how foolish this was, looking for two items he never once had owned in all his years of living on the 32nd floor of Building 5-38 (in Sector 7 near Quadrant North) so he quickly shifted gears and made the monumental decision to venture outside into the city he despised.

But before doing so he considered ordering one or the other item online, then realized shipping would take days (with the ongoing labor strikes and fuel shortages, probably even longer, much longer) and he was in the mood to figure this shit out now. Beans or not beans. This was the question and this became his mission, for now at least.

The thought of venturing outside into the surrounding world of physical reality made Philip's heart race and his skin clammy. He couldn't help it. Ever since he was just a kid, he suffered panic attacks and emotional breakdowns when in public places, surrounded by other people, even other children. His parents never knew why or what caused this disposition, but they accepted it and learned to cope with their son's abnormality.

"Can't you just deal, for once??" his mother would yank his arm hard to punctuate her parental request, however futile it may have been. Philip would squirm even more and then the wailing would begin. Not so much crying, but outright screaming bloody murder. His shrill voice piercing the eardrums of anyone within fifty paces. People, normal folks, would run, cupping their ears, or if they had to hold their children's hand, would cover just one ear. Once his tantrum cleared an entire supermarket during Saturday shopping. After that his parents left him at home, and shopped during off hours like Tuesday morning or Sunday night, which was all perfectly fine with Philip who never wanted to go shopping in the first place. No, he was

totally content to stay at home where he felt safe, at ease, and in control of things.

But now, at forty-one years of age, both parents long dead and gone, it was his choice to step forth into the outside world and for whatever reason he cared to initiate. He just doubled up on medication before doing so, that's all. A few extra pills would do the trick, gobbling them down with what was left in his mug. "That'll work," Philip figured while locking his apartment door and heading out into the city.

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In part due to its magnitude and in part due to its constant flux of construction taking place of every minute of every waking hour, the city in which Philip lived could have been another universe altogether. Rows of skyscrapers scraping, clawing, their way into infinity along the four, six and sometimes eight lane highways, stretching out as far as one would dare imagine. Blocks upon congested blocks of work-live-shop-eat structures, filled to capacity with shop owners, shop keepers, shop employees, working poor, and just working class, crammed together for better or worse.

On the streets, Philip's mind always wandered, moreso than his person did. He'd catch glimpses, however fleeting, of random strangers staring back at him. Then as quickly as their eyes met, he'd look away, trying not to hold his gaze for

a second longer than is customary in public places. He recalled as a child feeling overwhelmed and frightened at the hundreds (probably just dozens) of faces leering down at him while throwing one of his tantrums, either outside in a park or inside the mall. Who'd want to put up with that racket, now reflecting as an adult. I certainly wouldn't. He kicked a rolled newspaper from the sidewalk into the street.

He had a ways to go before getting to Worth-Mart, the store he always shopped at. As he estimated numerous times before, it generally took about 37 minutes, give or take 3 minutes for crossing streets and traffic. And with construction the way it had been, there was no telling which sidewalk was being rerouted and which detour would lead him in the wrong direction. He knew exactly how to get to Worth-Mart and stuck with the same route, time and again, but any monkey wrench thrown in his path was cause for concern. After all, this was a man of little patience and with almost no ability to make on-the-spot decisions, even if his life depended on it, which would be the case sooner than Philip would ever know.

The one thing, and perhaps only thing, that Philip did enjoy about his walk to the store was passing by or even through Propaganda Park, for it was said, but never proven, to be haunted in some fashion. The very sort of ghouls, spirits, ghosts or apparitions that claimed residence at Propa Park (as it was known by locals) he had always speculated,

but unfortunately had never witnessed face-to-face, or face-to-skull as the case may have been. Still, there were some stories passed down from local generations which reflect varying degrees of similarities to one another. Some tales insist the spirits of buried loved ones were seen wandering about the grounds, smelling flowers in bloom or feeding pigeons, while other stories boast horrific beasts and demons, clawing their way from the ground's surface into the waking world to dine on the flesh of mortals. If he had to choose between believing in the two, Philip undoubtedly would take the latter.

“I mean, really, smelling roses?” he was known to say on the very few occasions of opportunity. “If they didn’t take the time to do it in life, what’s the point of doing it when you’re pushing up daisies.” Depending on the company he was keeping, a few laughs may have been directed his way, but in general, making light of these grave matters was inappropriate, despite however rare the occasions were.

Philip, at times, did creep out of his shell, as a trapdoor spider does: lashing out at the immediate surroundings only to scurry back inside, slamming the door behind him, but never pulling anyone with him. Never. Or rather... never again.

Once in a long while, on his way to Worth-Mart for groceries, if his glance was met by a woman on the streets who bore resemblance to his first and only wife, flashes of a life well lived came

to mind and, for the most part, turned his gloomy mood around if only for a few beautiful moments. But so much of what he thought would remain fresh and vibrant in his memory had become dusted with soot, tarnished with time. The lazy Sunday mornings in bed, an evening stroll by the shoreline, a long weekend away, these scenes were played back on scratched film, through cracked lenses, and against a dark screen. Philip wondered “If the best things in life are free, why on earth is it so damn hard to get seconds?”

Philip would sit in the Propa Park on his favorite bench jotting notes into his little blue book – of big ideas he might add. There, under the massive oak tree towering overhead, hours would pass as he filled the pages with bizarre, disjointed, and sometimes horrific stories, transplanting him from the peaceful park into imaginary worlds of monsters and mystery. One tale, which he was quite fond of, took place on the planet Foodak-Mygar...

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Their company, badly beaten and in need of supplies, nourishment and sleep, continued onward through the battle fields which they were all too familiar with. It seemed as if they were marching in circles, inside an endless labyrinth of hellish proportions, beyond the scope of which any soldier had the ability to comprehend in their fatigued minds. Starving for the simple joy of rest, they

hobbled along with battle-packs and weapons, carrying their dead comrades and the limited supplies that remained.

There was no telling when the next attack might take place, so their guard must always be up and ready, on alert as best as possible. But that was easier said than executed as anyone getting by on three hours of sleep over as many days could surely understand.

No, the going was tough and the tough tried their damndest to keep going, but it was this constant threat of dying in a most gruesome manner, as the fallen comrades splayed and spread about their feet no doubt had, that kept them on the move and on the lookout for any sign of the beasts that lurk about. One of the soldiers craving slumber, was Niklas Daslavich, an infantryman drafted from Russia by the Freedom Federation of Combat, or FFOC. A simple man with aspirations of one day owning a pet store as his grandparents once did, Niklas was drafted during the dark days of the last decade. His dreams, now dashed to the rocks, had turned into nightmares, thanks to his newly appointed position of 2nd Level Infantry. Instead of working with furry friends during the working hours, he found himself wielding a giant hunk of cold steel and killing anything that threatened, or was thought to be a threat, their way of life on earth, his home and home to every soldier he ever knew. Maybe they aren't as evil as we think they are, he considered, stepping over the freshly

slayed body of a former FFOC soldier, his rib cage torn open as if by a hasty child on Christmas morning, ripping apart presents with careless abandon, his entrails flung about like red ribbons, his flesh bits scattered like wrapping paper. Then, as children often do whether it be on Christmas morning or their sixth birthday, the beast would move on to the next present, opening, tearing, shredding until all the presents were opened and their contents removed.

Niklas nearly slipped on the bloody slime from a former soldier's innards-now-outtards, but steadied himself before falling to far. If his family could see him now they may very well not recognize him, suited up in protective battle gear, donning a TAK-997 Laser Rifle complete with rocket launcher and auto-protracting BladeRazer. Leaving his wife and two daughters behind in their shoebox of an apartment was definitely not part of his plan and the only thing on his mind, save for pulling the trigger on the next beast that showed up, was staying alive long enough see the smiling faces of his family once again. Wiping his daughter's shit smeared asshole or changing a wet bed or even scraping vomit from his newly cleaned shirt seemed heavenly chores compared to what he was dealing with on the frontlines of the FFOC nearly 73 million km from home. But, for the time being, he was alive and carrying a loaded weapon and that's about that mattered.

It wasn't until the wearied troops cleared a huge outcropping that their collective fears were realized. Each soldier fraught by a vision so terrifying, their only reaction was to fall on their knees and pray for mercy.

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Philip snapped his blue book shut. "Enough of that," he added, and got up from his favorite park bench. The rose bushes were in full bloom and, despite poking fun and having a laugh at the ghosts' expense (the ones who spend their afterlife stopping to smell the roses) he found himself doing just that. He wasn't alone in his thinking. There were others, not many of them, but he did have company nearby and if he tuned in to their conversations he could just make out bits of what they were saying to one other. Snippets like "... and they weren't even going to... she figured if she didn't tell her... lonely biscuits... another chance to make a go of" He couldn't quite grasp the lonely biscuits part, although he did try and move in closer until the pair of park goers picked up on Philip's eavesdropping and found their way to another section of bushes.

"Lonely biscuits?" Philip almost felt compelled to give chase and demand an explanation of such a bizarre tid-bit of dialog. "I'm curious, and forgive me for prying, but what in the world were you saying about lonely biscuits, anyhow?" He figured asking in a polite fashion would yield better

results as opposed to pestering them for answers. However polite he planned on being, he didn't follow through, and to this day still ruminates over the meaning of lonely biscuits.

Although Philip's nature would have him obsessing about such things until it consumed every watt of mental energy his brain could possibly generate (think maggots), he hadn't thought of lonely biscuits for months, years even. It seemed his compulsion to write every (god damned) thing down into his Little Blue Book of Big Ideas was the root of his current situation, both emotional and financial. He hadn't written anything in months, years even, and now this whimsical notion of documenting his daily routine, however mundane or pointless, seemed utterly out of character and just plain wrong.

Looking deep into the petals of a Bishop's Castle, a medium pink English rose, and inhaling the fragrance, he couldn't help but think about the life he lived before the one he was living. His wife had been dead for 11 years now, and how she enjoyed the heady fragrance of roses. So much so that Philip had her entire casket filled with endless varieties and colors and looking at it you'd think she was a float in the Rose Bowl parade. It was absurd and outrageous and that's exactly how Wendy would have wanted to be remembered. Even Philip, who considered himself far more conservative than Wendy, thought her funeral almost a parade, and that was okay with him and would have been with

her had she been alive to enjoy it. No matter. That was many years ago and all that remained of those times were spotty memories and a child he didn't see much anymore.

Tyler was 11 when his mother died, which now made him 22 and living somewhere overseas, at least he was the last time they spoke over the phone. He was in and out of college, trying his luck with different jobs and experiences. Philip would often smile fondly when hearing about Tyler's current employment situation because he saw himself as a younger man doing the same thing. The two were close, but communication between them would lapse for months and before either realized a year would pass without so much as an email. No harm, no foul. That was just how things went with them. There was always tomorrow, Philip thought. And such would be the mindset of someone completely oblivious to the inevitable turn of events that was at work behind the wall of time, shaping future events and designing the bizarre and unfortunate destiny of Philip J. Bastion, III.

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That was one thing Philip was adamant about when naming their only child. No way was he going to be named after his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Philip J. Bastion, IV? Not a chance. He didn't want his kid suffering the same fate as he did growing up... continually get picked on and chided

by his peers regarding his “III” status. “What, are you some kind of king?” or “That’s so queer!” he would hear from classmates, clamming up into his shell, retreating to the library or hiding out in the woods near the playground.

This faux status of being a “III”, which he claimed no desire to be a part of, was his cross to bear, however small and petty. He’d often leave his numerical and familial ranking off many forms when he could, but it always appeared on government records, medical charts, and bills. So when it came time to pass the torch on to his only child, he snuffed it out and let his wife decide. “I think Tyler would be good, you think?” his wife asked. And Tyler it was.

But this was history and best put aside for the time being. There were more pressing matters which demanded Philip’s immediate attention. That magnifying glass... those beans... the store... What time was it anyway? He checked his watch - 5:41pm. Oh, that’s not bad, he decided and strolled out of Propaganda Park, weaving himself back into the flowing yarns of pedestrian traffic towards Worth-Mart and possibly... beyond.

There’s plenty of time to contemplate, he thought, reaching for his Little Blue Book of Big Ideas, but suddenly refraining and grabbing the coffee bean instead, pinching it between his fore finger and thumb, holding it out to the light. It’s just too perfect, he believed and tucked it back into his pocket.

Construction, as anticipated, but never embraced, was once again happening directly in line of Philip's chosen route, which gave him one of two choices: take a left and walk around the block or take a right. Or, if he felt it wasn't in the cards that evening, turn around and go back home. He'd come too far for that, so a left or right were his only options and either way would be another block which, in this city, felt like a mile.

Philip deliberated over the two directions, listing the pros and cons for each as he stood in front of a massive crane which was hoisting an I-beam into the sky against the backdrop of a steel building skeleton. The beeping of a truck bounced around his head and he wondered what the hell was being built. He looked around for signs but didn't see any. It was probably more fancy condos that no one, or at least no one he knew, could afford to live in. Who the hell can afford such a lavish place? Not me, he knew. But times weren't bad for every citizen of the Great Republic. War may have filled the cemeteries with coffins of dead soldiers and collateral damage, but it also lined the coffers of already wealthy Captains of Industry, politicians and just about anyone who was immediately involved with either of the two. No, Philip did not consider himself a profiteer by any stretch of the imagination, unless of course if one felt his rantings and writings on the WWW were making him rich with pride, or maybe even fans, but certainly not the Almighty Currency.

Having kept his opinions mostly to himself his whole life (personal, political, philosophical and otherwise) he found the WWW to provide the only outlet for any amount of “blood letting” as he considered it. After all, why get into it with your neighbor, he figured. So while he kept to himself in public, Philip made no such concessions on the WWW nor in his Little Blue Book. He enjoyed the anonymity of the WWW and took great pleasure in “letting people have it” when he felt they were out of line or out of touch with the current state of the world they lived in, or rather, the world Philip lived in.

While he'd never transpose words from his Little Blue Book onto the WWW, he would sometimes continue with his scribblings, picking up where he left off and flesh out his thoughts even more as his alter ego, Terrible Happiness. And should anyone ever get a hold of his book, not that anyone would want to, but if they did and if they were privy to the ramblings of Terrible Happiness, the Powers That Be would have reason to apprehend, question and, as they are known to do, imprison anyone who they believed were a threat, no matter how insignificant, to the Great Republic and its good citizens. The very thought never crossed Philip's mind, until he decided to walk right instead of left. And that has made all the difference.

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If there was one thing Philip was sure of it was his sense of direction. No matter where he was, or when he was as he liked to say, he'd know the way to go. Not that this particular skill was very marketable or in high demand, but he was known to relish in circumventing congested traffic jams or navigating his way through the Public Mall. Despite this self-proclaimed "talent" he rarely put it to use since he spent most of his waking days inside in his stuffy – but safe! – apartment.

What he could use was a more adventurous spirit, one that got him out and about more often, one that tested his mettle and forced him to engage in his surroundings, for god's sake. There was a whole world out there just waiting to be explored, and it wasn't just on the WWW either. It may just be right around the corner. Regardless, Philip was destined to live an insulated existence unless external forces would step in and take the wheel from his white knuckled hands, saying something like "Get your lazy ass in the backseat, buddy, it's time for a ride."

It was his obsessive behavior that Philip was imprisoned by, a condition many people suffer from but all too often shrugged off as eccentric or kooky behavior. Oh, that's just Philip, his mother used to say. There were plenty folks out there who were afraid of lightning, and who shouldn't be? The stuff could kill you! But it was this "irrational" fear or, in Philip's case, behavior which made his public excursions monumental events followed by periods

of great depression and anxiety. And today was no exception.

“Why the hell did they have to be doing construction today? It’s almost 6:00 for Christ’s sake,” he muttered on his way down sidewalk. Taking a right wasn’t part of the plan, today, but it was what he chose and with every step he tried harder and harder to live with the decision. Cutting down alleys could shave some time of the trip and save him some leg work, but Philip was adverse to alleys. He’d rather go swimming with sharks wearing a meat bathing suit and a bloody nose. Alleys were off limits as far as he was concerned. Drug users, pushers, degenerates, crack-heads (if the stuff still existed anymore), gangbangers, and your generic scumbags resided in such areas. But, he agreed to himself, if he found one that looked safe enough he would give it a whirl. This wasn’t such a bad section of the city, the sun wasn’t down yet and, by some stroke of random happenstance, Philip was feeling a touch adventurous. So he decided, against his better judgement and all that defined his character up to that point in his life, to cut down the next alley.

If Philip was feeling the least bit giddy from his walk to Worth-Mart that day at that moment, it was probably due in part to the “humming” light as he called it, a buzzing warm glow that fades in during this time of year, right after the Halloween holiday. Of course, Halloween hadn’t been a national holiday since it was banned in 2831, but

from everything Philip read up and learned about All Hallow's Eve as a kid, he was pretty sure he would have enjoyed it. There were some underground groups who celebrated it covertly, which wasn't such a big deal anymore, and he always thought he might seek one out and join in the festivities some year... but he never did. Still it was fun to imagine the spooky traditions and children dressed in costumes, running from house to house asking for tricks or treats. Which reminded Philip of a story he once read by an author he could not recall the name of. It was about a group of about four kids, all around 15 years of age or thereabouts, and they were out on Halloween night trick-or-treating, but mostly tricking, and it was way after all the youngsters had gone to bed and were in their sugar comas by now, but the four punks were still out raising hell around their neighborhood. Anyhow, it was between 3am and 4am when one of the punks had the horrible idea of daring each other to sneak into someone's house and scare the shit out of the people sleeping in bed. It would only work if the door wasn't locked or there was some way into the house without breaking a window or making noise. After some bickering and ego bashing, they all agreed to give it a try. One would give it a go while the other three waited outside somewhere under the cover of darkness. The first one up was Peter Roos, who was blessed with the gift of playing it cool and acting older than his age, so being the youngest of the group didn't get in the

way most of the time. The remaining three, Michael Upton, Jimmy Finn and Darby Krenshaw huddled nearby behind a huge azalea shrub across the street. Peter skulked across the dimly lit street and made his way to the back of the house of his choosing. It was a tidy cape with neat landscaping and Grand Marquis in the driveway, which was definitely the sign that seniors called this place home. All the lights were out inside and Peter found that the back porch door was unlocked. He slowly pushed it open and carefully crept inside. Back in the azalea bush, his pals were betting whether or not he'd whimper out or stick with the dare and follow through. They quietly waited for some indication that he made it inside the house. The streets of this quaint neighborhood were void of pedestrians, cars and early risers, which was typical of the small city of Wiltonville, Illinois, but for a Halloween night that was as crisp and clear as this one, it almost didn't seem appropriate. It was too quiet. Shouldn't there be spirits walking about, haunting the empty streets and tormenting the souls of the living? Where were the black cats and ghouls? What about the rattling of chains, the creaking of doors, the cracking of bones? The three friends, hunched together, their breath visible from the cold, waited and watched the house across the street. Then, a scream, some shouting, and a gun shot rang out, shattering the night's silence into a million shards of terror. Lights in the house turned on then more screaming. His friends imagined Peter running out of the house,

laughing hysterically, giddy with the success of scaring the daylight out of an old couple in bed, something only few have ever let alone dream up, but with every fraction of a second their hearts surged with adrenaline and their hopes of seeing their lone friend join them under the azalea shrub faded until they had to make a choice: stay and deal with all that goes along with being accomplices to home invasion and potential death of your friend or get the hell out of there. And with one more fraction of a second the decision would be made for them.

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Philip kept rubbing the coffee bean in his pocket like a rosary bead, or rosary bean one might say. His mind often wandered where he physically dared not, so he'd constantly ponder some pretty awful thoughts, some of which people were sure to have either experienced or participated in at a point in this world's history he was certain. Was he the only one who imagined how horrific it would be to at one moment be gently holding your good friend's newborn in your arms ("No, go ahead, you can hold her.") and the next grab it by the ankles and swing it like a baseball bat against the nearest hard surface, smashing its head into a globby mess of bashed baby brains? Was he the only one who imagined replacing his unsuspecting coworker's bottled water with hydrochloric acid and waiting to hear him

garble in agony from the nearby cubicle when he swigs a sip? These scenarios rolled around Philip's cluttered and confused mind all too often and that worried him. But he was still normal, right? He would never do such terrible things... right? On the outset, there was no telling one way or another, but deep down inside his bowels, Philip would continue to wrestle with these imaginings for what remained of his seemingly insignificant life.

He had forgotten altogether that Crucible Books, a used and antique bookstore he frequented many years ago, was located on the very block he was walking by. For the sake of nostalgia, he wanted to duck in and poke around. There would be time to make Worth-Mart afterward.

The Big Choice was going on this term cycle for a new Leader of the Great Republic, and if there was a hotbed of political and philosophical discussion taking place, it happened at Crucible Books. But he was surprised the establishment was still in operation. Only months ago it had been bombed by members of the radical quasi-terrorist Federal Loyalist Organization (Go with the FLO! was a slogan plastered around the city and spray painted on walls, boxcars and in subways), but the explosive device was faulty and poorly made, creating more of a smoke bomb that fumigated the shop as if they were fogging for roaches or termites instead of trying to kill people. And as hard as the owners tried to clean the smell of carbon, sulphur

and chemicals it wouldn't go away, and that was certain as soon as Philip stepped inside.

The rank odor that permeated Crucible Books might have been new, but the cheerful bell on the door was still in place and ringing with every customer that entered or left. This sound, the tinkling chime, lifted his spirits and changed his mood. Just moments before he was lost in thought, brooding and moody from the buzzing light outside that covered every surface like peach colored dust, then he was suddenly transported by the ringing of the bell.

“Of course,” setting his mind straight. “The dream...”

=====

Not one but two weeks back, Philip had written down in best detail as he could, the intricacies of a fabulous dream he had that night, a dream that took place in widescreen with surround sound, one of those intense dreams that isn't easily forgotten. It took place on a grassy bluff of sorts, a hilly area that overlooked the ocean, which ocean he did not know, but where ever it was the weather was cool and breezy, that much he did recall. And he was riding a bicycle, one of those beach cruisers with wide tires and a chunky frame and a wicker basket that hung from the handlebars in the front. He was coasting down the hill towards the ocean, towards the bay, and he could see the boats that filled the

harbor, bobbing and swaying with every gust of wind. But he wasn't alone and that's partly why he could remember it so well. Coasting next to him was Wendy, riding a similar bike but hers was a different color. Then there was Trent, a childhood friend of Philip. He, too, was coasting on a bicycle, although his was a leaner ride and Trent was peddling faster than the other two. They swerved among one another, all thrilled to be alive, thrilled to be enjoying each other's company. Philip could remember looking over at Wendy and thinking just how amazing it was to be with her again.

Their baskets were full of makings for a picnic lunch – bread, cheese, fruit, meats, olives and wine. While Trent continued on toward the harbor, Philip and Wendy found an open area, the most level ground they could, and spread out the lunch on a red-and-white checkered tablecloth. It took Philip several times to unfold and lay the tablecloth down just right, but he eventually did and the two were soon digging into their plates of food while staring across the picturesque bay.

“Man,” Philip said between bites, his mouth full of olives. “Gorgeous, huh?” Wendy nodded and sliced some apple.

Philip spit an olive pit onto the grass. “You know, I've been thinking. Maybe we should...” A ding-a-ling interrupted him mid-sentence.

“Hey guys.” It was Trent sitting on his bike. “You should check out the dock. Lots of old bouys

and traps. Fun stuff.” Trent smiled down at the couple sitting with their picnic lunch.

“Yeah, we might do that,” Wendy glanced up from her empty glass of red at Trent, ringing that damn bike bell. Ding-ding, ding... ding-ding... ding...

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They met at Crucible Books, but their shifts only overlapped about two hours during the noon rush so there was never much time for fooling around. She preferred the night shift and he the morning. She was a late sleeper, he liked the morning for sipping coffee and listening to News Radio or whatever station was generating a signal that early in the day. Neither was making a career out of the gig, but they did enjoy the clientele, the free books and coffee. Both had aspirations for something more, something they weren't entirely sure of when asked by friends or relatives, but they definitely knew it wasn't going to be found among the shelves at Crucible Books. Well, at least Wendy was certain.

By virtue of his “condition”, Philip wasn't long for any job that required patience and concentration or being quiet all day. Then again, he didn't care for dealing with customers or answering phones and solving a customer's problem, so he was really screwed. And in a time when the Great Republic was trying rebuilding itself (its international image as a Power Player) after the

Massive Market Crash and thousands of citizens were out of work, beggars shouldn't be choosers – but somehow Philip, via his charm and wit, found a way to be both and charmed his way right into Wendy's bed. Ah, the good old days. Reckless romping. That's the stuff. Reckless romping indeed.

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He would, on random occasions without any form of early warning, black out when writing only to wake up hours later (or minutes depending on where he happened to be) and have to reread what was scrawled inside the pages of his Little Blue Book of Big Ideas as if someone had momentarily hijacked his thoughts. Philip would think nothing of it and continue with his scribbles and notes, picking up where he left off. He'd often have to reread paragraphs several times to recollect his thought process at that instant, struggling to make sense of his rantings as they seemed out of place and out of character. He was indifferent to much of what he read, dismissing the content as wild and nonsensical, but he would find kernels of concepts, pieces of constructs which pleased him immensely. One of which was a story about a man who, upon waking up one morning, was suffering from terrible cramps in and around his stomach.

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Doubled over with pain, falling out of bed, he crawled toward the bathroom, thinking it was some form of food poisoning, impacted bowels or just a bad case of gas. The man was an immigrant from Finland living in a basement apartment somewhere in New York City. His name was Eerik Haajanen and he had never experienced pain quite like what he was experiencing as he wriggled across the concrete floor. By the time he reached the toilet, his underpants were filled with a copious amount blood and some viscous jelly-like goo. His screams for help were lost inside the cavernous building as his basement apartment was located between hot water boilers and cooling units for the apartments above him. He had no immediate neighbors or flat mates living with him to call for help and even if he considered calling 911 he had lost his cell phone three nights ago on his way back from work as a longshoreman.

By the time he was able to hoist himself onto the filthy toilet, he was no longer screaming for help, but for sweet mercy from God Almighty. When his back end, now slick with blood, made contact with the wooden toilet seat, the pain was so intense Eerik wasn't sure how long he could remain in a seated position. He was slumped forward with hands on his ankles, sweating, shivering and praying that whatever was causing such agony would soon be gone. He heard the sloshing of goo dripping from his anus, he felt a sharp pain shoot up through his gut and then... a splash. Something fell out

from inside. Then another – splash. Then again and again, and with every splash the pain was lessening until after a total of seven splashes, there was silence. He found that his screaming had stopped along with the twisting of his guts. Eerik could breathe once more and slowly, very slowly, moved off the john, not sitting on his butt, rather crouching alongside the tiled wall.

He was alive, dehydrated and still in pain, but alive nonetheless. It was only when he leaned to flush the toilet that he made the unfortunate mistake of glancing into the bowl, realizing the terrifying fact that its contents had just come from the inside of his torn and weeping anal cavity.

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It was this sort of story that Philip might awaken to, drooling over the pages, pencil on the ground. He'd snort and look around as if he planned on nodding off for a cat nap, then snap his book shut and move along. Rarely did he share these stories (or the fact that he didn't remember writing them) with coworkers, friends or even Wendy – especially Wendy. Why bother? No, that wouldn't have been a good thing. Afterall, that was the old Philip. We're here to talk about the new one. But not new and improved, just new. That would suffice for now.

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It wasn't that reading bedeviled Philip. That wasn't the case at all. Philip J. Bastion, III was literate and spoke quite eloquently at times, if only in circles, but why reading posed a particular challenge to him was on account of his fidgety nature. It's no great fact that fidgety people find it difficult to sit in one place for a very long time doing one thing. And when that one thing is flipping pages of a book and staring at words, he just couldn't muster the patience no matter how many times he tried. Writing them was one thing. Reading them was something altogether different. Why else would he have to reread page upon page before realizing he had already done just that? His mind just didn't work the way of his peers, and that was that.

Philip soon realized he was nauseas from the sulphur smell and decided to step outside Crucible Books for a breath of air, thinking he might go back in after he cleared his head a bit, but never did. Once again, he was struck by the quality of light, this time for another reason altogether. It was the lack of shadows that helped wash out the crisp details, turning down the contrast he thought. Every surface was diffused, every angle less sharp. He took it all in while inhaling the fresh air, as fresh as city air could be, then continued down the sidewalk keeping an eye out for that alley.

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Since he spent most of his time inside, and for that matter, in the Safe Zone, inhabitants from the more destitute areas of the city weren't commonplace for Philip. And he liked it that way. He wished no harm on the derelects, drug-addled and homeless that wandered the bleak streets of the city, nor did he wish to make their acquaintance, either. And he found little comfort in the Protection Authority as well. Protection of your person was up to you, he believed. These were desperate times which created desperate people and there was no telling when you could find yourself in the wrong place among the wrong people at the wrong time. And, unfortunately, Philip was about to find out how right he was.

The alley he found adequate was sandwiched between an empty apartment building and a closed indescrpt bucket shop, one of those that might have been used by a fly-by-night sales team or campaign headquarters for the Liberty Party. You see them everywhere but moreso in this area. Philip stood at the entrance long enough to get a feel for the location, but was quickly on his way as not to look lost, which is one vibe you don't want to broadcast in these parts.

He hadn't walked but ten paces before the deal happened. Two men, dressed in shabby, grease-covered jackets, ripped pants and worn shoes, were exchanging drugs for money or money for drugs or drugs for sex... Philip wasn't quite sure, but his instinct to absorb the scenery and take in the

surroundings betrayed him at that very moment. He made eye contact with only one of the men, but it may have well been with an entire mob of them, at least that's what it felt like to Philip. He diverted his eye line after he knew it was too late and quickened his pace.

“Yo, mistah! What you lookin’ at?” Philip heard from behind. Perhaps he should have ignored the question. Perhaps he should have kept walking. Perhaps he should have done both. But as he hadn't spent much time on the streets growing up and as he felt it was rude to pretend someone wasn't asking you a question and as he simply was a dumb white guy with a terminal case of niavete, Philip stopped and turned around.

“Who... me?” squeaked from his throat.

The two men, their wobbly gaits and lanky bodies looking like they stumbled out of a zombie film, approached Philip, who made note that their wall of toxic body odor hit him long before their fists did.

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At Wendy's request, her funeral was scheduled from dusk until dark. She loved candles and mood lighting and wanted everyone to hold small votives during the ceremony. Philip wasn't against the idea of having candles, but felt an evening funeral was inappropriate. However, it was something they worked out together in her living will and there

were indeed hundreds of candles at the evening ceremony.

“It will be so beautiful,” she continued to convince Philip, reaching for his hand from her hospital bed, her I.V. tubes in the way.

“Anything is beautiful when you’re involved,” he mustered, swallowing the lump in his throat.

Her cancer proved too formidable a foe and despite a valiant attempt at cheating death twice, Wendy passed on a rainy Wednesday morning while Philip slept in the chair next to her hospital bed. It was three days before her 35th birthday.

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While others may go beyond the physical borders of their worlds, Philip traveled to worlds far beyond what others could imagine. It was this knack which kept him from despair. A wife gone and a son living elsewhere might be enough of a catalyst for a lesser man to wallow in loneliness and pity. But by virtue of his affable disposition and optimistic abandon, Philip carried on, more or less. He could imagine himself behind a podium in front of a massive and captive audience, delivering his State of Philip speech:

“We may be a nation on the brink of collapse and a people on the edge of ruin, but I will not add my problems to the collective spirit. Weep

not for my torn heart and battered soul, as time will rebuild both stronger and more powerful than they were before this day. You can be certain that if we should cross paths on the street and exchange smiles, my mood will be lifted by your kind eyes and thoughtful wishes. Bless you all and bless the Great Republic. Thank you!”

The crowd would erupt into cheers, whistling, chanting as Philip walked off the stage and disappeared into the future.

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For a period of time, it seemed every day he was reminded in some fashion that there were individuals more capable of greater accomplishments than what Philip could ever or would ever be able to manifest. But what was to be done about this shabby, short hand the game of life had dealt him? Surely he had the wherewithal to change course and steer his ship, his junk, his skiff in a new direction with the promising winds of whim filling his sails and the prow of his vessel raised high as his chin. He lifted his arm, pointing toward the magnificent yet uncertain horizon.

“On this day my destiny lies beyond that wall of doubt and, with the help of strong black coffee and a dash of luck, from this day forward I vow to press onward into the unknown. May the Gods, however mighty or foolish, look down upon my singular plight as worthy of their blessings. I am

but one man, but nonetheless, a man with good intentions and a clean conscience. Let this moment mark the beginning of what is to come and what can be!”

Waves lapped at the prow and he braced an icy splash of sea water against his face, still pointing at the horizon. “The future will not stop me!!!”

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It wasn't until his head stopped thumping that his vision slowly came into focus. Once he could discern certain shapes and patterns, he realized he was staring at an air conditioner in a pile of trash. It was still a blobby mess of textures, but enough to remember where he was and what probably had happened to him. He motioned to feel his face, but his right arm wouldn't allow it. Pain crept into his body, coursed through his muscles, bones and made a non-stop trip clear into his brain. And once Pain arrived, images of its putrid smelling passengers weren't far behind. There was a time when Philip could pride himself, boast even, on the fact that he had never been mugged or had never participated in a brawl. All of his front teeth were intact and unchipped and the only bone he'd ever broken was the fifth metatarsel on his right foot... the only bone until taking the alley shortcut.

As a kid, Philip really did try to do the right thing. He kept to himself, interminably lost in thought, but when he did venture out of his bubble

to make friends, they were generally decent connections with interesting and mindful children. On the other hand, when it came to impressing the girls and scoring that first kiss, he wasn't such a marksman. Truth be told, there aren't many 10-year-old Cassanovas swooning sweethearts and sweeping them off their feet for romantic getaways, as Philip's track record with girls would prove this time and time again. But he did try and always added, Do the best with what you got and make the most of a bad situation. And he was able to follow this creed for the better part of his adult life, although he was finding it difficult under his current circumstances.

He now knew what it must feel like to be in a train wreck, he thought, attempting to lift himself off the grimy cold pavement to a standing position, barely accomplishing the monumental task. If he didn't have a broken rib, he had several, or at least that's how it felt inside. Hands scraped, face bruised and bloody, and his jacket smelled of urine. *Did they piss on me?* He smelled the sleeves of his damp jacket. *My god they did. Those motherfuckers pissed on me! How fucking barbaric!* He wanted to lash out and yell at them, but after looking down one length of the alley to the other, they were no where to be found. *Scum.*

Then a horrible thought jabbed him in the back of his head like a ice pick. His wallet... his cell phone... his Little Blue Book of Big Ideas. *All gone!* Along with screaming, the urge to cry overwhelmed

his beaten, limp body. He didn't just want to curse his scumbag assailants out, he wanted to kill them. Instead of crying, a bubbling gyser of vitriol and vengeance surged through his blood like bull running the streets of Madrid and erupted from his mouth in a most uncharacteristic manner.

“You mother fuckers!” His booming statement rolled down the alley and faded into the night air. “You don't know who you're messing with!”

Was this a threat? Had Philip been pushed by the wrong people at the wrong time in the wrong place? What was to become of his personal items? These questions and many more were bouncing around his brain like lottery balls bouncing around chaotically in one of those clear boxes with a fan, each ball containing a different message that would trigger a unique reaction if lined up in the correct sequence resulting in a certain outcome for the particular ticket holder of said sequence. But as he stood in that alley, rocking forward on his toes then back on his heels, the flurry of questions in Philip's mind continued to bounce and bounce and bounce and bounce...

*The coffee bean!*

Philip shoved his hand into his pocket, assuming his drug-addled assailants had taken it along with everything else to grind up and smoke, but his fingers found it nestled deep in the corner of the

pocket liner along with a ball of lint. He pulled it out and looked it over, which for some bizarre reason brought images of the bird hitting his bedroom window to mind. Then he realized that when he left his apartment building he hadn't even checked to see if he could find it laying about on the ground. He'd have to remember to do so when he got back from Worth-Mart, which... *Was it even open? What time is it anyways?* Philip would have checked his watch but the scumbags took that, too. He made it out of the alley without further incident and promised himself he'd take the long way home, a splendid idea he concluded.

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After the Chemical Wars of 2017 had robbed earth of most human lifeform and the Nebulic Magnetic Storms that soon followed erased much of modern day technology and The Blight of 2022 stripped the earth of its plant life and the Great Quake reshaped much of the earth's topography, there wasn't much in the way of normality as we think of it. In fact by 2031, nearly 91% of earth's surface was pretty much a smoldering ruin of caustic aftermath, brought on by mankind's greed, ignorance and inability to think sustainably. How many people must we create? How many mouths must we feed? How much can we afford to consume? How much can we take from the earth before giving back?

Earth had been around for four-and-a-half billion years (give or take a few million) and it took humans only 3,000 years (some argue just 200) to scrape, suck, strip, cut, burn, churn, dig, and destroy just about every square mile and kilometer of its surface for their “survival”. But of course - survival!

Decades ticked by before the ReBuilding began. It started in areas that were least affected by the aforementioned benchmarks; Northern Russia, Mongolia, inner Australia, northern Canada and parts of Africa. All major cities and metropolitan hubs were completely leveled, husks of their former stature. Communication via satellite was nonexistent, which meant cell phones, digital signals, television, and just about every electronic device was rendered useless. Not that there were any people to participate in chat rooms or food blogs. Even radio was off the air and anything which used or depended on microchips and CPUs was essentially a play toy. For all of their ingenuity and inventiveness, humankind overlooked the simple concept of measured progress: you can only get so big before you buckle.

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Worth-Mart was a run-of-the-mill “super” store which housed rows upon rows of cheap products for not-so-cheap prices,. But as the not-so-average patron that he was, Philip would make sure to learn the names of as many employees as he could so

they'd remember *him* as the guy who remembered *them*. He wasn't trying to be flippant or cheeky, just cordial. And since he hadn't been shopping there in ages it seemed, he took this opportunity, eleven minutes before closing, to test his memory for employee names – without looking at their name tag.

“Greg!” The teenage employee in aisle 14 didn't look up at Philip who was waving his hand in his direction. *Nope, not Greg*. Philip would try this technique several times with no success before wondering if he was shopping in the right store. This is Worth-Mart, isn't it? He found the aisle with office products and stationary.

There were three types of magnifying glasses, only one of which was going to be useful. He snatched it from the hanging hook and beelined for checkout.

“Jaimalal!” he announced, plopping the magnifying glass on the rubber conveyer belt.

“It's *Jailama*.” The cashier scanned the item. “But thanks for trying. Total comes to 7.79.” Philip studied her tired face and reached for his...

“Damn... that's right.” Philip wasn't thinking straight.

“You know your face is bleeding,” *Jailama* pointed at his right eyebrow. “You okay?”

“Not really, but thanks for asking.” And he skulked out of Worth-Mart without the magnifying glass.

Those lottery balls that had been bouncing around in Philip's cavernous head were starting to line up into a sequence, forming some sort of code that he would soon become privy to. Imagining all the information he had written and recorded in that little book of his along with his wallet and cell phone... in the hands of loser scum with terrible body odor... it added up to some terrifying conclusions and future scenarios that Philip hardly wanted to think about. His apartment. His passwords. His contacts. His personal information. Traded for drugs? Sex? A shower? A hot meal? Where would it all end up?

Never before had Philip entertained such wild ideas about his current circumstance. Never before had he felt so violated and dejected by his surroundings. Never before had he envisioned taking revenge and the law into his own hands until now. He thought about going to the authorities and filing a report, but he could already hear their laughter, mocking his poor judgement in taking a shortcut down an alley, especially one in that area of the city. No, laughter was the last thing he needed right now. And going back to the alley to poke around for his assailants was even more ridiculous a notion. All that remained for him to do was limp back to his apartment and pray it wasn't already broken into. They didn't have the building key or room key, so that brought some comfort to his battered brain. Did they even look like the type to care? Maybe they just wanted the money and Bank

Card? He only had one card and without the password it seemed of little use. More importantly was his Little Blue Book of Big Ideas, something he cherished far more than money or bank cards. The notion that months worth of his private thoughts could be discarded into the gutter, or broadcast for millions to read, sent Philip into a panic attack, the likes of he'd never experienced before. His body, beaten just hours before, started to shiver and cramp. The throbbing in his head was reared *its* head once again and his knees buckled, hurtling his body toward the sidewalk for another face-to-face with cold concrete.

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But praying for mercy was not Niklas's style, and nor would it have been his father's. He was born into a long line of fighters; strong men with strong constitutions, and it was this lineage that brought Niklas 73 million km from home on a routine recon mission for the FFOC... and it was this very lineage that was going to save his company.

The alien beasts upon which the troops set sights were crowded around an enormous heap of fellow soldiers, some dead and some squirming for their lives. The creatures were cherry picking their bodies, lifting them to their massive, open jaws and gnashing their flesh to shreds. The victims' wails of agony were heard across the hellish landscape, washing over Niklas and his company as gusts of

dying breath. Nearly a dozen of these heinous demons circled the heap of humans, snatching them up with their numerous tendrils and gobbling them down, one after another.

As Niklas clutched his TAK-997 Laser Rifle, he realized it wouldn't take long for these beasts, often referred to as Jandors by previous expeditions, to finish their feast and move on for more, and his company of 31 would prove a decent find should they stay where they currently were.

"We mustn't stay here," Niklas urged the others. With their Major long dead and the soldiers stretched thin, physically and psychologically, common sense and words of wisdom were as scant as rations.

"But there's nothing for us to go back to," a fellow infantryman chimed in.

Niklas considered the man's words and recounted the last two days of grueling travel through terrain so treacherous, even a one-way excursion seemed impossible. The emaciated soldier was right. It was pointless to retreat to their craft, which was disabled and without fuel, and the prospects of their D-S (distress signal) reaching a third party in the vicinity of Foodak-Mygar would have been a miracle, to say the least. And while praying for mercy may not have been Niklas's style, praying for miracles was.

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While Philip may have held together emotionally during Wendy's cancer and excruciatingly slow-motion demise, it was Tyler who fell apart and wasn't quite the same following his mother's funeral. He became withdrawn, even moreso than before, and lashed out at his father, friends and the world around him, however small it may have been at that point in his life. He was 11 at the time and more vulnerable than he ever knew.

Philip did what he could to console him, but found it increasingly difficult dealing with his son's erratic behavior. Some days he would stay in his room, staring at the wall, curled up on his bed, while other days a chair might end up thrown at said wall. From week to week, Philip never knew what Tyler he'd be waking up to. He denied medication or therapy, which only made it worse and harder for Philip to help.

He never imagined himself being widowed at age 37 to father an only child, but this was how the dice tumbled and stopped. He supposed no one ever really knows what lies ahead and he was no exception. Wendy was gone and there was nothing he could do about it and the more he tried to console Tyler, the more despondant he became. This is how it was with the father and son until, at age 13, Tyler hopped a train north and went missing. Philip wanted nothing more than to get Tyler back home, but knew, deep inside, that somehow, some way, his son was going to be okay.

He knew that Tyler was aware of how much his father loved him and would do anything to make him happy, and this was the way he could do that, by letting go.

Now, with his wife permanently gone and his kid on an emotional sabbatical, Philip was left with two holes in his heart, two more than any man should have. His life became more routine than he had hoped and no matter how many pep talks he gave himself it was still an uphill battle to complete the most simple chore. He struggled with his work as a safety inspector for a private firm, and took more time off than he was allowed, making waves with his employer and employees. Barely holding on to his job, he stumbled through the days feeling a failure, feeling lost in a familiar place. At one point, after dropping a bread heel with protein butter onto the floor, he realized that he hadn't left his apartment for five days. He stared at the bread heel that was staring back at him. *Five days...*

After that incident, an epiphany of sorts, Philip snapped out of his depressed stupor which forced himself to change his tune. *Do what you can with what you got and make the best of a bad situation.* It wasn't long before Philip's new attitude ushered him into better days and the only real issue of uncertainty that plagued his mind was that of Tyler's whereabouts. But everytime he considered going to the authorities to file a report, his gut instinct prevented it. Tyler would come back when he was ready and that's exactly how it happened.

=====

Pods. Mossy, gray pods were floating in a stew of Eerik's blood and toilet water. He counted about seven of them, but knew there must have been some that sank to the bottom, hidden under the dark, red froth that skimmed the top of the bowl. The physical pain he had endured just moments before was small potatoes compared to the acute mental disturbance he was now dealing with. The closer he inspected the pods, the more he was feeling sick.

What at first looked like fuzzy hairs were actually thousands of flagellum, wriggling in synchronicity, slowly spinning and moving the pods. Whatever Eerik was looking at were *living organisms!* Were they parasites? Giant bacteria? Eggs? There was no telling. But the real question Eerik wanted answered was... *were there any still inside of him?* As the thought crossed his mind, he gagged and vomited then passed out in the warm puddle of his acidic wretch.

=====

In the back of Philip's mind, which was a cluttered mess of mostly useless scraps of information and memories, some not so useless, was a feeling of sadness that he could never quite fully understand. It wasn't until he woke up on the sidewalk, staring

yet again at something completely unfamiliar and out of focus, that he was able to make some sense of it, this sadness of his. More than just a fleeting sensation attributed to someone dying (Wendy), a son missing (Tyler), a routine work week, the inevitability of his own death, or fresh road kill, it lingered for a while and stuck around long enough to mix with other emotions, thus creating new feelings altogether. These odd combinations fluxuated throughout the day and always gave Philip something to ruminate and struggle with. If it wasn't one feeling, it was *two* feelings, mabe even three, all rolled into an *emotion amalgam*. And, Philip concluded, there seemed to be no cure for them nor end to them and all that was left to do was cut with the grain and take every day square on the chin.

*I gotta get back to the place...* Philip began concocting paranoid scenarios that, when added to his ongoing "emotion amalgam", created yet another level of psychological distress, this time something more akin to a *hybrid* of emotion amalgams. But not even he could understand or articulate such a tangled nest of systems and perhaps maybe that was for the best. He picked himself up and staggered back to Building 5-38 in Sector 7 near Quadrant North. He had a long way to go, which gave him plenty of time to think about his situation, or predicament as it may very well be, and what was to be done about it, if anything could. And with every step of the way, his thoughts, although very much entrenched in the moment,

lapsed into a flashing series of vignettes that helped him forget about the discomfort and weariness enveloping his body, mind and weakened spirit. Each with its own random quality, palette and frame... each formed from the bouncing lottery balls inside Philip's rattled brain.

=====

She'd always felt that while building her empire, she was living somewhere else entirely, as if managing the construction from a remote location with the help of nameless, faceless worker bees. What *didn't* help was her ambitions for perfection which, as anyone working in the corporate world of computer sales and manufacturing, would turn the most savvy individual into a money-starved, success-driven, blood-thirsty train wreck before they could ever enjoy their 401K retirement plan while sitting on the deck of their \$401K second home in Boca Raton, Florida or Aspen, Colorado or Whistler, Canada or Belize for that matter. Corporate sales was a tough racket and one must be tough as a two-dollar steak to make a go of it, let alone thrive. But thriving was just what Brenda Margonte set out to do and, come hell *and* high water, she did exactly that. At the expense of a failed marriage, estranged children, zero friends, back-stabbing coworkers, hypertension, and an endless appetite for alcohol, she'd somehow remained steadfast in her belief that *It was all worth it, dammit.*

While sipping her vodka twist on a routine flight to the midwest for a sales seminar, Brenda clicked away at her laptop, busy with the minute details of an annual report. When she looked out the window between opening data files, she could just make out metropolitan areas from the cluster of twinkling lights. The flight out of Boston had been clear and smooth, like her drink of choice, but provided little comfort in way of seating. Booking last minute was always a crap shoot, and all too often a gamble she had to take. Invading her space from the middle seat was the blob of a man stuffed into a cheap suit, undoubtedly traveling on his own business endeavor. He was fidgety and continued to knock Brenda's elbow off the arm rest until she gave up and let him have his way, realizing there was no winning against that much girth. She moved her drink to the right-hand side of the pull-down tray and continued inputting data into a spreadsheet.

The drive from the Denver airport terminal to her hotel in Castle Rock was longer than she had imagined. Her rental car stank of cigarette smoke, which was one vice she never succumbed to over the years, and after filing a complaint with the rental company she had some charges and fees waived from the bill. The further she got away from Denver, the more she wondered why the managing operations team of RecoStat chose the podunk town of Castle Rock for new company territory. But the parent company was renovating a former textile plant into a new computer parts manufacturing hub,

which meant Brenda's skill set was needed. It was a combination of tax incentives, state politics and a flagging economy which had forced them in this remote direction. Their hands weren't tied and the decisions were tactical if anything, but Brenda wasn't the least bit jazzed about spending the next three days in a town of less than 50,000 people. In fact, the whole idea of this business trip made her anxious from the start and Brenda wasn't the least bit jazzed about being anxious, either.

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The other personal items, along with the coffee bean, which Philip's odiferous assailants neglected to remove from his person were his building card and apartment key. About half-way home Philip remembered that he would need both to get back inside into safety. He felt the building card in his back pocket and the one apartment door key in his front left pocket. That his assailants knew where he lived was of grave concern to Philip, but without the building card and key, he considered it highly improbable that putrid pair would take the time or have the gumption to pay him a visit without a convenient way into the premises. However, if his personal items (wallet, cell phone, little book) were to get into the wrong hands, perhaps the hands of someone wishing to extort money for instance, the lack of card and key would hardly prevent a person of such criminal intentions from doing just that.

This chilling scenario is what Philip had feared most and tried his best to rid the concern from his immediate thoughts, only to replace it with a longing for his Little Blue Book and all of its Big Ideas.

*Lonely biscuits*, he recalled fondly. *Lonely biscuits...*

His apartment was as he left it, disorganized and stuffy, but there was no sign of breaking and entering and rummaging and taking otherwise. No sooner than entering he remembered the he forgot to look for the bird. There was too much to think about and the bird had slipped his mind. He'd look for it in the morning. The smudged epitaph was still visible on the outside of the window as a reminder.

Philip made his way to the sofa and with a huge sigh, collapsed backwards in exhaustion and pain, kicking his feet up onto the cluttered coffee table. As his mind began melting into the pillow, a feeling of complete euphoria washed over his body and seeped into his core. All that he was capable of doing was closing his eyelids and falling into deepest slumber.

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It wasn't how he imagined killing someone if given the choice, his thumbs pressing hard into the man's throat, but Shelby McIniman was short on choices at this juncture in life and if he wanted to see

another day himself, he'd have to make peace with the way things were going for him and finish the job he started. Period. Squeezing the breath out of someone actually made him laugh a little bit, if only on the inside. While he was known for starting a lot of projects over the 51 years of his life, he'd never really finished many of them. In fact, now that he was thinking about it, he could count on his left hand the number of endeavors he'd consider to be "finished". For Shelby it seemed that the easiest way to finish a project was to start a new one, and if that didn't work, try something else. The projects ran the gamut from harebrained business ideas to pyramid scams and betting pools. They'd also include personal projects like building model replicas of WWII battleships, repairing defunct cars, adding on new additions to his trailer, and he'd even throw in his three marriages as projects that, while definitely were *finished*, couldn't in any way be considered true successes. Didn't mean they weren't fun while they lasted, but you really shouldn't move on to the next until the one you're working on is officially over. But to Shelby, wives were like cereal boxes in the cupboard; when you're tired of Frosted Flakes, it might be time for Fruit Loops.

At 6-foot 5-inches, he dwarfed many of his construction coworkers and a hard hat added to his magnitude. He worked drywall, painting, and general building gigs in the south west and Northern California, depending on the time of year and the abundance of work. After spending a few

dry spells in Colorado, he found a decent run of construction projects just south of the Sacramento area, in and around Lodi. Along with the endless suburban sprawl and strip malls, the area was rampant with meth labs, tweakers and all that accompanies such depravity. Shelby wasn't known to partake in the hard drugs, but he did enjoy his Jack and coke, or straight up, and American beer, although he stopped drinking Budweiser after it was sold to a foreign company. He didn't mind (or even consider) that his powertools were from China, but drinking imported beer was against his better judgement. And that was Shelby in a nutshell, full of double-standards and short on common sense.

But when you “follow the work” you typically end up with some strange associates and random circumstances, all of which can formulate a series of unforeseen events triggered by the slightest infraction of trust or personal space. After finding himself in some rather awkward and potentially dangerous situations over the years, Shelby had managed to walk away with a better understanding of how to deal with similar problems should they occur in the future. He could recall such an incident while working on an oil rig in Wyoming when the drill pipe jammed and the collar bolts were popping off like bullets. If he continued to hold on, they'd surely find him in the morning with a chest full of broken bolts, dead and cold. Even Shelby was smart enough to realize the job wasn't worth his own life, no matter how much of a wreck it was at that time.

Back then he was married to Alana and thinking about having a kid of their own. They met while working a flooring job in Cheyene. She was the office manager at Tilton Bros. Construction and he was one of the hired hands. A few dinner dates turned into several weeks of screwing which lead to a hasty marriage and then on to the topic of children. Alana was ready, willing and more than able. Shelby was more than able, but neither willing nor ready. The more Alana begged and bickered, the more Shelby lost interest, and on the eve of their second anniversary, he left town and headed south to Arizona, where only the paperwork for the divorce followed him. He was worried that Alana might leave her mother's in Wyoming to find him on site somewhere, letting him have it and throw a fit about not getting her pregnant. But that scenario only played itself out in his imagination.

=====

Tyler was a different (read: *happier*) person when came back home. Philip noticed it immediately. It had been almost two years since his father had seen him crack even the slightest of a smile, and now he was beaming with high-adventure stories about being on the road with like-minded skater rats, punk rockers and throw-away kids. His hair was tinted green, his nose was pierced, and a few tattoos decorated his arms, all obviously done by non-professionals. But he was back home and, despite

his new getup, Philip was overwhelmed with joy to see that his forlorn and estranged son was alive and standing in front of him eating a sandwich.

He'd hopped a train north and eventually, after a few weeks of on-and-off hitchhiking, ended up on the streets of Winnipeg. Maybe it wasn't the ideal location for living off the land, but that's how it went for Tyler and he see managed to get by just fine. He'd tell his father he had to *work shit out about mom*, and *put things into perspective* on his own terms. Philip was surprised with Tyler's eloquence on the matter and nodded in agreement as he spun tales of dodging the cops and squatting in abandoned warehouse buildings. *I'm just glad you're back*, Philip would add.

It wasn't long after Tyler's homecoming that the two were back on track with life's routine at home. Having missed quite a bit of school, Philip had to make arrangements with the education district and find a way to assimilate him into his grade appropriate classes. But what Philip found remarkable was that Tyler had picked up the habit of reading while he was on his emotional sabbatical. In fact, he'd become rather astute when it came to topics of literary and political importance. This newly found penchat for learning impressed the administration at the high school which made it much easier for Tyler to pick up where he left off and stay in the same grade. Sure he'd have to take a few extra-cirricular math and science courses, but if it meant reuniting with his former classmates, he

was okay with that. And it was simply grand for Philip as well.

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*The only thing worse than drinking alone at a dive bar in a podunk town while on a business trip, Brenda thought while poking the ice cubes in her cheap vodka twist with the plastic stirrer, would be having to share the same table with a podunk inhabitant of the opposite gender. Because she knew that as an attractive single woman, it was inevitable that some lug would find an excuse (however pathetic it might be) to introduce himself and offer to buy her a drink (however cheap it might be) and that she would have to decline said offer (however generous it might be.)*

Not that she had anything against a good time with a Good Time Joe. She could recall numerous alcohol induced business trip flings initiated by the “just one drink” line and some of which that were better left forgotten. But Brenda was alone, and in more ways than one, whether she would ever concede the fact to anyone other than her therapist. So when Dale Williams offered to buy her a drink, her only request was that it be a double Jameson’s with one cube of ice, and wondered if that could be considered *two* drinks instead of the “just one drink” protocol. Such things didn’t concern Dale Williams as he was only looking for a

Good Time Jane while in town on business from Boston.

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When Philip opened his crusty eyelids, he almost expected to find himself staring at a fuzzy heap of trash or the feet of pedestrians. Instead, the ceiling tiles of his apartment faded into view. He'd only been sleeping for an hour and the evening could still be considered *young*. His knees hurt, back hurt, arms hurt, ribs... he quickly realized that there wasn't a cubic inch of his body that *didn't* hurt. So he nearly crept to the bathroom to gulp down some Ibuprofen or Aspirin or whatever variety of pain killer he could find in the medicine cabinet.

When he turned off the bathroom light, the glow of his computer screen reminded him that he may have some form of E-message waiting in his WWW Mailbox, even if it was only junk spam. He logged on.

User: Terrible Happiness

Passcode: zucchiniSoundoff99

He was having a hard time focusing on the screen and reading the small fonts. The evening's events were more than he could fathom and his head echoed with various bits of dialog and pulsed with snapshots of situations.

*Yo, mistab! What you lookin' at? Yo, mistab! What you lookin' at?*

Philip would try his best to rewrite a follow-up to that fateful question over and over, without any success, and erasing it altogether just wasn't a possibility. He was stuck with the ramifications of his poor judgement and there was nothing to be done. Just about the only shred of decent news he would find comforting came to him by way of his computer. It was a message from Tyler with the subject: Dad, Go with the FLO! He clicked and opened. Tyler had joined the Federal Loyalist Organization, gotten married, and his wife was expecting. Tyler's message continued: ... *and, if it's a boy we're going to name him after you, dad. Philip. He'll be Philip J. Bastion, IV! Won't that be cool?*

Sadly, the only thing that crossed Philip's mind at that very moment was not his son's marriage or becoming a grandfather, but the subject line of Tyler's message. He knew that any reference to FLO on the WWW was subject to scrutiny and punishment by the Great Republic and the Protection Authority. This, coupled with the fact that his Little Blue Book of Big Ideas, his cell phone and his wallet were now floating around the city, probably being sold, circulated and distributed somewhere on the Dark Market this very moment, turned his stomach more ways than he'd ever known possible. Vomit spewed onto the keyboard and he remembered seeing all the pills he had just

swallowed bouncing around from key to key... like lottery balls.

=====

In Phoenix, jobs were abundant and Shelby had his pick of them as well as, more importantly, of women. From beautiful to trashy, busy to bawdy, he acquainted himself with them all and then some. Early morning, lunch time, late afternoon, and evening sessions with his lady friends got him through the week, until weekends when he had several to juggle.

But, as was to be expected, there was one lady friend that he was particularly fond of by the name of Lucinda Hernandez, a Mexican-American beauty with an insatiable appetite for his jackhammer. She worked at a family owned and operated store that Shelby frequented for fresh cut meats, handmade chorizo and chicken tamales, but what he favored most were the generous helpings of head delivered in his pick-up truck.

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*How could he be so careless? Philip was mystified with Tyler's stupidity. Sending me messages with the mention of FLO to my government issued computer? I haven't heard from him in months and this is what I get? Visions of Protection Authority Troops bounding into his apartment flooded his mind and prompted him to*

shut the blinds and check to make sure that he had locked the door behind him. If the PATs did show up they'd certainly confiscate his government issued computer along with every shred of literary or liberal evidence that happened to be laying about. Philip quickly tucked that all away as well. *Why would he do such a thing?* Unless Tyler wanted the PATs after his father, which had momentarily popped into his clouded brain. He could see no reason for this and vanquished the foolish speculation even as a remote possibility. But it wasn't gone for long, and Philip continued to obsess over his son's reckless message and his news of marriage and all that entails, round and round like a Mobius strip, always finding himself right back where he started.

He reached behind the particle board desk and yanked the power cords and InfoLines from the wall socket, shutting down the computer and cutting it off from the outside world. For a fleeting moment Philip felt as though he had dodged a bullet, then a knocking on his apartment door fired another one his way, but he was too flustered to play it cool... and he felt his underwear sag with warm, moist excrement. Which reminded him of the time he got sick on the way to school.

He really wasn't feeling very good and told his mother about having a stomach ache, but she either didn't buy it or just figured it would go away, so off Philip went to the bus stop. As if standing in line waiting didn't add to his feeling of nausea,

sitting for twenty minutes on a bumpy bus ride with no fresh air would certainly jostle things around inside.

He did get a window seat, so he just watched the scenery as his stomach flopped back and forth with every sway and turn the bus made. It was just a matter of time before its contents would find their way out of his mouth and onto his navy blue hooded sweatshirt. Feeling self-conscious about being sick, he didn't want anyone to know about the puke, Philip thought it best to *do away* with the evidence. So, instead of scraping the mess onto the floor where the bus driver would notice or an annoying classmate would see and tattle, he mushed it all into the front of his sweatshirt. This wasn't the most brilliant idea as he simply managed to create a huge, rancid stain about as round as 33LP record smack-dab on the front of his navy blue sweatshirt. It was just about the most distgusting thing that no one saw, and thank goodness for that, Philip thought.

On the playground later that day, one of his annoying classmates wanted to know what happened to his sweatshirt. As far as he can remember, Philip claimed that he spilled orange juice onto it at lunch and didn't have anything to change into. And as far as he can remember, that's what they were inclined to believe.

But now instead of standing on the playground with a self-induced vomit stain embedded into his hooded sweatshirt, he was 47

years old standing in his apartment living room with a sizeable dump leaking from his skivvies. *My, my, how times change and how they stay the same.*

=====

Not only did Brenda manage to weasel *two* double Jameson's from Dale Williams, but she was able to unload her whole dinner bill onto his tab before they left the bar for his hotel room. Alcohol, the social lubricant indeed. By the time she could say thanks for the drinks, she was knees down, ass up, and her face was being pushed into a polyester bed spread that matched the polyester curtains at the Castle Vista Motel.

There wasn't much in the way of sentiment between the two, not that either one of them gave a damn. It was a get-it-on-and-try-for-seconds kinda night and each party was on board for the same ride, only in different seats. They aimed for thirds, but the lubricant – social and otherwise – had worn at that point and today was looking more like tomorrow, so the two dismounted and called it a night. It was then that Brenda realized she couldn't kick Dale out of her room and fall asleep on the bed because it wasn't her room they were in to begin with. He didn't care either way, but she wanted to wake up alone, especially with the hangover she was anticipating.

Brenda collected her explosion of clothes, thanked Dale for picking up her tab and got back to

her room just before 4:00. After a quick hot shower, she fell asleep to the sound of the freeway, finding humor in the matching polyester curtains and polyester bed spread.

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Eerik would awake from his stupor of shock to find the toilet bowl teeming with a mass of pods, far more than were evident before passing out. And they had grown not only in number, but in size. They went from the size of a mango seed, which was easily passed through Eerik's anus, to nearly *three times* as big. The pods seemed to be more active as their movement was visible, not only in terms of locomotion, but from within. They were swollen and wriggling with something under their flesh. The flagellum had lengthened into a thick, matted shag which gave the illusion of hair and the only sound Eerik could hear was from each one touching the other in the now sticky, blood-soaked toilet water... until one of the bigger pods split open making a popping sound, reminding Eerik of squeezing bubble wrap inside the surprise Christmas package from his family in Finland. Only this particular package he was staring at in the toilet wasn't full of cookies or candies, but contained a horrific surprise nonetheless.

=====

The Federal Loyalist Organization wasn't as serious as Philip imagined and nor had it been for some time now. National News had declared that the members of FLO had increasingly become "soft around the edges" and "politically benign" rendering the flimsy organization "a motley collection of myopic misanthropes". Which would explain the dud D.I.Y. explosive at Crucible Books. But if he believed these opinions to be true, they painted his son as a loser. And that was most certainly, in Philip's eyes, simply *untrue*.

However, his fatherly concerns and responsibilities were in need of adjustment and he felt that if it was important to Tyler, than in some strange way it should be important to Tyler's dad. *But Philip J. Bastion, IV? What was he thinking?*

He approached the apartment door, his underpants loaded with cooling feces, and inspected the eye-hole to see who was knocking. It was his neighbor, Mrs. Yamagata, her hair wrapped up in curlers and a bandana.

"Two men came. You not here. They give me this." She handed Philip a manila envelope and, in exchange, he offered the stink of his soiled shorts.

"Oh." Her face pinched, hands waving. "Something stink. Smell bad. Oh. That not right." With that, Mrs. Yamagata stepped backwards and rushed down the hall to the safety of her apartment.

Philip turned the manila envelope around, hoping to find some form of writing which would

explain its contents. All he found were the handwritten words scribbled in pencil: XzucchiniXsoundoff99X. He felt as if he might fill his pants with more brown sauce, but he just didn't have it in him this time. It seemed that Philip had about all the shit he could take.

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It wasn't possible to count with the naked eye what was crawling out of the pods gaping slit, he'd only estimate there must have been millions of them. They looked to be a cross between a crab, an earwig, and a tick, but could jump like fleas as Eerik immediately discovered. Several landed on his face and he swatted them off, then mashed them into the white bathroom tiles with his bare foot. Another pod split open – pop! – then another. At that point, as Eerik watched his toilet bowl grow into a squirming heap of *things*, his only option was to run. And that is exactly what he did.

It was widely known, but perhaps he'd forgotten, that people in New York generally do not speak Finnish. They, of course, would recognize that someone was speaking the language, “Oh, that's definitely Portugese,” or “I think that's Korean,” but picking up on Finnish let alone understanding it would be quite the feat, even in an international city such as New York City. But this didn't stop Eerik from explaining to every pedestrian he ran past that “eggs came out of my

behind... in my toilet... and now they grow into many things like bugs..." Even if he were speaking in English, no one would believe him or care enough to help or even know how they *could* help. When he wasn't running for his life and scared out of his mind, Eerik could get by with some English phrases and greetings. He'd only been in the states for about six months and was learning what he could, but the extenuating circumstance of shitting out mossy pods negated a lot of what he had learned and it took a few blocks before he could form thoughts in English, however choppy it sounded.

"My room... my bathroom, it's full of bugs. Believe me. I... they came from stomach," Eerik rubbed his belly while explaining to the lady florist behind the counter.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Just stop right there, mister." Maya Umbadu held up her hands in disgust. "I don't wanna hear about your bugs."

"Please. Call the police... or someone! Now!" pleaded Eerik, but Maya would have nothing to do with neither the condition of his apartment's bathroom nor the insides of his stomach.

"I'm sorry, mister, but you'll have to leave." She pointed to the door and Eerik sprinted out of the shop miffed as to why Maya didn't care enough to call the cops. What Eerik didn't seem to grasp is that when a total stranger corners you and explains in broken English with a Finnish accent that they just crapped out a nest of bugs that's piled in a heap

on the john of their apartment, it doesn't matter if you're in New York City, New Mexico or Newfoundland -- IT AIN'T YOUR PROBLEM. Period. End of story.

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When the front door light clicked on, Michael Upton, Jimmy Finn and Darby Krenshaw knew it was time to leave – and fast. Running across the street would surely blow their cover and bolting down the sidewalk would be just as obvious, so they turned and ran through a neighbor's yard which, through a series of side streets and backyards, funneled them into the Regent Park woods... but what then?

Their friend might be shot, wounded, dead even, and no matter how far their legs would take them they would certainly be questioned by the police. Their parents, teachers and classmates all knew the four palled around together, which made their chances of skating over the thin ice of an interrogation nearly impossible. Nearly.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Jimmy railed, beating the air with his fists.

“What if he's dead? Shit, guys. What if that guy shot him?” Michael chimed in with his anxiety.

“Jesus, would you calm down. Just calm down,” Darby, always the pragmatist of the group, tried to stamp out any fear of being implicated. “We

just gotta think of what to do, what to do next, that's all."

"Whatta you mean, Darby? It's not like we can just pretend it didn't happen. Fuck that!" Jimmy continued his tirade.

"Just cool it, okay? Just shut up for a second. Let me think," Darby needed some quiet to form a plan, always forming a plan.

Michael pulled out his cell phone. Darby swatted it out of his hands.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Michael squawked.

"You asshole," Darby jumped on his words. "Stopping you from calling anyone, that's what. Just the both of you, just calm the fuck down. Jesus."

An owl squawked from a nearby tree before taking flight. Without mentioning it aloud, the three realized that their Halloween trick hadn't quite delivered the treat they were hoping for. But if Darby had his way, and he usually did, they might make it out of the woods, in more ways than one.

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Beyond the blow jobs and big boobs, the discount meats and homemade tamales, Shelby genuinely liked Lucinda Hernandez, which was more he could say for her god forsaken Cocker Spaniel, Pico. Sure he was cute and melted everyone's hearts, but the damn mutt would not stop yip, yip, yipping all the

god damn day and would not stop shit, shit, shitting all over the god damn double-wide. But Lucinda doted on Pico paw-over-footpad to the point where Shelby felt like the *other man*, or as if he were being cheated on right in front of his face. Either way, Lucinda's undying affection for Pico did not bode well for their future together, as short term as it was destined to be.

The day he left (Shelby not the dog) was the morning he stepped out of their creaky bed onto a not so pico pile of poo. When his weight pushed down, the dog shit squished up between every toe on his right foot, setting aflame what would be the last straw of the couple's tinderbox relationship. It was this moment that pulled the trigger of Shelby's fully loaded, semi-automatic temper and riddled his patience with enough ammo to drop a dinosaur.

He'd never kick or abuse an animal, nor would he lay a finger on Lucinda, but everything else was fair game. Dressers, mirrors, baskets, book shelves, tables, chairs, and finally the junky television set were all victims of collateral damage while Lucinda screamed bloody murder and Pico yip, yip, yipped and shit, shit, shit his brains out under the bed frame. The severity of Shelby's rage was intermittently mocked every time he accidentally stepped on one of Pico's squeaky toys, fanning the flames even moreso, and adding a touch of the absurd to an otherwise violent mess.

After the dust and the pillow stuffing settled, Lucinda appeared in the kitchen doorway wrapped in a blanket, her face red from screaming, her face wet from crying. Shelby, in boxers and a dirty tank top, sat on the couch with head in hands, blood pooling around his knuckles and dripping down his arms. He'd officially snapped, to say the least, and both of them knew there wasn't any chance of piecing it all back together again.

The clinking of Pico's collar tag came down the hall. Shelby uncovered his eyes to face his runt of a nemesis. The dog was shaking and wide-eyed, but would get over it. Lucinda bent down and scooped Pico into her arms, comforting him with words.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's not your fault," she whispered, Pico licking the salty tears from her cheek.

Shelby looked at the two, knowing that she was right, that it wasn't the little shitbag's fault, but knowing that she was wrong about it being okay. It wasn't going to be okay. Not for Shelby it wasn't. All that was left to do was grab his tools, some clothes and hit the road. Sure he'd start to feel like a total bastard pulling out of the driveway and he'd definitely suffer from serious guilt and a twinge of genuine sadness somewhere on Interstate 10 heading west, but by the time he reached Los Angeles later that evening, his grieving had subsided and he was already on the mend. Shelby knew that there wasn't anything a good blow job from a

teenage tramp couldn't fix. *Yeah*, he thought, staring at the girl's blond hair between his legs, *it's going to be okay.*

=====

*Two men?* Philip replayed the night's events in his mind while taking a long shower and putting on new clothes. He hadn't opened the manila envelope yet, its contents still a mystery. *There's no way it could have been those two scumbags.* It seemed too coincidental yet at the same time oddly appropriate. He'd forgotten to ask Mrs. Yamagata what the two men looked like and decided to pay her a visit.

On his way down the hall, it struck Philip that in the five years of living on the 32nd floor of Building 5-38 (in Sector 7 near Quadrant North), he had never knocked on any neighbor's door for any reason. This wasn't a great tragedy as Philip kept to himself, scurrying in and out of his apartment like that Trap Door Spider, often spending weeks inside. But couldn't remember a single time when he felt the need to impose on a neighbor, and a sense of anxiety tugged at his gut after he rapped three times on Mrs. Yamagata's door.

After all, he just wanted to know about the two men that gave her the manila envelope, or at least what they looked like. Were they gangly? Did they reek of body odor? Any details would help, and possibly quell his worries, so he was hoping that Mrs. Yamagata remembered some details.

Her door swung open and as soon as she layed eyes on Philip she cupped her hand over her nose.

“Mrs. Yamagata. It’s okay. I got rid of the smell,” he assured her. She lowered her hand, cautiously.

“That was bad stink,” she added, the fragrance of something delicious wafting from inside her apartment kitchen.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Mrs. Yamagata,” Philip continued.

“Betty. You call me Betty.”

“Okay, Betty. I was hoping you could tell me more about the two men who gave you that manila envelope?”

“Oh,” Betty laughed a bit. “Sorry. They here few days ago. I forgot until tonight. Sorry.”

“A few days? What did they look like?” The anxiety in his gut tugged a little bit more.

“Hmmm... one had big ears. Both sunglasses. Very nice. No problems.”

Philip prodded for more answers. “Did they mention where they were from, a business perhaps?”

“No, no. Just said give to man in 3247. That you, right?”

“Yes. That’s me, but...” his thought was interrupted by Betty. “Sorry. Cooking now. Gonna burn. Sorry.”

And with that she swung her door shut, leaving Philip alone in the dimly lit, badly decorated

hallway. It was at that moment that a connection was made, a connection between what he had subconsciously seen and what his growing paranoia may have manifested out of thin space. Across the room, almost indiscernable and obscured by a floor lamp, Philip could swear he saw a “Go with the FLO!” poster tacked to Mrs. Yamagata’s living room wall.

He felt he had reason to bang on her door again, demanding more answers to his questions. But what Philip *thought* and what Philip *did* were often at odds with one another, in a constant state of strife for mental land rights, an ongoing battle between Smart vs. Stupid, an endless seesaw ride with Do! on one side and Don’t! on another. For Philip, life was at times complicated with decisions yet simplistic in design.

True, it was said by some that living under the flag of the Great Republic had tinkered with the minds of its people, but Philip would argue that there were undoubtedly a vast collection of folks who were predisposed to such manipulation. *Was I one of them?* He remembered reading a banned eBlast by the late Kirwin Blonski in which he ranted and raved that “...the current Dictatorship has slowly lifted up the hoods on the engines of its ‘Great Citizens’... and secretly replaced their spark plugs with sandwich meat.” Not only was his article vanquished and taken off the WWW, but it was widely suspected that Blonski had suffered a similar fate.

Whether you believed in what he wrote or not, Philip didn't think you should end up dead because of it. He knew that few had the courage to step forward and make their opinions known on the WWW and realized it was a slippery slope should you choose to take the plunge. Which is why he was becoming increasingly anxious about the events of the evening and all that had transpired since that damn bird smashed into his apartment window.

=====

"Where'd you park your car?" Darby asked Michael, who was quick to reply.

"My car? What's your deal, man? This is nuts"

"Yes, fuckwad, your car. Where is it?" Darby needed Michael for the information.

Jimmy chimed in. "What the hell do we need his car for, Darby?"

"I think I have an idea," added Darby.

"We don't even know what the fuck happened back there, man! We gotta check it out!" Michael's voice shot through the woods and beyond.

"Jesus christ Mike, would you keep it down? You want the whole town to hear? My god."

"Jimmy's right, Mike," Darby continued. "Let's just keep it quiet, keep cool. I know we're all a bit fucked up right now but if we're gonna fix this

we have to be level headed about it. Are you guys with me on this?"

There was a pause in the discourse, interrupted only by Michael's voice.

"What's your idea."

=====

Brenda had often wondered what was so *continental* about the free Continental Breakfast offered at hotels and motels across the country. *Is this the North American Continental Breakfast here at the Castle Vista Motel?* This curiosity prompted her to do a quick Internet search while munching on her dry wheat toast and sipping her Darjeeling tea. She also wondered if she'd bump into Dale Williams and his overgrown mustache in the motel dining area, but didn't cross paths with him until she pulled into the parking lot of the renovated textile plant, now owned by RecoStat. He was leaning against his truck, sucking on a cigarette.

"Mornin', sunshine," Dale turned his head and exhaled a cloud of smoke. "How's the hangover?"

Brenda looked up at the man who just five hours before was involved in a most intimate manner with her backside. She pulled up the emergency brake and turned off the rental car.

"You know those things will kill you," she snapped.

Dale lifted the cigarette to his lips in a theatrical fashion and took another drag. "Tell me about it."

"I didn't know you were involved with RecoStat," Brenda stepped out of the car and onto the paved lot.

"Never said I wasn't," Dale fired off another puff of smoke, this time in Brenda's direction. She was deciding if she found this man to be utterly revolting, devilishly charming or a dangerous collision of both.

"Hey, if you really want to impress a girl, try blowing a smoke ring out of your ass. I haven't seen that one before."

A wide smile appeared under Dale's even wider mustache and he tossed the cigarette butt onto the ground, stamping it out with his leather boot.

"Never said I couldn't," tucking his hands behind his belt buckle. "But I'd feel obliged to give it a whirl in front of a captive audience... if you knew where I could find one."

*Both, Brenda decided. He was definitely both.*

=====

Back in his apartment, Philip looked over the manila envelope once more before opening it, inspecting the corners, feeling for lumps, checking for powder. Dirty Deliveries, chemical warfare, were a common method of subversive terrorism and would have

fallen within the spectrum of possibilities for the night's events, at least in terms of the direction things were headed for Philip. The UUU (Users United Underground) assumed this was exactly how they smudged out Kirwin Blonski, but who *they* were was still under investigation and was considered to be a shape-shifting identity difficult to trace and even more difficult to isolate.

*How could they know my password?* The only person he could think of that knew his password was... *Tyler*. He was the only one who had used Philip's GICOMP (Government Issue Computer) which made him the only person who would know his private password: zucchinisoundoff99. But just how private was it? *There is good reason to be paranoid*, Philip assured with himself and he opened the manila envelope.

Back in the day, Philip had heard of stories about the Great Republic from coworkers at Crucible Books that he felt sounded far flung, but eerily plausible. One such tale woven through the tangled grapevine had Philip thinking about the two men who hand delivered the manila envelope. It was rumored that the Great Republic had, over the years, collected the depraved and depressed off the streets, drugging them, knocking them out, then sequestered the group to remote locations, underground laboratories or "emotional mine fields" as one of his former coworkers put it, wherein the subjects would undergo rigorous physical and psychological tests for reconditioning

of the brain, of their identity, essentially pressing the restart button and wiping much of their former life clear and clean off the blackboard. They would appear on the other side as trained PATs, wound up like toy robots, programmed for servitude and slavery for the Greater Good of the Great Republic.

As an employee of Crucible Books it wasn't unusual or uncommon to hear theories such as this one, and Philip enjoyed cherry picking the ones he thought were interesting or at least entertaining. He didn't put much stock in the legitimacy of the tales or his coworkers, except for Wendy who had her own impartial agenda which Philip aligned himself with. The two would commiserate during their overlapping shifts, but mostly outside of work or in private. But as he removed the contents of the envelope, he discovered what little privacy they actually had.

=====

By the time they reached Michael's car, which was nearly seven blocks from the Regent Park woods, the town was flooded with police cruisers, circling the neighborhood where their Halloween trick went horribly wrong. Their cell phones hadn't lit up with calls or messages from Peter, which meant he was either dead, unconscious, or unable to make contact. But they weren't even sure if he had it on him to begin with.

“If he’s alive he’s going to tell them about us, if he’s dead we’ll be questioned by the cops. Either way we’re fucked, fucked, fucked.” Jimmy punched the back of the passenger seat.

“We gotta make a drive-by, even if it’s just down the road. It’s the only way to know what’s going on,” Darby defended his plan.

“This is insane. He’s gonna tell them we were there. It’s just a matter of time before we get busted,” Michael tossed in his two cents and turned onto Silver Avenue heading towards the scene of their botched dare.

However inconspicuous or crafty the three friends thought they were, driving around at 4:37am on All Hallows’ Eve in a beat up Oldsmobile Delta88 with punk rock stickers plastered on the trunk, an urban cammo spray paint job on the sides and a busted front headlight in the midst of the most excitement the Wiltonville P.D. had experienced in decades was a great way to find out. So when Officer Chenard hit his lights and spun around to pull them over for a rolling stop at the intersection of Silver and 4<sup>th</sup>, the three friends had some serious soul searching to do... and what better night was there for soul searching than the one betwixt October 31 and November 1<sup>st</sup>?

=====

Los Angeles was an ever widening pool of cold pancake batter poured onto a luke-warm griddle; it

was never going to be fully cooked and would never hold much flavor. But Shelby didn't really care about such things. He just wanted to work and get laid and maybe go to a ball game if the opportunity presented itself. Since he'd given up drinking after leaving Alana, he stayed away from bars, but was a frequent flyer at strip clubs. And if there were any city to find a good strip club it was L.A.

He fancied himself a *pussy hunter* with sights set on the big game that prowled the washed out streets of Hollywood, boasting about his "big take" to coworkers on the job site when landing "major meat" over the weekends. After a few months of collecting trophies, if only in memory, what had started out as the *thrill of the drill* for Shelby ended up taking him down the wrong rabbit hole and onto the other side of the cold pancake batter. The self-proclaimed Pussy Hunter had bagged the wrong "creature of the night" and was about to discover just how wild his hunting expedition could get.

=====

In as much as Philip considered the Great Republic to be a Dictatorship, he knew that The One (their "elected" president-gone-rogue-gone-autocrat Gregor von Schuster) wasn't solely responsible for its apparent success. No *one* man, however deceptive or diabolical, could carry out orders and fulfill his whims unless there were groups of dedicated people to do the bidding for him. It was

widely accepted by the general populous that Gregor von Schuster was not the most erudite candidate for the position of The One, but somehow he was voted into the highest seat of authority in the Great Republic and had held on to role for the last three Election Cycles (E-Cyc), each one being the duration of 6 years. Cunning as he may be, The One was heading for his 4<sup>th</sup> Cycle win and aside from a good old fashioned coup, it appeared as if von Schuster would coast to victory once again. There seemed to be no end to his rule and no end to the failed and rogue tactics of his appointed Policy Cabinet.

What most distressed the general populous of the GP (Great Republic), to some extent Philip and to a lesser extent the rural areas of the GP, was that Ms. Shandor Oolabi, the opposing candidate during the last E-Cyc, was killed in a controversial plane crash merely weeks before ballots were cast, a controversy of which lingers to this day. Amid cries of foul play and gushing sympathies from surrounding states, von Schuster reprised his role as The One, however inept and unbelievable his performance.

With that in mind, if von Schuster were to win a 4<sup>th</sup> Cycle as was predicted, a tenuous situation would inevitably snap, sending shockwaves through the far reaches of the GP resulting in tumult, rage and civic unrest. The simmering emotions would boil over into the streets and storm the castle, so to speak. This is exactly what The One and his Policy

Cabinet feared most, but everything that FLO was planning for. Why the concept of an outright mutiny hadn't taken root long ago was something Philip had always found curious. Oddly enough, his curiosities seemed to dovetail all too well with the pictures that he pulled from the manila envelope, pictures of his naked wife Wendy in numerous sexual positions with none other than The One... the only... *Gregor von Schuster*.

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The fact that Niklas Daslavich was among the living when the Cymax-P38 Rescue Shuttle touched down on Foodak-Mygar was the answer to his prayer for miracles. He'd witnessed half of his comrades eviscerated before his eyes, their carcasses tossed into a mound of blood mash, their screams dashed to the winds.

Niklas had wedged himself into a fissure along a sloped escarpment, which protected him from the prodding claws of the savage Jandors, but prevented him from any mobility whatsoever. Only a handful of the beasts remained, the scant company did what it could for as long as they were able. Now, out of ammo, out of hope, they could only wait to die or, if God willing, to be rescued.

As many infantrymen do, he'd always anticipated this moment of reckoning, and it was believed when faced with death that your mind would turn to thoughts of home, family, loved ones,

holiday meals, the warm sun, distant nostalgia... But Niklas found this scenario to be far from the truth. Not by choice, mind you. He'd love for nothing more than to drift off into a blissful display of memories past and wake up in soft heaven instead of crammed between a rock and a hard place, starving, dehydrated and inches away from being gutted. So when he heard the familiar blasts of a PhaseShift Kill-Beam followed by the shrill wailing of a dying Jandor, he had reason to lapse into a momentary slideshow of future scenes that were yet to be written; with his family, sitting around a holiday meal, or even locking up the doors to his pet store. His heart swelled with every blast and subsequent death of a hideous Jandor. He felt the rumble of the Cymax-P38 Rescue Shuttle somewhere above and then quickly extricated himself from his hiding place, the search lights of the shuttle scanning the topography for survivors.

Niklas rased his arms, waving and shouting wildly to for the rescuers to see him. *This is it*, he thought. *I'm going home*. But his erratic motions had only attracted the attention of a wounded beast that was semi-unconscious just out of view yet sadly, within reach. Niklas felt his body jolt, then a warm rush of blood followed by his feet leaving the ground. He reached forward, wrapping his hands around the thorny trunk of a Jandor protruding from his rib cage, drenched with his blood and organs. The slideshow that had appeared in Niklas's mind moments before, grew dim and faded into the

cold, dark space swallowing the planet Foodak-Mygar and all that lay beyond.

=====

She was torn. On one hand there was a part of her that wanted to know everything about Dale Williams and what was behind that massive mustache of his. But on the other, retaining a sense of mystery by playing it close to the vest could help keep the sparks flying, if only for the duration of her business trip. Since boredom and banality had mercifully extinguished her first and only marriage, Brenda wondered if the military's policy of *don't ask, don't tell* could apply to single civilians aiming to keep their interactions cordial, clean, uncomplicated.

The sex was good, better than good, and that surprised her. She'd been with myriad partners over the years, men and women, and could honestly say that she had fun with both genders. But even when the sex was great, it didn't quite complete the picture for her, which was a topic Brenda discussed at length with her therapist, forever digging to expose the roots of her feelings.

"For you, it's probably not about sex, Brenda. It's about intimacy, or in your case, the lack of it," Dr. Elise Giran would explain, looking over her thick bifocals.

"Oh, come on Elise. That's bullshit. You know me better than that," Brenda stood up from

her chair and moved to the window. “I never said I was afraid of intimacy. My god, Troy and I were practically joined at the hip.”

“But living separate lives, Brenda,” Elise added. “Three years of secrets and lies add up and those hidden layers of emotional deception will decompose and rot the foundation, even in that short amount of time.”

Outside, four stories below and adjacent to the office building parking lot, Brenda watched a dozen toddlers playing on a jungle gym behind the chain-link fence of a day car center. What irked her most about Elise’s observation wasn’t only its accurate depiction of their marriage, but that it left her with the unsettling memories of failure and incompetence, memories that plagued her childhood, memories she’d spend an adult life trying desperately to expunge.

When the echoes of Dr. Giran’s comment finally withered, Brenda realized that her breath had fogged the window making it difficult to see the day care. She wiped a streak through the patch of condensation with the side of her hand and found the playground empty, the toddlers gone. *Would it have made any difference had their daughter lived?* She knew no amount of therapy could ever answer such a question, but that didn’t stop her conscience from asking or her heart from yearning.

=====

Philip was reeling from the candid images of his wife engaging in sexual intercourse with the very man she detested. His mouth dry, stomach acid bubbling, hands and neck clammy, Philip's world was crumbling inside and around him and he was dancing on the cusp of heart failure. Not that he could think clearly at that moment, but the lottery balls were forming some semblance of a message and were about to bounce clear through his skull, out of his head and onto the floor. *This must be some mistake. Someone... those two men... had manipulated the photos... superimposing Wendy's face onto another woman's body. That's what they did. Surely I'm not expected to believe that my wife, the mother of my child, was having an affair with The One sometime before she fell ill. Surely this is... this is some sick joke is what it is. Perverted and sick is what it is. My god! That's my wife! That's Wendy! What the fuck is going on? What the hell is happening? Tyler's email... now this... I can't take it... no way... there's no possible way that is Wendy. My Wendy! No!!!*

He felt the lobes of his brain melding into a gelatinous mass of dough. He struggled to stand, but lacked the motor skills to sit. He was paralyzed by mental and memory exhaustion yet it seemed millions of thoughts were surging into his consciousness like a firehose. The photographs slipped out of his hands and onto the carpet, a few of which turned over face down.

He started a free-from cascade of possibilities: *scumbags, coffee bean, bird, window, Worth-*

*Mart, scumbags, wallet, alley, Propaganda Park, flowers, FLO, Tyler, Wendy... FLO, Tyler, Wendy... The One.*

He was hard pressed to come up with any answers on his own accord, but Philip figured that the note affixed to the back of one of the photos might offer some clues. He could finally move, so he kneeled down and grabbed the note. He immediately recognized the handwriting. How could he not? It was his.

=====

The only thing Shelby knew about “gangstas” he learned on television and the movies. In fact, he’d never really seen an O.G. up close and personal, until that Monday morning at the job site when a black 7-Series BMW sedan swerved into the gravel work area parking lot. Most of his coworkers figured it was one of the bigwigs from corporate checking up on the construction progress (or lack thereof) or a CEO that was overseeing his real estate assets, so when the pair of buff dumb thugs appeared from the buffed BMW and asked where they might find Shelby McIniman, they were more than helpful with directions. After all, it wouldn’t take but a mere hint of insolence to send an immigrant laborer packing for the day or week – and they knew it.

Shelby was working interior framing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the 14 story structure. It was to be a posh office building for the high-tech sector or any

company that could afford the outrageous monthly rent. The exterior walls and glazing had yet to be added, but it was beginning to take shape and look a bit like the architect's future rendition on the giant *The Teague* sign at the site's entrance. Marcus Teague was an L.A. developer with dozens of projects in the works and this particular site happened to be one that his son Terry was managing and doing his best to play general contractor. That's how Shelby ended up with the job. He'd met Terry at a dive bar strip joint and the two got to talking while tossing fivers at strippers and tossing back shots of tequila. They hit it off, which in their world meant they shared similar interests: pussy, stupid jokes, southern rock, and sports. At any rate, one thing lead to another there was Shelby on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of The Teague on a Monday morning, hungover as hell.

Apparently gangbangers don't mind taking care of business during working hours in the broad daylight. And why should they? They know where to find you and if you've been a bad boy and have participated in some infraction, some wrongdoing, your just desserts are served when ready. And it hardly matters if you even have an appetite either. Plus, being surrounded by coworkers is a great way to ratchet up the personal humiliation. Let's face it, when your buddies find out you're fucking with someone else's property, they can assume you're capable of doing it to them as well. Those gangsters, *theyz gots it all figgid out, yo.*

What irked him more than anything was that he didn't see them coming. If Shelby had the chance to duck out of the way or sprint down the scaffolding. But the PVC pipe to the back of his legs was a real surprise and stung like he'd just lodged his legs into a nest of hornets. Pain like that helped to do only one thing which was get rid of his hangover pretty damn quickly.

Mind you, these were L.A. gangbangers, huge, wide motherfuckers with gold caps, chains, leather jackets, real mean dogs hungry for blood. But remember, Shelby wasn't a pipsqueak at 6foot5 and had some fight in him, just not at that very second. One of the thugs grabbed Shelby's shoulders and hoisted him back up from the concrete floor so the other one could take another whack with the improvised PVC bat. Despite the fact that the pair had replaced his hellish hangover with excruciating pain in the lower half of his body didn't win them any points with Shelby, but it did inspire him to try and take a swing if he got the chance.

"You keep yo white shrinky-dink outta Mo Wiggs bitch, 'aight?" Bones Tyrone, the thug standing in front of Shelby spoke. Shelby was at a loss for words, but managed to put a few together for them in a straightforward manner.

"Fffuck you," he spit out. "I dunno what you're talking about."

The PVC pipe connected with Shelby's rib cage. He let out a gasp. Bigga-Z, the thug holding him from behind leaned in to his left ear.

"Dat ain't what weez hearin' from Holly Chambers, mudda fucka," he said and tightened his grip. Bones continued.

"Now, we catch ya with yo dick in his girl, that'll be da lass piece o' ass it gets a taste a', you hear what I'ze sayin' you redneck fuck?" Bones stepped up to Shelby, inches from his face. It was unlike him to back down from a fight or a threat, especially one he didn't initiate, but Shelby decided against immediate retaliation.

"Yeah, yeah. Just get your hands off me," Shelby said.

Bigga-Z let go and Shelby stepped aside, wincing in pain.

"Weez keepin' a watch on yo ass. Don't go an' get stupid on us now," Bones said as they walked away.

"When you see Mo Wiggs, whoever the fuck that is, you can tell him she's a lousy lay," Shelby announced through the metal frames of the unfinished floor, the few coworkers watching from afar. The exchange all happened so fast no one really had time to react.

Bigga-Z spun around on his way out, "You wanna tell'im yo'seff, be my guess, cracka jacka. Ya know whatta do!" The buff thugs had left the building.

While he had decided to withhold retaliation while they were close up with the PVC pipe, the hurt from his legs and ribs spreading into his whole body, his hangover back with a vengeance, Shelby got to thinking. Then, after his thinking subsided, his temper stepped up for a swing.

Now, a full gallon of oil-based primer weighs roughly 10 pounds. When airborne, falling from the height of roughly 30 feet (let's say the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of an office building, perhaps) the can of paint would be traveling roughly 23.78 miles per hour by the time it made impact with the ground, or, in this case, the black 7-Series BMW that belonged to one Mo Wiggs.

To be fair, Shelby wasn't really aiming to actually *hit* the car per se, but rather was aiming to hit the ground next to it. So when the full gallon of oil-based primer landed smack-dab on the hood of the black 7-Series BMW that belonged to Mo Wiggs, a man Shelby had never met in his life, and popped open sending a geyser of paper-white primer into the air then splashing down onto the Beamer, Bones Tyrone, and Bigga-Z, it wasn't just the car alarm that got everyone's attention and attracted a small crowd of onlookers. Construction workers and pedestrians alike paused to take in what looked like a scene from a Keystone Cops film or *The Little Rascals* even.

As the primer oozed down the tinted windows of the BMW, the rear driver side door opened and out stepped the man Shelby believed to

be Mo Wiggs. He was a stout fellow, sharply dressed, and his various items of jewellery glistened in the sunlight. He removed his sunglasses so that he could get a good look at the man responsible for such an unfortunate error in judgement and Shelby stared back.

His temper had possessed him once again. However, this time he actually felt that he probably shouldn't have made such a dumbfuck move. Bones Tyrone and Bigga-Z, dappled in white primer, their expensive suits and leather jackets completely ruined, motioned for their guns. Mo Wiggs wouldn't have it and barked orders for each to step down. It seemed this incident was merely an inconvenience for Mo Wiggs, an incident which would be duly adjusted in gangsta fashion, at his leisure, on his terms – but not here, not now.

Shelby was standing at the edge of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor frame of a building in plain view. Mo Wiggs ordered his men into the car and they dutifully obeyed like trained dogs. He kept his eyes locked on Shelby, then slid his sunglasses on and slinked into his now 2-tone white and black 7-Series BMW which got some folks laughing as it rolled out of the lot and pulled into traffic painting Pollock-style all over the road.

“You know who that was, esse?” One of Shelby's latino coworkers piped up. “That was Mo Wiggs, man. You don't fuck with Mo Wiggs, hombre.”

*Nope.* He thought, agreeing with himself and his coworker. *I definitely shouldn't have been such a dumbfuck.*

=====

After more failed attempts at getting someone's attention than he would care to guess, Eerik thought it was prudent, though potentially risky, to make the trek back to his apartment building, which, he imagined, would be crawling with *those things* killing all of his neighbors that he never even knew. He was close to West 46<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> and his apartment was on West 50<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, so he had a ways to go before knowing for certain the fate of his building.

While waking, he noticed that his stomach was bothering him again, but not like before. This time it was more like indigestion instead of cramps in his lower intestine, almost like heartburn. It seemed that the more he walked the more his throat burned until the sensation was too much and he had to stop to buy a bottle of water from a magazine vendor. It was only when he tried to reach inside his pockets that he realized he wasn't wearing any pants. He'd run straight out of his apartment room and into the streets in his unsavory underwear. Apparently it's completely legal to strut around in your skivvies on the streets of New York City, which is another reason it is considered the greatest city in the world. Try doing *that* in Finland!

So there Eerik was, barefoot in his underwear (it's legal to go barefoot on the street, just not inside public buildings and such places) and grimy tee shirt walking down West 46<sup>th</sup> street with a burning esophagus ready to pass out from the pain. But instead of passing out, he stopped in his tracks, leaned forward and vomited up a slurry of bloody worms onto the sidewalk. As the projectile of pestilence splattered into a misshapen mound, wriggling and bubbling with movement, the oncoming flow of pedestrians nearly leapt into traffic to get out of harm's way. Human kindness and good will generally gets thrown out the window in situations such as these. There's only so much one can do about a man in his underwear puking up a pile of blood-soaked squirmy things. Sometimes, and this was one of them, you have to turn the other cheek and run like hell.

But people aren't so jaded that no one would call 911, which is what a few people did. The question was would they show up in time to help Eerik at all and figure out what was causing his terrible case of spontaneously regurgitating plasmatic invertebrates. If they managed to get him stable and safe then maybe they could inspect his basement bathroom for whatever came out of his ass. These things take time, especially in New York City. Jeez Louise.

=====

The interior of the Delta88 was awash with flashing red and blue lights and the blasting white flood from the police cruiser parked behind them. Having been pulled over just once before, Michael estimated they had no more than two minutes to discuss amongst themselves and get their story straight while the officer took down his car's vital statistics, ran the plates in the online state database and filled out some mumbo-jumbo on his clipboard. Then he'd sidle up to the window and ask for his license and registration, which he immediately started wondering where that was. Were they prepared to tell the truth or would they stumble through a graveyard of vague and uninspired lies like brain-starved zombies? This was up for debate.

“Nice going, retard. That was a stop sign back there,” Darby lamented.

“I fucking stopped, asshole,” snapped Michael.

“What the fuck are we gonna tell him? He's gonna ask about what happened,” whined Jimmy.

“We got about a minute before he gets here so let's figure this shit out,” Michael rambled on. “I say we just tell him the truth. They're gonna know eventually...”

Darby stepped on his words. “Whoa, whoa, who said anything about telling the truth? What the fuck? They haven't even asked us anything. We don't know anything, okay?”

Jimmy wasn't sure. "I don't know, guys. What if Pete already spilled his guts about us, about the dare?"

"Or better yet, what if he spilled his guts all over the fucking floor. That guy coulda shot him. He could be dead," Michael checked his rear view mirror. The officer was approaching. "Shit. Here he comes."

A flashlight shone through the driver's side windows onto Jimmy, then Darby, then Michael. "Happy Halloween, boys," Officer Sheridan said in a decidedly female voice. "No costumes this year?"

"Uh, no. We're in high school," Michael explained.

"License and registration, please."

Michael handed her his license then leaned over to check the glove box for his registration, hoping to find it tucked somewhere among all the clutter.

"Do you know why I pulled you over, Michael?" Officer Sheridan turned her flashlight to Michael's license.

"Probably speeding?" he offered an answer then found his registration and held that out the window. Officer Sheridan grabbed it.

"Actually that's the one thing you managed to avoid doing," she explained, looking over the license and registration.

"Great," he mumbled.

“For starters, looks like you got a tail light out. Left rear. You know about that?” her voice anything but comforting.

“Uh, yeah, I did,” Michael admitted.

“Well, you might want to get that fixed. For seconds, you performed what we call a *rolling stop* back there when you turned on to Silver. Remember that?”

“No... but I’ll take your word for it,” he waited for number three.

“Okay, Michael. I gotta put a few things into the computer, you guys just hang tight,” Officer Sheridan turned and walked back to the cruiser. Before the three said anything they waited until her door shut.

“Great. Just fucking great,” Michael exhaled.

“You see?” Darby needling the two. “No mention of Peter, no mention of nothing. Or should I go tell her now?”

“You don’t know, Darby. It’s not over yet,” Jimmy added. “She could come back with more questions.”

“Can we just shut up for a moment? Please? Thanks,” requested Michael.

But Darby couldn’t leave it alone.

“I’ll tell her. When she comes back. I’ll tell her,” he decided.

“Jesus Christ, Darby. Would you just quit it?” Jimmy pretty much had all he could take of it.

“You’re not gonna say shit because she might not even know so just...”

“No, no. You guys figured we should tell her, we might as well do it now while she’s here,” Darby rattled on. “It’ll save us the headache of getting hauled in for questioning.”

“No one’s getting hauled in for questioning,” Michael slammed the steering wheel with his hands. Jimmy can see Officer Sheridan on her way back.

“Guys, shut up. Here she comes.”

Officer Sheridan leans over next to the car, putting herself eye-level with Michael.

“Okay, Michael, I’m gonna have to give you a ticket for that rolling stop,” she calmly explains. Michael gets

“Oh, come on. Really?” he whines.

“Yes. Really. Now sign your name here. You’ll have fifteen days to pay the ticket, or if you choose to contend the charges, check this box and you’ll get a court date in the mail,” Officer Sheridan hands over his license, registration and the ticket clipboard. He collects what is his, signs his name and hands it back to the officer. She tugs the triplicate and gives Michael his part.

Then Officer Sheridan drops a bomb into their laps, the fuse of which burns in slow motion, adding to the cruiser’s red and blue light show.

“You boys wouldn’t happen to know a Peter Roos, would you?”

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He invited her to lunch, which turned into a mid-day romp back in Brenda's room at the Castle Pines Motel. There wasn't much in the way of discussion or chit-chat. Time was better spent sucking or fucking. Besides, it's difficult to carry on a conversation with a stiff cock in your mouth. Small talk was an *apres-coucher* affair, if at all. They were both due at the conference at 1:00 and were sitting in the drive-thru at Wendy's around 12:50.

"I usually don't eat this crap, but when in Rome, right?" Brenda quipped, reading the drive-thru menu.

"And what makes you think I do?" Dale was quick to add.

"Oh come on, who are you kidding? What guy doesn't like a #6 combo once in a while?"

"Yeah, *once* in a while. A long while," he assured her.

Brenda ordered the classic 1/4 pounder combo and Dale indeed got the #6 combo (a spicy chicken sandwich) and side of chili. They decided to show up late and eat in the parking lot. Between bites of their food were bits of conversation. Brenda noticed a few pictures on his cluttered dashboard of his pickup truck, one of which held her attention. She reached out and pointed, her diet soda in hand.

"Who's this?" She asked, disregarding her unformulated plan to ask less.

“That’s my sunshine, Sara Beth. My daughter,” he boasted, beaming with pride and pulling the creased photo from the dashboard. “Which reminds me, I need to update this one. She’s about a year older now. Still cute as a cottontail though.”

Brenda swallowed a bite of burger and washed down the lump in her throat with a swig of soda, wondering if Dale would stop talking if she refrained from a follow up question or comment. But she knew that would have been rude and

“She is, yes... quite the cutie. How old you say?”

Dale tucked the photo back where it came from.

“Seven, but she’s got more brains than her daddy, that’s for shit sure,” Dale let out a laugh then scooped a spoonful of chili into his mouth catching his moustache on the way in, which, from the size of it, wasn’t hard to do. He grabbed a napkin from the pile between them in the cab. “In fact, I gotta pick her up in a few hours. School gets out around 3:15, but what’s today? Wednesday?”

“Yeah,” Brenda replied.

“Then, yeah, she’s got band today, so not ‘til after 4:00,” Dale corrected himself. “This damn RecoStat thing is chewin’ into my week faster than a fat kid with Fritos.”

Brenda missed the humor, but that didn’t stop Dale from chuckling at his joke. The picture of Sara Beth and her father’s comments had

transported her from the sunny Wendy's parking lot to another parking lot altogether, this one overcast and snow-covered...

It was a matter of routine for Brenda to spend the time following her session with Dr. Giran sitting alone in her car, arms folded over the steering wheel, forehead planted on her sweater sleeves, and her face streaming with tears. Once her car door was shut and safely inside, Brenda's emotional spigot, sealed tight just minutes before in Dr. Giran's office, would burst wide open, flooding her body with memories of her daughter who was lost to sudden infant death syndrome. Her body shaking with heaving sobs of pain, Brenda would wish the rising waters of memory could carry her away somewhere closer to heaven, somewhere closer to Josylin.

Their life as mother and father was charmed and beautiful, but their future as wife and husband would be snuffed out as quickly as the baby they had been blessed with. After the funeral, the couple struggled in silence, racked with the haunting loss of their baby Josylin; her bubbling smiles and rosey cheeks had magically, not surprisingly, rekindled their marriage, somehow hoisting the sails of an otherwise rudderless ship. For 18 wonderous months they navigated the often choppy waters of parenthood with great joys and success. But on the morning of May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1998, their vessel would run aground, finding their lifeless daughter face down in her crib.

In the following months, Brenda would watch as Troy succumbed to bouts of severe depression followed by binge drinking and, eventually, unemployment. As captain of their family's ship he felt most responsible for Josylin's death, although no one was blaming anyone. But if she were to blame her husband for anything it would have been his inability to keep it together in the face of their terrible loss. She had joined him in drinking, yes, but never together which would have been far too painful and almost disrespectful of their daughter's memory. Troy would eventually sleep in separate rooms of the house, sometimes on the sofa, the guest room, the study, never in bed with Brenda. It was easier to cope as individuals than as a couple. From day to day, weekend to weekend, whatever remained of their relationship dissipated into a morbid pall that permeated the house and seeped into the chasms of their crumbling marriage. As far as she was concerned, they were both inside that casket with Josylin.

Unlike some divorces that drag out for years, full of spite and vitriol, theirs went in quite the opposite direction. After a year of drifting apart, each in their own way, signing the papers and moving on wasn't a bittersweet affair, but rather a clinical formality, void of the slightest sign of emotion. Troy moved out and into an apartment outside of Quincy and Brenda kept the house in Newton. But none of this mattered to them. They could have just as easily swapped sides with one

another or moved out of the states entirely, somewhere in Europe or South America. The joyous gusts of meaning and beauty that Josylin had once filled their sails with were gone and along with them the dreams of her return.

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Along with his handwritten note affixed to the photos of his wife with Gregor von Schuster, there were a few more pages that Philip had fanned out in front of his bloodshot eyes. One of which was a handwritten letter, handwriting he recognized but wasn't his own. It was Wendy's and was addressed to him. He hardly had the stomach to continue reading, but it was the only way forward, further into the warren of insanity.

My Dearest Philip,

You will find little comfort in the forthcoming information. It was never my intention to withhold these facts and truths from you while I was alive, and I cannot ask you to understand or agree with my actions, only that you imagine how difficult it would have been for me to tell you during my last days in the hospital. My hope is that you will find it in your generous heart to forgive me for my irresponsible and reckless actions. I only wanted to bring happiness into our lives. With that, I shall begin...

As we discovered early on in our failed attempts to start our family with children, your infertility came as a disheartening surprise to both of us. Since we could never have afforded the appropriate medical treatment or procedure to correct the issue on a book clerk's salary, and the alternative practices were deemed illegal under the Great Republic Law, our hopes were limited by our options.

With affordable avenues exhausted, I enlisted the help of Ari Senegal, an ardent member of the UUU and an academic confidante whom I befriended a few years before you and I met at Crucible Books. He knew of a secret but reputable program on the Dark Market wherein women with infertile spouses could be naturally inseminated. In return, wealthy men could engage in unbridled, unprotected sex with screened, anonymous women – a thrill for the political and corporate elite. Obviously, a partner's traits would have to resemble those of their spouse and careful attention was given to this genetic and biological vetting process. Although the identity of my Bidder would never be revealed to me (as I have no memory of the event nor would I have wanted to) there were rumors circulating within the UUU which claimed certain parties had breached security protocol and recorded their Engagements with video and hidden cameras. I often feared one of those Engagements was mine, but the UUU assured me otherwise, despite having little proof or reason to tell me the truth.

Now officially pregnant, with the Engagement one day behind me, it was critical that you and I have an engagement of our own, our “magic night” as we called it. Nine months later *our* son Tyler was born. Your son not by blood, but by the bonds of love and matrimony.

Such is the world we live in, Philip! And now you must carry this torch, must bear this cross. It is the world *you* now live in. I am almost ashamed to admit it myself. Almost. We had a grand life with Tyler and you still can. Life lies ahead for you both. May you keep my memory close to your heart. As I write this letter, my heart heavy with guilt for not telling you during my remaining days among the living, I have no knowledge of the father, only that his heritage was strong and he came from a life of wealth and power. Should you feel inclined to tell Tyler the truth, this is your choice to make. As I had lived uncomfortably with this secret I regret relaying it to you, but feel deep in my soul that you should know the truth about our son and the truth about me.

Death will never destroy my love for you and I pray this letter will not destroy your love for me. Please know that I only wanted to fulfill your dreams which were always my dreams.

Love, peace, forever...

Wendy

Could the evening's events become even more unhinged? Could Philip withstand even one more tiny turn of the dial, one more twist of the knife? How is it that a simple man, an everyday man, could be swept up by the towering waves of turmoil in just one night? How is it that this one man who once stood on the calm shoreline of domesticity is now drowning in the topsy-turvy world he watched from afar?

*Was Tyler the bastard son of Gregor von Schuster, The One, despised and feared leader of the Great Republic? Had I been duped into believing in their miraculous conception? How and why were these photos just now coming into my possession? Where was my "son" and what is his involvement with FLO? And what... what of Tyler's unborn child? Did von Schuster know of his future grandchild?*

Philip's mind was spinning into a wild mess of gnarled yarns. It was at risk of shutting down completely, its gears jammed with those damn lottery balls, all colliding at the same time in the same place for different reasons. He half suspected that this insane scenario was one of his story fragments he'd wake up to, drooling on his Little Blue Book in Propaganda Park, surrounded by the heady fragrance of rose bushes in bloom. But if there were ever a moment that cauterized his naivete, his fragile sensibilities, and sparked a fire within him he had never known possible nor seen

the likes of before, it would without a doubt be this very moment. The world around him was about to discover just how hot that fire would burn... and just how high those flames would climb.

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“Peter who?” Michael wondered, his voice a few keys higher than usual.

“Roos,” Officer Sheridan answered in a curt manner. “Peter Roos. Ring a bell?”

Darby leaned to the left over Michael and toward his open window.

“Yeah, I know him. What about it?” Darby tried to lay on the charm, but it just came out as attitude. Officer Sheridan clicked her flashlight on and shone it into his eyes.

“Oh, you know him?” Asking as if she honestly hadn’t heard him.

“I said I did,” his attitude shifted into snarkiness.

“Why?” Jimmy joined in from the back seat, “What’s going on?”

“Seems like he got shot at while breaking into someone’s home tonight. Thought you might have heard about it since you’re out driving around,” she explained.

Michael pounced on her news. “He got... he’s... is he okay?”

“He’s at the hospital with a gunshot wound to the shoulder. Don’t think he’s happy about it, but

that's what you get when you pull a stupid ass stunt like that. Just because it's Halloween doesn't make home invasion any less illegal than usual, know what I mean?" She was baiting the three of them, waiting for the dashboard confession that never came.

"Shit," Darby mustered. "You think they'll let us visit him, I mean tonight?"

Officer Sheridan turned off her flashlight and slid it back in her holster.

"Not sure about that, but he might want company at some point. Michael, take care of that tail light. Have a safe drive home."

With that the officer jumped back in her cruiser, shifted into first and took off down the road. Michael, Darby and Jimmy started weighing their options.

"Oh, she totally knew. There's no way Pete didn't mention us, there's no way!" insisted Jimmy.

"I don't think he did, Jimmy. If he had, Officer Rimjob would have totally busted us. I don't think he caved," stated Darby.

"Either way he's in the hospital with a bullet wound and in serious fucking trouble," Michael started his car and pulled into the road. "Even if he didn't tell 'em we're still part of it. Jesus, he's our fucking friend."

"I know, I know he is. Jesus," Jimmy shouted from the back.

"Fuck it," Darby said, spitting a lunger out the window. "We gotta go to the hospital now that

we know. At least he's not dead. That would really have sucked."

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Philip's breathing was labored and his throat was crackling with thirst, but he was determined to continue reading. He flipped back to his handwritten note. It was on a standard letter sized ruled piece of paper, folded many times and worn, but his penmanship was still legible. He started reading:

The Mire of Hope, The Pire of Justice

In our time of need, of doer and deed  
This was our time to tip tables and heed  
The advice of the past, look not through broken  
glass  
Oh, for shame! This battle is lost!  
Our future uncertain yet mirrored in death's face  
Couched in the fear of truth, a stuck pig of justice  
Who will slaughter this beast? You know the one  
Let my eyes weep for no One  
This torch I bear, ablaze with a million sparks  
Each ember crying for dawn  
But how do tears burn? How do they burn?  
How they do burn  
This was our time, robbed from baby's palm  
From mother's womb, from father's tomb  
We shall not bow down for The

One bringer of justice  
We shall rise from humble means, from  
Beggars and begotten, the living and rotten  
Our time has yet to reach  
The horizon of awakening  
Though our shattered hopes rust  
Deep in the mire  
We shall build this pire higher and  
The flames will lick His flesh  
As we roast pig with apple  
And burn Him to hellfire!

After reading it three times the vague memory of writing these words settled into his thoughts and Philip started connecting the dots, but wasn't having the luck he had hoped for. It wasn't until he read the third piece of paper that all the puzzle pieces clicked into place. This particular page was printed from a computer and he most definitely recognized the content. It was his only eBlast that made it out into the WWW before the Policy Cabinet intituted what was to be coined the Liberty Lockdown. Sure he remembered writing it and sending it off, but he didn't really mean it, did he? The content of the eBlast was simple and easy to get your head around:

Re: This fetid land

This fetid land of Pustulous Pestilence Policy  
In my nightmares... are these police-I-see?  
Under what law were your dreams crushed?

Mine too!  
This hawkish rogue of vacuous merit  
My boot tastes of honey...  
Won't you try?  
I am the malcontent! Hear me roar!  
A coward you cower under cover of  
Our flag Your rag  
Ball gag

Deviant for the times, but hardly subversive enough to incite Philip's peers, it didn't get him snuffed out like poor Kirwin Blonski. Still, a copy of this provocative eBlast along with a 9<sup>th</sup> grade poem, Wendy's letter regarding the truth about Tyler and accompanying pictures of her undressed and unconscious with The One was reason for Philip to contemplate his next move in exacting detail and with a heightened sense of purpose.

But where to start? He couldn't connect his GICOMP back into the wall, the Policy Cabinet was probably waiting for him to log on and reply to Tyler. Should he confront Mrs. Betty Yamagata about the FLO poster? Was it even there? What was the safest way to contact Tyler anyway? He didn't even know where he was living! His Little Blue Book of Big Ideas was certainly lost for good. His wallet in the hands of disreputable scum for sure. The bean, the bird, the book, the bean, the bird, the book... the bean!

Of all the times to become obsessed with the least important and relevant detail, this was not

it, but that didn't stop Philip from running to the kitchen and opening the bag of coffee beans, pouring them onto the counter top. They skittered across the smooth hard surface into a caffeine constellation. He waved his hand over them as if he were spreading imaginary frosting on an imaginary cake. He studied the beans closely, crouching down so his eyes were level with the counter, with the skim layer of beans.

It wasn't but a minute later when the Philip's hunch was realized in a most chilling discovery. With eyes locked on the beans he was certain that some amount of movement was visible, if just a quiver. One bean rocked back and forth ever so slightly, then another, barely noticable at a glance, but on a level steady surface it was obvious. Several beans were moving. A few began to gently spin, then almost pop up, like a jumping bean. Philip made sure there was no draft from a window or fan aiding this movement. Then he carefully and cautiously picked one of the moving beans up between his fore finger and thumb and brought it closer to the light source. No matter how hard he squinted he just couldn't see anything unusual.

He pulled out a white cutting board, placed the bean round side down, and grabbed a sharp knife. It was difficult to stable the bean with its hard round shell, but he wanted to try and cut it in half along the center crease. As he positioned the thin blade along the tiny crevass and began to press down, his darkest and most irrational fears were

about to manifest themselves right in his own kitchen. There was a piercing, high-pitched tone just before two rows of half-inch legs sprang out from inside the hard shell, pressing against the blade. Philip only froze after stepping away from the cutting board and the creature clutching his knife. The table wasn't covered with shells of roasted coffee bean... it was covered with shells of beetles!

As this shocking discovery slowly curled and coiled around his brain like a deadly serpent, he rewound his memories to play back the thousands upon thousands scenes of himself drinking coffee from his mug, in the morning, during the day, at night, all the while and unbeknownst sipping, slurping and swallowing the sour sludge of steeped bitter beetles!! He could almost feel every gulp he'd ever taken bubbling inside his bowels, a roiling mud of bug guts inside his guts on the verge of erupting and spewing from his mouth. But then, he wasn't the only one brewing the blood and body of these beetles. No. He thought of the millions of people in the Great Republic, all of whom were avid coffee drinkers, some more addicted than others. *My god! We're all addicted to bug juice!!* Bug juice, beetle java, beetle beans, whatever they were called, he knew they must be destroyed and that people must know the truth. But how?

When the flashing in his head subsided, he grabbed the handle of the white cutting board, spun around to the counter and began smashing as many of the beetles as possible, their guts squirting and

spitting everywhere. Some had crawled away and others were trying to escape using their atrophied wings, but every last one of them were moving! Every time When Philip's makeshift paddle came crashing down onto the counter, the ch crunching crack of exoskeletons would follow along with a thick stream of beetle bellies, turning the white cutting board black with bug blood. For Philip, every whack of the paddle was accompanied by a twinge of pleasure and revenge, but was also mixed with an urge to puke. The more he smashed their bodies, the greater his sense of power became. He swatted them from the air like errant ping-pong balls, sending them against the wall and cupboards where they met their quick demise. One after another, instead of grinding them to drink, he stomped on them with his shoes and grind them into a putrid paste of pulp.

The rampage finally over, Philip's apartment was now painted and smeared with the contents of these coffee critters from wall to wall and floor to ceiling. He managed to salvage one and trap it in a jar so he can demonstrate the truth to anyone who doubted his discovery. But Philip needed to mull over and organize the facts as they had stacked up like a house of cards and were teetering inside his mind. How could we have been so stupid? Of course there were no real coffee plants living, not after the Chemical Wars or The Blight. But cockroaches and bugs... they must have found them living under the earth, hidden from the

atmosphere, immune to the death from above. Or maybe they designed them and bred them for various effects? They could have mutated over time, altering their biological make-up, their chemical compounds. His knowledge of the ReBuilding was spotty at best, but he was almost positive that nearly all plant based life forms were wiped out. And if so, how would they (*They who? Scientists? The Policy Cabinet?*) find such an abundance of traditional coffee plants, *Rubiaceae Coffea*, especially enough to keep up with the growing population.

But there was only so much Philip could absorb before new information started to simply bounce off his skull and crash to the floor. If it were true that Tyler was not his son, but the offspring of The One, Gregor von Schuster, and if it were true that Tyler was now enlisted somewhere within the ranks of FLO planning and scheming to do who knows what, and if it were true that Philip was being watched, followed, framed or on the verge of being blackmailed, then his already longer than usual evening was about to get even longer.

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## BEGIN-NOTES

Dale invites Brenda to dinner and to pick up his daughter. Dinner at his place. The daughter chokes on something. Bonding. Dale. Brenda  
Allergies?

Shelby and Mo Wiggs, Holly, gangbaners, fight, pick up where Shelby is strangling someone. L.A., cigar shop. Now Shelby was on his toes, prepared for battle, he knew they'd be coming after him one way or another at some point. He had to be ready for them. He finds that Holly was beaten up pretty badly. Shelby decides to make war. Does he get the girl? His heart's in the right place but his head is up his ass. There's no going back. L.A. hookers, tramps, call girls, meat, the bar, Mo Wiggs turf. Shelby goes it alone. Meets with Holly. Gets pissed off. He'd never hurt anyone unless they asked for it, and from the looks of Holly's face and arms, Mo Wiggs definitely asked for it.

Halloween night at the hospital – what is going on here? They find out it was the house of a teacher, or someone important, someone they knew. Or maybe Peter fooled them from the start? Maybe it was a trick?

Philip tracks down Tyler. Where is he? Discovers secrets of FLO. There is a plot to assassinate The One and Tyler is involved. Philip has to decide

whether or not to tell him. He does, of course. Which puts Tyler in a tailspin. What to do?

“Are you going to chose hope or hell?” Philip decides to take Tyler’s role and pull the trigger. You can choose hope or you can choose hell.

Eerik in hospital, they find a nest of more pods inside him. He is a host of the creature. His building is crawling with them. Anyone inside was killed. Describe the rooms, the building, the entire thing consumed by the nest. Entire building infested with the critters. They got into the water system. Big problems.

More about the ReBuilding. Get the dates right.

Philip goes to Crucible Books. This is where he talks with Ari Senegal. They are suspicious at first, but allow him in. Ari knows. They all know. Ari liked Philip too much to involve him. They tried to work it out on their own but they needed Philip’s help. Philip has secrets he doesn’t even know about.

Wendy wanted it this way.

I saw you earlier and wanted to say something. We have cameras. We were wondering why you came in.

Ari takes him to the Dark Market?

Behind the scenes...

Philip: Two men delivered some... information.  
Wish I could say

Ari: I know.

Philip: Tyler. I need to see him.

Ari: That will be tricky. He's entrenched with FLO Frontline, but

Philip: I assume you know everything?

Ari: Depends on what you mean by everything. If you're referring to Wendy's Engagement, yes, I helped her with that process, but I had no idea it was going to take such a turn

Philip:

Ari:

Philip: I didn't even know we had cameras.

Ari: Oh yes, always. Precautionary measures.

Philip:

Ari gives Philip the information to find Tyler. Now Philip is on the journey.

Philip: I had a little book, it's blue, some guys mugged me tonight

Philip: Don't tell me you know about that, too?

Ari: I'm afraid we set it up.

Philip: Then where's my book!?

Ari: We wanted to know for sure if you were on our side.

Philip: On your side? How many sides are there here?

Ari: They keep track of everything we write from day one. What do you think those writing exercises were for in school? They are psychological tests and they follow every move we make, every thing we scribble, every word, every phrase, it's all recorded and accumulated until they piece it together and make the call that you are a threat, that you are a liability, you are incitant, revolutionary, activist, traitor, turncoat, rat, mole, mouse, They know more about you than you know about you. That's what FLO aims to destroy. That's what Tyler is a part of. And ultimately that's why you are here, to become part of this movement, this river, this flood.

Ari talks about Kirwin Blonski.

Everyone thinks that Blonski's dead, wiped off the radar, Not so. FLO got to him before the Policy Cabinet did and he's in hiding. He was too valuable to lose, too important. We had to do something. I can't tell you his whereabouts but rest assured, he is alive and well, probably a little hungry and pissed off, but that's Kirwin for you. He likes your kid.

Philip: My kid? Tyler?

Ari: Not by blood, by The bonds of blood can be broken just like any , just as easily as thin ice. I have more in common and more at stake with this band of underground misfits than I ever did with my blood. This is my family. What I was born into was a

The family tree I was born into had rotten roots, twisted branches, diseased bark, and was infested with termites.

Philip mentions the bugs beetles coffee beans

Shows Ari the jar

Ari: Oh, that ain't nothin'. You should see what's in the water.

+++++

So now I'm just going to write to get it out. This is for notes.

Brenda. More story about she and Troy. How they met? Parallels to Dale? Their dinner date at Dale's. Sara Beth chokes, allergic. Maybe Brenda suggests something, a different kind of veggie/food and she is allergic. It is her fault, but they make it. End up in hospital?

What about story of zen mechanic? Candles on the hood of car, séance?

More about Dale. His wife. Back story. After dinner story. "She doesn't see her mom much. Up in Denver, not altogether there if you know what I mean. We didn't meet under the most savory conditions. But I cleaned up y- as best I could - and she kept on at it. If it weren't for Sara, I don't know where I'd be. Had to fight the courts for

custody, but it was worth it. Couldn't stand to see her

Now it's just me and her. We get a long fine. I ain't one for housework so we make some compromises. Anyhow, listen to be yappin' away.

Brenda: No, this is nice.

Why would he be staying at the motel?

+++++

Holly meets Shelby. She's beat up, I didn't mean for this to happen.

She tells Shelby to cut the shit. Just leave it. He sees the marks, the welts, the bruises.

That's right, Mo sez. I'm with Mo.

No you're not, you're with me.

No I ain't. I'm jus takin' a break. Getting' a little on the side.

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Halloween night. Four friends dare one another to break into someone's house and scare them while they sleep.