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The 8½ x 11 printable version of a story collection called *The Story Quilt*. Use the black & white setting on your printer. The margin on the left is slightly wider, to allow for binding on that side.

This collection is also available in html (readable on handheld devices). You can find it at MikeSheedy.com.

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FOREWORD

This book of stories is a follow-up to one I wrote in 2021. The pieces here were written from 2022 to 2024. Unlike the other collection, this one follows a historical chronology. For example, “The Matriarchs” (which takes place on September 20, 2022) comes before “The Autumn of the Big Guy” (which takes place in November 2022).

M. Sheedy

The Story Quilt

The Temple of Jesu Christo is on the outskirts of Shardly, a town of a couple hundred people in Hursoot County, Texas. I was in the office at the back of the church.

"You don't want to give this away," Mrs. Pilfrim said, looking up from the quilt. "It's too pretty."

The quilt was definitely pretty. It was a Texas star, with eight points that stretched across a yellow top to a red border. Little diamond-shaped patches from a dozen different fabrics made up the star. The colorful fabrics had been common during the Great Depression, when feed companies sold their goods in sacks that could be used later for sewing projects.

I wondered if my Great Aunt had made the quilt. I inherited a cedar chest full of the things from her. They were different sizes and patterns. There was a Peter and Paul, a bear paw, a log cabin, and several of the stars.

Mrs. Pilfrim said, "Are you sure you want to donate this, Professor Featherbed?" My name is Weatherhead but I didn't see any point in correcting her for the third time. And I'm not a professor. I was new to the area and some of the locals assumed I was one because I have a lot of books.

"Yes, I want to donate it, Mrs. Pilfrim. I thought maybe the church could raffle it off, or sell it."

"Could be." She considered. "But don't you have any children who'd want it?"

I couldn't tell if she was honestly trying to puzzle out what to do with the quilt or just fishing for information.

"No children," I said, "but it would be good if it went to a child."

I remembered the quilt I'd had when I was young. Long before the internet, before my parents even got a TV, I would entertain myself by making up stories while looking at the quilt on my bed. It was an around-the-world pattern, made by my grandmother and her sisters especially for me. They used little squares of circus and Wild West materials, and an underwater scene with fantastical sea creatures. Perfect materials to fire a boy's imagination.

Mrs. Pilfrim said something.

"Pardon? My mind wandered."

"I asked how you came across this quilt."

"I inherited it."

"Hmm." She gave me a questioning look. "Strange thing to inherit,

you being a man."

I left her fishing and went home, back to the house I was still settling into. It's a small place on a few acres of cactus and mesquite. I'd contracted to have it built when I retired, and I was lucky to get it finished when I did. Construction costs jumped after Covid and were continuing to rise.

I ate a sandwich and browsed the news on the internet, then I went through my notes looking for a story idea. None seemed worth pursuing. It had become nearly impossible to compete with the government when it came to manufacturing fiction. In just a little over a year the usurper Biden had delivered staggering body blows to America's financial security, food security and border security, but according to the news coming out of Washington the country's biggest problem was a reluctance to embrace transsexuals.

The next day I was still combing through my notes for an idea, when I got a phone call from Pastor Wells. He was the minister at the church where I donated the quilt. I'd never actually met the man, but I heard he could thump a Bible with the best of them. He thanked me for my gift and then asked how my relationship with the Lord was going.

"About like my relationship with my ex-wife."

"Oh," he said, sounding disappointed. "Well, Jesus raised Lazarus, brother Weatherhead, so he may raise you back into the faith. And if that ever happens, you come on down to The Temple of Jesu Christo to testify."

I told him I'd be there if and when, and then he got to the reason for his call.

"We gave your quilt to a girl named Caitlin Raye. She's stuck in bed with the mononucleosis. The family doesn't have much, but they're god-fearing and, well, Caitlin was mighty pleased to get the quilt. She asked if you could stop by sometime so she can say thanks."

An hour later I parked my pickup in front of the old frame house that Wells had directed me to. It was a couple of miles out of Shardy, on a dirt road that snaked between barbwire fences holding back cactus and goats.

The house was surrounded by a dozen or so tall oaks. They were shedding for the year, and dead leaves fluttered down to join others in a carpet that looked a foot thick in places. Chickens scratched here and there. Occasionally one would mistake a flutter for an insect and jump at it.

I kicked through the leaves and climbed the steps to the front porch. A middle-aged woman appeared at the rusted mesh of the screen door. She wore a stained apron over a washed-out dress, and her thin brown hair was pushed back behind her ears. She looked tired.

"Hello," I said. "Are you Mrs. Raye?"

She nodded and asked if I was the professor.

"I'm not a professor, but I'm the man Pastor Wells talked to you about. My name is Weatherhead."

"You're the one that gave Caitlin the quilt?"

"Well, I gave it to the church, and they passed it on to her."

She eyed me for a moment, then she nodded again, pushed the door open, and I stepped inside.

I followed her through a high-ceilinged living room to the kitchen. Both rooms were tidy but needed to be painted. As she went to the stove Mrs. Raye told me to take a seat at the beat-up dining table. A spindly chair creaked beneath me when I sat.

She stirred a large pot and gestured to a door that was slightly ajar.

"Caitlin's asleep, but she'll wake up when she hears us talking. She was right tickled when she saw that quilt."

I looked around at the sparseness of the kitchen. Wells had said that Mr. Raye was an ex-con who'd met the Lord inside and now walked the straight and narrow. He made pretty good money in the oil fields, but most of it went to debts, so the family didn't have much.

Mrs. Raye offered me some Kool-Aid but I declined. She continued with her stirring. I asked what she was cooking and she said chicken soup. We talked about food for a while, then during a pause in the conversation a girl's voice said, "Is he here, Mother?"

Mrs. Raye went to the door that was ajar and stuck her head through it. I heard a murmured exchange and then she opened the door fully.

I saw Caitlin sitting propped up in bed. She looked to be ten or eleven and had a cascade of wavy chestnut hair. The quilt was draped over the bed and reached almost to the floor. She ran a smoothing hand over it.

Mrs. Raye placed a chair next to the bed and said, "Come on in Mr. Weatherhead." She introduced me to Caitlin, then as I sat she returned to the stove. She was positioned so that she could keep an eye on me.

"I'm not contagious," Caitlin smiled. Her eyes were a glittery hazel color. "Or not very contagious. The doctor said I'm over the worst of it."

"I was sorry to hear you're sick. I hope it hasn't been too bad."

"Oh, no, not really. But it seems like I've been in bed forever and..." She sighed. "I get bored. There's not much to do except sleep and read."

I looked around the room. It was drab and cried out for girly pink paint, ruffles at the windows and posters of boy bands. There was no TV, and no radio or sound system.

I noticed a laptop computer on the bedside table, on top of a stack of books. Caitlin followed my gaze and said the computer was only for

schoolwork. I read the titles on the spines of the books and was pleased to see a collection of stories by Washington Irving.

"Thank you for the quilt," Caitlin said. "Where did you get it?"

"I inherited it. My mother's side of the family made quilts. I got one when I was about your age, or a little younger, and I really liked it. I think it's the reason I became a writer."

"You're a writer?"

"Yes. I write stories and sell them to magazines."

Her mom gave me a sidelong glance from the stove.

"How'd a quilt make you become a writer?" Caitlin asked.

"Well, I used to look at the patches of material and make up stories about them. I'd write about cowboys and clowns and sea monsters, then turn the stories into little books with scissors and a stapler. I grew out of that and went on to other things, but I always drifted back to the writing. Been doing it steadily now for twenty years."

Caitlin thought for a moment, then said, "Can I read one?"

"One of my stories?"

"Yes."

"Well, I, uh, I don't know."

None of my writing's obscene, but it's adult. I didn't know if I had a piece that would be age-appropriate. "Hold on a minute," I said, and I took out my phone. I poked through folders until I found a story that seemed innocent enough. "Maybe this one. It's called 'Coventry.'" I was about to hand the phone over when I heard her mother clear her throat. She was at the bedroom door.

"Oh, uh, I keep copies of the things I've written on this, Mrs. Raye. Let me show you."

I went to the kitchen table, set my phone on it and stepped aside. She leaned down and read. Her lips moved while she did. The story's not very long and she went through it twice, using a fingertip to scroll up and down, then she straightened up and said it was okay to show it to Caitlin.

I returned to the chair by Caitlin's bed and handed her the phone. She read without moving her lips:

"Who's that man at the fountain, Mother? The old one."

"That's Mr. Abelard."

"He won't talk to me."

"Oh you mustn't try to talk to him, dear. This town used to send people to Coventry."

"Where's that?"

"It's in... Well, it's a place, but when you say someone was sent there,

it means they're being shunned. You have to ignore them."

"Why do people get shunned?"

"Because they broke the law, or because they're a gossip or a liar."

"And no one can talk to them?"

"That's right."

"I wouldn't like that. I talked to Mrs. Gaines this morning, and to Marilyn Swift. I'd miss talking to them."

"Of course you would."

"So why was Mr. Abelard sent to Coventry?"

"Oh he wasn't, dear. He got mad once and sent everybody else to Coventry."

Caitlin read the story twice too, same as her mother, and then she said, "I like it. Is there really a place called Coventry?"

"Yes. It's a city in England."

She asked how long it took me to write the piece.

"Not long, but then I did a bunch of polishes. Somebody said, 'Writing is rewriting,' and they were right."

"Well I liked it. It gave me a...a kind of a surprised feeling at the end, when it turned around who was really being shunned."

"A twist ending. You should read some stories by O. Henry. A man named..." I was going to say that William Sydney Porter began using O. Henry as a pen name while he was serving time in prison, but I stopped myself when I remembered that her dad had a record.

"What about Mr. O'Henry?" Caitlin prompted.

"Oh, uh, he was really good with twist endings."

She handed my phone back to me and asked when I wrote "Coventry."

"A couple years ago. Before I moved here."

"Do you have anything else I can read?"

"Well, not that I can think of. Lately I've been writing a lot of grownup stories. Social criticism. But I'll look around."

We talked awhile longer and then she yawned, so I left. Mrs. Raye gave me a dozen yard eggs on my way out the door.

A few days later Russia invaded Ukraine. NATO and the CIA had been using Ukraine as a staging area to prepare for an attack on Russia, but the Russians moved first. Biden responded by saying he might launch nukes. So I needed to get away from things and I went for a drive to clear my head. And I drove to the Raye house.

On the way I remembered how I used to think of my stories as quilts that covered the ugliness of the human condition. My intricate patterns were symmetry laid over malformation. But then the real world began to

seep through the fantasy. Dark stains began to creep across the patterns.

I kicked through the leaves at the Raye place. The chickens were leaping for worms that hung by silk threads from the oaks.

I knocked on the front door and heard Mrs. Raye call out from behind the house. I walked around and found her hanging wash on a clothesline. Caitlin was on the back porch, stretched out on a chaise lounge. She was wrapped in the quilt. I asked Mrs. Raye if I could visit, and when she said I could I sat in a chair beside the chaise. I asked Caitlin how she was feeling.

"Good, thank you. It's nice to be outside. And I've been trying to make up stories with your quilt, the way you used to." She pointed to a patch of fabric that was green and had a pattern of black squiggles. "This piece here makes me think of the worms hanging from the trees. They hatch out in the spring, then the blackbirds come along and eat them. But last year the birds were late and there were a gazillion worms. And when I walked through the yard one time their webs stuck to my feet and made them look like those puffy mops you use to dust the floor. Anyway, I remembered that today when I was looking at this piece of material, and I thought, 'What if I'd kept walking around the yard until the webs on my feet balled up as big as clouds and lifted me into the sky?'"

She stopped.

"Go on," I said.

"That's all. So is that how you used to make up stories with your quilt?"

"Yes, but I'd keep thinking and try to come up with a complete story. Like with yours, what happens once you're up there in the sky?"

"I don't know."

I looked up, found a gap in the canopy of new leaves and saw a cloud. I pointed.

"See that cloud through there? Doesn't it look like a horse?"

She squinted, then giggled.

"It does. A horse with a big nose."

"So what if the balls of silk on your feet lifted you up there and you settled onto the horse's back? Where would you ride it?"

"Hmm. I don't know. Maybe to Consuela's. I haven't seen her since I got sick."

"And after that? If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?"

"Well, maybe to Switzerland. To the mountains. And I'd make the horse jump from peak to peak."

"What if you ran into the Abominable Snowman?"

"I've heard about him. I even looked up that word once."

"Abominable?"

"Snowman."

We both laughed.

We watched the horse cloud change into a peacock that Caitlin rode through the Amazonian jungle. Then it became a tortoise and carried her across the Sahara desert, where she met a prince in a castle. They got married and lived happily ever after.

While Caitlin looked dreamy-eyed at the sky and thought about her prince, I saw that her mother had perched on the edge of the porch to listen. It was the first time I'd seen her smile.

I stopped by the house again a week or so later, but Caitlin wasn't there. Her mother said she was back in school. She returned the quilt to me and said she'd washed and dried it carefully. I told her I wanted Caitlin to keep it.

"Oh, she couldn't do that," she said. "We don't accept charity."

So the quilt went back into my Great Aunt's cedar chest, but it didn't stay there long. Pastor Wells called again a few days later and said another child was asking to use it. "Or his mother is. Mrs. Arredondo. Her boy's something of a hellion and the Lord visited an accident upon him. He's laid up in bed."

He gave me the family's address and I said I could stop by the next morning.

The house wasn't out in the sticks like the Raye place; it was in Shardly. And it wasn't rundown. It was red brick, had a proper lawn around it and so on. Wells had told me over the phone that Roy Arredondo did all right selling farm and ranch equipment across several counties.

Mrs. Arredondo met me at the front door. She was a small Hispanic woman, middle-aged but good-looking, and she was dressed in a crisp tan pantsuit. She invited me in and led the way through the living room. As we passed the fireplace I slowed to scan the pictures of the family that were on the mantel.

Some dishes were laid out on the dining room table. I placed the quilt beside them and sat down to coffee.

Mrs. Arredondo was a fidgety type. She was up and down a lot, going to get spoons and sugar and whatnot. We chatted during her comings and goings, and I learned that her son, Travis, was thirteen and had broken both legs while skateboarding.

She settled in her chair but then immediately got up again and went to the quilt. As she ran a hand over it she said, "I heard this gave Caitlin a

great deal of comfort, and I thought..." She didn't finish but didn't need to. She wanted the best and the most up-to-date for her son, and the quilt was gaining a reputation as the thing to have for your sick child.

I declined a second cup of coffee and she took me to meet Travis. She carried the quilt and toed his bedroom door open while she said, "Knock, knock."

The room was neat but looked like it didn't want to be. What should have been teenage clutter was folded and stacked and squared away. But a touch of havoc screamed down from the walls—posters of skateboarders in flight and video game heroes blasting bad guys.

Travis was propped up against the headboard of his bed. He had an explosion of shaggy black hair and his attention was fixed on a computer in his lap. The top sheet on his bed outlined a lean body tipped with a couple of leg casts. He didn't look away from his computer but he said "Hey" when his mother introduced me. Then his hands twitched and the computer burbled with gunfire and screams.

"He's playing his online game," his mom explained with a smile, and then in a louder voice said, "but he'll shut it off now."

Travis sighed and closed the computer. The room fell silent after one last scream.

"That's better," Mrs. Arredondo said. "Here's the famous quilt, Travis."

She held it forward and he looked and said, "Cool," then he yawned. She responded by unfolding the quilt with a sudden flap. It flew toward him and he flinched. The quilt caught the air like a parachute and settled. Mrs. Arredondo walked around the bed tugging and centering. Travis pulled his computer out from beneath the quilt but didn't open it. He yawned again.

"There," his mom said when things were arranged the way she wanted. She looked at me and smiled. "I think Travis has some questions for you, Mr. Weatherhead." She moved a chair to a position beside the bed. "Have a seat, and let me know if you need anything."

She left and I sat. After an awkward pause I said, "So, what questions do you have, Travis?"

"Huh? There, that's one, right? If I just say 'huh' that's a question."

"Manners," his mother said from the distance. She'd left the door open, apparently so she could monitor our conversation.

Travis didn't really have any questions, but I did and I learned that he broke his legs when he beefed a railslide. Translation after my puzzled look: "I fell off a handrail I tried to slide down on my board." I also learned that he wanted to be a salesman when he grew up.

"Do you want to sell farm and ranch equipment, like your dad?"

He shrugged and said it didn't matter. People would buy anything. The trick was to find out how much they would pay.

He fingered his computer while we talked, so after about five minutes I said goodbye and let him get back to his game.

Then a few days later I stopped by the house again. Travis was streaming an old movie on his laptop. I sat by his bed and he angled the screen so I could see, and together we watched Wallace Beery try to outsmart Jackie Cooper on Treasure Island. I asked if he'd ever read the novel. His response was, "They wrote a book about this?"

Halfway through the battle at the stockade he muttered, "This is lame" and muted the sound.

"I checked you out online," he said, looking at me squarely for the first time since we'd met. Something in his dark eyes seemed familiar. "I found some of your stories and read a couple."

"Which ones?"

"I, uh, I don't remember the names. But I couldn't make it all the way through. Some of the words were too big."

That surprised me. I try to rein in my vocabulary when I write. We write to communicate, so why say things in a way that people won't understand? I was about to ask which words he'd had trouble with, when he said he had an idea for a movie.

"Really? A movie about what?"

"A thing I call a screamsaver. You know, like how a screensaver comes on your computer when it sits too long? Well, the program the dude in my movie designs will be like that, only it'll scream at you to get your attention. And there's a ghost or something in the code that infects computers. It makes them, like, murderous or something. What do you think?"

"Well, it's a starting point. But where would the story go after you've established the premise?"

He stared at me, blinking.

"I mean, do you know what would happen in the story? Or how it would end?"

I was hoping he'd stretch his imagination, like Caitlin had when talking about the clouds, but his imagination didn't extend beyond his computer screen. His story ideas were a mishmash of internet memes and video game violence. But he thought he was spouting gold, and after a while he went cautious.

"You won't tell anyone about this, will you? They might rip off my idea."

"Don't worry, Travis. I'd say your idea's stillborn."

"Good. I think it should be a movie. You could do that, couldn't you? You're a writer, and people write movies."

"Screenwriters do."

"Well, I give you permission. And you can have, like, ten percent of the money we make. It should be a lot, don't you think?"

I saw the familiar something in his eyes again and suddenly knew what it was. It was the same look I'd seen in one of the pictures of his father on the living room mantle. He was receiving a salesman of the year award. Unfortunately Travis was having a year of beefed railslides and broken legs.

"Sorry," I said. "I don't have time to work on a screenplay."

"Okay then, twenty percent."

The quilt came back to me after he got his casts off, and I continued to circulate it, then eventually it left my control. I've lost track of it but I hear that it's still being used to comfort the sick and injured. When a family is done with it they pass it on.

The quilt gave me ideas for a couple of stories. I call one of them "Gift a Wish." I didn't think its Travis-like character needed a full brain transplant, but I added a few neurons:

"How'd you get in here, kid?"

"Gift a Wish sent me."

"Gift a what?"

"The Gift a Wish Foundation. They fulfill the dying wishes of terminally ill children."

"Oh, yeah, the charity thing. They said you want to pitch a screenplay idea. Fine. I'll listen. You have five minutes."

"Well, the play's about a teenaged boy who takes advantage of a company that helps young people fulfill their dying wishes."

"Like Gift a Wish?"

"Yeah. And the boy manipulates those groups to get freebies. One gave him tickets to Disneyland, and he sold them online. Another gave him a free funeral, but he sold that too."

"So he's not really dying?"

"No. He hacks into hospital computers to create fake records, to make it look like he's sick."

"Okay, so that introduces your main character and the premise of your story. What happens next?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether the main character is allowed to write a screenplay."
"So he wants to be a screenwriter too, same as you?"
"Well, he claims he does, but that's just so he can get an interview with the head of a movie studio. Once he's in he threatens to go to the press with a story about how mean the studio has been to him."
"Why would he do that?"
"Extortion."
"Is this by any chance based on a real-life incident?"
"Yes."
"I get it. So what happens at the end?"
"The studio pays."
"Doesn't work. The bad guy has to be punished at the end, and in this piece the kid's the bad guy."
"But he gets punished. He doesn't get the ten million dollars he wants."
"Ten million? That's pretty steep. But they don't give it to him?"
"No. He only gets a million."
"Ha! Some punishment. Your time's up, kid. Thanks for the laugh."
"Fine. Watch for your name in the news."
"What do you mean?"
"That's what the main character says in the screenplay. He lawyers up when the studio head turns him down. The court case drags on for years and the studio loses tens of millions because of public outrage. By the end everybody's rooting for the kid, even though he's the bad guy."
"Yeah, that could work. But there's no way the studio head would pay a million dollars. He might pay a hundred."
"A hundred thousand?"
"A hundred bucks."
"Half a million."
"A hundred and fifty, with a guarantee of no sequels."
"But sequels are where the real money is."
"Fine. But you'd have to take them to the other studios."
"Well...I guess that's okay. Damn you drive a hard bargain."
"I have to. Us good guys need to win. Don't forget that when you're dealing with the other studios. Stick it to them."

The Game

They were playing five-card draw and Ward had dealt himself trash. Low cards in all four suits. He considered throwing in the hand, but he was betting last so he would wait and see. The pot so far was just the four white chips of the antes. They'd told him that the reds were worth five times the white and the blues worth ten.

The poker table was covered in green felt, and a naked lightbulb hung dead center about four feet up. The air was smoky from the cigar that Bill Clinton had just stubbed out. He sat to Ward's left, Henry Kissinger was across the table, and Anthony Fauci was to the right. Without his seat booster and TV makeup Fauci looked small and gray. He could have been a gnome. Clinton was jowly and splotched, and Kissinger looked like a corpse. He must have been a hundred years old. The others weren't far behind.

"Well..." Clinton said, nodding his head up and down as he studied his cards through his trifocals. All three of Ward's opponents wore glasses. Kissinger's were the thickest, and he wore a pair of hearing aids.

"Well..." Clinton said again.

"Will you bet already?" Kissinger carped.

Clinton smiled. "Don't rush me, Henry. Don't rush me."

Ward thought back to how he'd gotten there. He'd been in a dimly-lit service tunnel beneath the arena, on his way to a stairway that would lead up to his seat for the basketball game. Few people knew about the tunnel, and except for him it was empty. Then a door opened and threw a shaft of light across his path. An old man stepped through the door. He stopped Ward, shoved a hundred-dollar bill into his hand and said, "Sit in for me, son, in there. Five minutes." Ward had no objection to making an easy hundred, so he agreed and the man hustled off.

"All right," Clinton said, finally. He tossed a red chip into the pot. "Factor Eight."

Kissinger adjusted a hearing aid and said, "Fact of what?"

Clinton spoke louder. "Factor Eight. The blood scandal from when I was Governor of Arkansas. I sold blood collected in our prison system long after we knew it was tainted with hepatitis and AIDS. I should have shut the program down, but I kept it going and killed...I don't know, maybe a million."

"I remember that," Fauci said. "Nasty business, but there's no way you killed a million people."

"Okay, but tens of thousands, if you count that Canadian hemophiliac

group. A lot of the blood went to them."

"We don't play for such low stakes," Kissinger said.

"Then I'll add Waco." Clinton dropped another chip into the pot, a white one. "The Branch Davidian compound in Texas. I killed, what, eighty people there?"

Fauci shook his little head and said, "Still not enough."

"Aw, come on," Clinton whined. "Waco was choice. I killed men, women and children on live TV. Cooked 'em with that tank shooting napalm out its barrel."

"You're right," Kissinger said. "That was an impressive kill. We'll accept it paired with the Factor Eight. Now it's my bet, and I call." He tossed a red and a white chip into the pot. "I claim Cambodia. I helped put Pol Pot in power there and he killed two million."

Clinton chuckled and said, "I always liked that one. That crazy S.O.B. murdered a third of his population."

"I thought the eyeglasses were a nice touch," Fauci said. "He convinced his people that intellectuals were a threat, so they killed anybody who wore glasses."

Ward watched all three men adjust their glasses as they laughed.

"Your turn," Clinton said to Fauci.

Fauci studied his cards, then said, "Well, you may have killed people with AIDS-tainted blood, Bill, but you wouldn't have had AIDS without me. Call." He tossed a red and a white chip into the pot. "Not only did I help with the design of the virus, but I pushed treatments that weakened the immune systems of the infected. So they died from colds, pneumonia and other things."

"Now you're taking credit for deaths from pneumonia?" Kissinger said. "I object."

Clinton reached over and gave Kissinger a pat on the shoulder.

"Chill out, Henry. This is a gentleman's game. Let him have his AIDS."

Kissinger grumbled but nodded his assent, and then the three men looked at Ward.

"So how about it?" Fauci said. "Are you betting or not?"

Ward wasn't sure what to do. His cards were garbage and he didn't know if the man who'd asked him to sit in would want to bet.

"Why's this guy in the game anyway?" Fauci asked Clinton.

"Because Soros is even fuller of crap than usual tonight. He went to offload some, and he got junior here to sit in as a placeholder."

"Is he in or out?" Kissinger snapped.

"It'll cost you a red and a white," Clinton said to Ward. "George can

afford it, and he's good for the body count."

Ward picked up two chips from the mound in front of him. He tossed them into the pot and hoped the men would shift their attention away from him. But they didn't. They continued to stare.

"Wake up and deal," Clinton said. "I'll take two."

Ward dealt Clinton two cards, Kissinger took one and Fauci said he didn't need any. Ward looked at his hand again and drew four. The new cards weren't any better than the old.

"Okay now," Clinton said, "back to business." He studied his cards, picked up a blue chip and tossed it into the pot. "Yugoslavia," he said as he settled back in his chair.

"Yugoslavia," Fauci repeated. "Remind me what you did there."

"What I did was I bombed the hell out of them. They were expanding, making some money, even manufacturing a car that was catching on around the world. Those crappy little Yugos. The World Bank wanted me to do something about it, so I got NATO to bomb them and start some civil wars. And now the former Yugoslavia is just a bunch of pissant little countries that hate each other and have to borrow to get by."

"Thanks for the history lesson," Fauci said, "but was your body count an increase over Kissinger's in Cambodia?"

"Yeah. I'd say so." Kissinger raised an eyebrow and Clinton said, "I mean it, Henry. I stirred up lots of fighting over there, with all the little wars and vendettas. Those things add up."

"Yugoslavia," Kissinger muttered. "Fine. You can have it, but it's nothing compared to what I did when I was Secretary of State." He tossed a blue chip into the pot and grinned maliciously at Clinton. "The Vietnam War, Bill. You remember that, don't you? The war where you dodged the draft."

"N-n-now hold on there!" Clinton sputtered.

Kissinger laughed and said, "Ah, Vietnam," like he was relishing an especially fond memory. "No telling how many I helped kill there. Millions. And then there were the Americans. Fifty-six thousand dead troops, according to the official tally."

Kissinger smiled, looking into the past, then he looked at Fauci.

"It's up to you, Tony. Try to top Vietnam."

Fauci returned the smile.

"That won't be a problem, Henry. And because you're acting so smug, I'm going to raise."

He threw three blue chips into the pot. Everybody called the bet, but Kissinger looked worried.

"What is your strategy here?" he asked Fauci. "You can't possibly beat what I did in Vietnam."

"Yes I can. You're stuck in the past, Henry. You need to get current, so I have a new word for you. It's new, it's improved, it's...Covid"

"I call BS," Clinton said. "There's no way you can prove any numbers on Covid. Not any honest ones. We all know you had a hand in creating the virus, but it's not that deadly."

"True," Fauci said, "but it's not the virus that's doing the real damage, it's the shots. Half the world has taken the Covid shots now, and that half will die before their time. Blood clots, heart attacks, organ failure. Those are my deaths, gentlemen. Half the world."

Clinton and Kissinger looked at each other, and Clinton shrugged.

"I hadn't thought of it like that, Henry, but he's right. I saw the drug companies' reports before they rolled the shots out, and I wouldn't take one on a dare. He's got us beat."

Fauci threw down his cards and reached for the pot.

"One moment," Kissinger said. Fauci stopped and looked at him. "We must follow the rules, Tony, and our fourth player hasn't told us yet what he plans to do."

"Our fourth player?" Fauci leaned back and scratched his little head. "What the hell are you talking about? Our fourth is a dummy. A placeholder until Soros gets back."

"But he's met all the bets," Clinton said, "so Henry has a point. Our guest is in this hand just as much as any of us."

Fauci snorted and said, "This is an act of desperation, guys. He couldn't possibly have a claim on the pot. He has no body count. And he'd need permission to use George's."

"How can you be sure he has no body count?" Kissinger asked, then he addressed Ward. "Do you make any claim on this pot?"

Ward wasn't sure how to respond.

"Have you ever killed anyone?" Clinton asked.

"No," Ward said. "Never."

"You never killed Canadians like I did, or bombed a car factory at shift change?"

"I wouldn't do that," Ward said.

Kissinger asked about Cambodians. "Or Vietnamese. Have you ever killed them by the millions?"

Ward was about to answer when Fauci said, "What about a deadly virus? Have you ever made one in a lab? Or injected people with poison?"

Ward shook his head and Clinton said, "Well we've done all of that,

and more. We're famous for how many we've killed."

"I'm sure you are," Ward said, "but I haven't really followed your careers. I watch sports on TV, not the news."

The others stiffened in their chairs. After a moment Fauci said, "Soros." The S sound at the end of the name stretched into a hiss. "That greedy bastard brought in a ringer. That lousy piece of..."

Kissinger raised a shushing hand and said, "Let's not jump to conclusions. This man may not be a threat."

"Let's find out," Clinton said, then to Ward, "Have you ever protested any of the stuff we've been talking about here? Written a letter to the editor, or talked to your congressman?"

"No. I don't even vote."

"Damn it!" Clinton exploded. Kissinger cursed in German and Fauci beat his little fists on the table.

Ward said he didn't understand.

"You won the hand," Clinton said.

"I did? How?"

"Because you sat by while we killed people. That makes you an accomplice. You get a piece of all our kills."

"To quote Edmund Burke," Kissinger said, "'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' Pick up your chips."

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Keynote

They were playing "The Sailor and the Skank," and Barry was about to get down to business. He lifted Tony's pink chenille robe in back and felt himself start to harden. A flush of perspiration cooled his naked body. He inched closer to Tony, hardening, closer, and then the door to the study burst open.

Big Mike came charging into the room and rushed the couch. Tony dove to the floor. Mike grabbed Barry by the back of the neck and pulled him to his feet. The only thing he was wearing was the white sailor's cap, and he had to hold it in place as Mike marched him to the desk.

Mike shoved him into the chair, pointed to the computer and bellowed, "You're supposed to be working on your jihad against America! Look over that speech!"

Mike charged off and found Tony hiding behind a drape. He chased

him squealing from the room. Barry thought how scary Mike looked with black muscles bulging, hair combed spiky and nostrils flaring.

The front door slammed open and the sound of the chase receded. Barry sighed. He'd gone soft and it seemed that his fun was over for the morning. He looked at the computer and thought he might as well get some work done.

The speech on the monitor was one he was supposed to deliver at Stanford University in a few days. He checked the date at the top—April 22, 2022. He'd be speaking at the school's Cyber Policy Center. The Soros people wanted him to slap the conservative Republicans around, and he would do so by declaring that everything they post online is dangerous disinformation.

"Hello Stanford," he said, reading, but his voice was too high. He lowered it to his Obama register and tried the opening again. He repeated it until he found just the right tone, easygoing but serious. Presidential. With the voice in mind he read to himself.

The speech began with the usual introductory stuff, then moved on to talk about Russia invading Ukraine. He would say that Putin's a despot, he has nukes he might use and so forth. And Ukraine's only desire is to be free and independent. That made him smile. His administration overthrew the government there in 2014 and installed the TV comedian Zelensky as president. The CIA needed somebody it could control, and with Zelensky in place it made Ukraine its primary money launderer. It also ramped up the country's child sex trade and moved NATO missiles to the border with Russia. Ukraine was the CIA's abject slave by the end of Obama's first term, and for the rest of his time in office anybody who questioned America's actions there was accused of hating Obama just because he's a black man.

The speech then tied Russia to Donald Trump's reelection bid. Obama was still surprised at how the election turned out. He'd warned the strategists that they could never get away with stealing the presidency, but they said not to worry. And damned if they didn't pull it off. Joe Biden was forced like a square peg into the Oval Office, and he'd been struggling to read his teleprompters ever since. Obama wondered how long the old fart would last. They'd use him to plunder a few trillion from the treasury, and then when the time was right they'd turn the media loose on his son Hunter's laptop computer. The whole family would be crushed under the proverbial bus.

Obama scrolled down the speech. It was tedious. A mention of gender roles got his attention but led nowhere exciting, and he thought of Hunter Biden again. The videos on the computer he left at the repair shop in

Delaware showed him smoking crack with prostitutes and walking around naked waving a pistol. Obama was glad he never filmed himself doing things like that. It wasn't the CIA way.

He would have been nothing without the CIA. His mother used to tell him he was special but he never felt he was, not early in life. He was just a half-white half-black kid bouncing around the world, with nobody to give a damn about him except for his mom and her old white parents. They all said his dad was an African prince, but when he got older he learned the truth. Frank was his real father. He knocked his mom up when she was posing for his nude photos. Her parents knew that being the bastard son of a communist pornographer would look bad on their grandson's résumé, so they used their CIA connections to arrange his mom's marriage to the prince. She rarely saw the man, and they divorced a couple years after she gave birth. Then she married Lolo and moved to Indonesia. Lolo adopted Obama. They changed his legal name from Barack Obama, Jr. to Barry Soetoro, and after that he switched between names as needed.

The CIA left a paper trail through various schools while it sent him on foreign assignments. When he was supposed to be in class in the US, he was working for the agency in the Middle East. He especially enjoyed Pakistan. It was a Muslim country, and he believed in Islam, but the Pakistanis were merciless when it came to homosexuality. So while he was there he dealt with his urges in the shadows. The agency frowned on his activities but he couldn't help himself. He needed the sex. And it was great sex, coupled as it was with the rush of knowing the Pakistanis would kill him if he were discovered with another man.

And then one day the agency told him that he'd graduated from Columbia Law School, with honors, and he would be moving to Chicago. He went like a good soldier and trolled the city's gay bathhouses when he wasn't glad-handing as a community organizer. Then it was off to Harvard, then back to Chicago, then Michelle, marriage, the Illinois state senate, the US senate, and finally the presidency—each step guided by the agency.

He heard a commotion outside and saw two figures run past a window. First there was Tony, with his pink robe flapping cape-like behind him, and then Mike pumped past, all muscle and determination.

The sight reminded Obama of the wild times he used to have with Rahm in Chicago. They'd prowl the nights, rolling between parties and bathhouses in a big black limo. Obama was the long-legged mack daddy as some called him, taking boys into the back seat and then kicking them to the curb when he was done. The only one to come back and haunt him was the guy who wrote the book. Larry something-or-other. Sinclair. He wrote

about the sex and cocaine, and then he died. Obama wondered if the CIA killed him.

He continued scrolling through the speech. There was some talk about conspiracy theories and junk science. He'd say we're exposed to so much disinformation that we lose the ability to know the truth when we see it. And then he'd push the Covid shots, the greatest subterfuge and depopulation program in human history. He'd tell the audience that the shots have now been "essentially clinically tested" on billions of people worldwide. He made a mental note to chuckle at that point when he was delivering the speech, to let those in charge know that he understood what was going on. It was right there in the speech, the admission that the injections were part of a test. People were allowing the government to shoot them up with no telling what. Anybody that stupid deserved to die.

A Russian-sounding voice said, "A lie told often enough becomes the truth," and Obama jumped up and ran to his pants. They were on the floor where he'd left them when he stripped for Tony. The next Lenin ringtone said, "Sometimes history needs a push" before Obama got the phone from the pocket and answered.

It was Tony, squealing at first and then shouting that Mike wanted to beat him up. Then Mike's gruff voice said, "Gimme that phone!" and there was the sound of a scuffle, followed by another squeal and then a crunch. The line went dead.

Obama returned to the speech but couldn't focus on it. He thought how mundane his life had become since he left the White House. He caused quite a stir when he was there just the week before, on his first trip back since leaving office. The press knew that Biden was in reality serving Obama's third term, and all eyes were on Obama during the visit. Joe wandered around looking baffled because nobody would talk to him. The guests wanted face time with Obama, and the event made him realize how much he missed the presidency. He missed the billionaires bowing and scraping and the clatter of the camera shutters. And the movie stars, the beautiful movie stars shoving one another aside so they could have their pictures taken with him. Movie stars, Hollywood, Gavin Newsom...

Obama felt his butt pucker at the thought of Newsom. The stars lavished way too much attention on the California governor, and they supported him even when he behaved like a dictator. In the middle of the state's Covid lockdown he hosted a dinner party at a restaurant that was closed to the public. Unfortunately for him somebody took pictures. They showed the people at the dining table sitting shoulder to shoulder, in violation of the six-foot distancing mandate, and none were wearing the

required facemasks. Californians went ballistic when the pictures appeared online. They collected two million signatures for a recall vote, and it looked like Newsom's political career was over, but then dozens of stars spoke out in his defense. He survived the vote. Obama thought at the time that it was as if he was being protected so he could go on to something bigger—a cabinet post, the presidency, or maybe a big multinational position.

The wall mirror to the side of the desk caught Obama's eye and he leaned back in his chair to look at himself. He studied his long naked body topped with the sailor's cap and wondered who was prettier, him or Newsom. He smiled at himself, tipped the cap so it set rakishly on his head, and flexed some muscles. A Parliament-Funkadelic song began to thump in his memory. He started to stand up and slide into the boogaloo, but that was the last thing he wanted Mike to catch him doing. He killed the music and went back to the speech.

He scanned down until he saw the First Amendment mentioned. "I'm pretty close to a First Amendment absolutist," he was supposed to say, in support of freedom of speech, but then he'd recommend censorship of the internet and social media. His litmus test for what people could say would be whether their statements weakened or strengthened democracy. He smiled. He loved that word, "democracy." Americans were so ignorant of government that they didn't even know the U.S. is a constitutional republic. Most of them believed the country was run by majority rule. He wished it was. It would be a lot easier to subjugate conservatives if America were a true democracy, where a simple majority of fifty-one percent decided things. But that kind of control wouldn't be possible as long as they used the Electoral College in presidential elections. He wondered if his speech would address that. If it didn't he'd have his people write one on the subject before the next election. They could link the Electoral College to racism and manmade climate change, to fire up the kids.

He continued scrolling down through the speech, through the long dull part in the middle, then he grew bored and jumped to the last page. The final paragraph got his attention. It used the word "tool" over and over. He chuckled. The speechwriters had thrown in a little treat for him at the end. They said that handwritten signs were a tool, and TV was a tool, and so were the internet and social media. He loved it when the writers made an effort to perk up the ends of his speeches. In this one they knew that the word "tool" would get him thinking about big beefy erections, and he'd pass his arousal on to the audience.

Obama finished the speech and sat thinking about Tony. He'd buy him a toolbelt, a leather one, and strip him naked before strapping it on.

They'd fill its pockets with toys and...

"What are you grinning at?"

Obama jumped up from his chair, turned and saw Big Mike standing beside the couch.

"And why do you have a hard-on?"

Obama pulled his cap from his head and used it to cover himself. He felt his erection going down beneath his crossed hands.

Mike stretched out on the couch, yawned, and then looked at Obama again. "The Secret Service got your whore. Toss the cap." Obama complied and Mike smiled. "That's the way I like you, buck naked. Now come over here and sit."

Obama went to the couch and perched on the edge of it. Mike lifted a leg and hooked it over the back. Obama knew what was expected of him, but he gathered up the courage to say, "Do you...do you mind if we wait?"

Mike's brow furrowed and Obama went prickly with goosebumps. He slid off the couch, sat on the floor and laid his head sideways, so it was resting on Mike's pelvis. He looked up at the enormous figure, past the broad chest and powerful shoulders, to the Adam's apple and the wild hair.

"Yeah, we can wait," Mike said. "Did you go through the speech?"

"Yes. It's a strange one. It's about disinformation, but the speech itself is disinformation."

"That's because it's propaganda."

"I know, but... It made me feel like nothing in my life is what it seems, Michelle. Nothing."

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First Amendment Art Farm

Tor pinched his eyes shut against the explosion of sunlight and toed his way down the short flight of stairs. When he reached the ground he leaned back to close the trailer's door. It got hung on the edge of the frame, so he pushed until it seated with a snap.

The stairs ended an inch beyond the shade provided by the awning that ran the length of the trailer. Tor shuffled sideways and eased his eyes open as he stepped in out of the sun. One of his flip-flops picked up a pebble from the dirt. He kicked it free and scratched his head. Just ten seconds away from the air conditioning and sweat was already beading up on his scalp. Soon it would start to move along the waves of his hair, turning it

from blonde to the copper color it took on when it got wet. In ten minutes he'd be a redhead; in twenty his Pink Floyd T-shirt would be soaked through.

He felt the bundle of hypos shift in a pocket of his cargo shorts, and he pulled them out to count again. There were five, thin and orange-plungered. He put them away and took out his sunglasses. One of the lenses was smudged so he gave it a quick wipe on his shirt before he slipped them on.

He saw a black sedan nosed up to the chain around the front yard. The chain ran waist-high between metal posts and kept people from driving into the dead dirt display area. Beyond the car was the almost featureless plain of the Texas panhandle. The flat land stretched to a flat horizon that quivered in the July heat. He'd read that the month was on track to become the hottest ever recorded in Texas, and one of the driest. A drought sucked moisture from every pore and breath. Dogs fed it with their panting and the locals fed it with an ocean of sweet iced tea swilled in and sweated out in a clammy ebb and flow.

Sweat began to creep down through Tor's pubes. He scratched and thought of Alisha. It would be two hours earlier in California, about eight o'clock, and she'd be in bed. He pictured her supple little body and the way her back arched when he woke her with his touch. That never failed to arouse him, and he felt himself stiffening as he scratched his pubes. The scratch turned into a stroke and...

"I'm gonna kill you."

Tor looked at Bonzo, one of the two bums standing in the shade with him. Bonzo had threatened to kill Scrimp. The men seemed to have moved a couple inches closer in their faceoff during the night. Both were still bent forward at the waist but had straightened up a bit. Their morning dose of fentanyl would knock them down again. The saline bags clipped to the backs of their collars were empty, but there was no rush to replace them. The job could wait until they got their drugs.

A murmur of voices came from the car. Dust was still settling around it, so Tor figured it must have arrived just before he came out. Two people sat in the front seat. The one on the passenger side was a woman, with long hair that swung when she spoke. The driver was a man. His voice was deep and he wore a baseball cap.

Tor shifted his attention to the three bums standing bent forward in the yard. He'd set their big umbrellas the night before to block the morning sun, and now they would need to be readjusted. But first a more important matter.

The inside of the little portapotty behind the trailer was already hot.

Tor offloaded the last of the tofu pizza and then propped the door open with a brick, to keep the pod from turning into an oven later on. He lowered the windows of his old SUV for the same reason.

His folding chaise was where he'd left it after his sunset tanning session the day before. He grabbed the chair and then paused at one of the SUV's side mirrors. He'd done stomach crunches before leaving the cool of the trailer, and he lifted his shirt to check his reflected abs. Washboard. He made an attack face and flexed into a pose that would've looked great on an action movie poster. The attack face gave way to a smile.

He took the chaise back around to the front of the trailer and set it in its usual place between Bonzo and Scrimp. "Would either of you care for a Mocha Herba Vitabuzz?" he asked them quite formally, then without waiting for an answer he snickered and went in to get one of the drinks for himself.

When he returned he dropped onto the lounge. It was still warm from the sun. He angled the chair's back to about thirty degrees, popped the top on his can and put his feet up. The cold Vitabuzz felt good fizzing down his throat.

"You're a dead man," Scrimp whispered. Tor belched and looked up at him. He wondered how many times he'd heard Bonzo and Scrimp trade threats since arriving at the art farm. They were a matched pair, so instead of posing them awkwardly under two umbrellas in the yard, he'd placed them in the shade of the awning.

Scrimp held an icepick down low and Bonzo an open straight razor. Tor had found them that way, charging each other in an alley in El Paso. Or rather, they were showing an intent to charge. Both were frozen in what the media had come to call the "fentanyl fold," the stooped position that heavy users of the drug often adopted.

Tor couldn't decide whether Bonzo or Scrimp was dirtier. Both were filthy and wrapped in tattered clothes. He hadn't done anything to clean them up because he wanted authenticity in his project. The only change he made to them was to add some headgear. He put a red Coke cap on Bonzo and a blue Pepsi cap on Scrimp. In one of his vlog videos he said the caps represented the corporate power struggles that were playing out above the heads of the masses.

He sipped his drink and thought about the art geeks who followed his vlog. They were always encouraging him to try new things. They'd loved it when he placed his lounge between Bonzo and Scrimp. For the first couple of days after he opened the display he sat on the other side of the stairs from them, but then he announced that he wanted to become "a more active part of the inaction." He made a video of himself setting his chair between

the fighters, and when he uploaded it to his vlog he wrote that artists in America (thumbs-up emoji) must take a stand against the tragedy of the nation's drug crisis (thumbs-down emoji). That entry resulted in more than a hundred likes and upvotes and earned him a dozen new followers.

Tor sipped his drink and studied the three bums in the yard. The way they stood hunched forward made them look like question marks, or flowers curled in on themselves for the night. The streets and alleys of cities all over America were thick with the folded people.

Suddenly Tor missed Los Angeles. He'd moved there from Minnesota the year before, hoping to start an acting career. He was tall and blonde and his chiseled Nordic face seemed tailor-made for the movies. So he traveled west in his SUV, and on the drive he pictured people stopping someday to admire his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. But his career hadn't sparked to life yet. He took an acting class, but so far he'd landed only one part. A nonspeaking one. Someday though a casting agent would ask to see the hunky shelf stocker from the Vons supermarket commercial.

He worked as a waiter when he wasn't going to auditions, and he dated some wannabe actresses, and then he moved in with Alisha. She was a yoga therapist who did visual arts in her free time. Her current project was tied to the fruit smoothies she practically lived on. She would put a blender on a table in front of a big canvas, fill the jar with layers of different colored fruits, then adopt a nude yoga position against the canvas and have Tor hit the puree button. With no lid on the jar a rainbow storm would spin out and onto the canvas but leave her silhouette blank. Tor loved helping her paint, especially the part where he got to lick her clean as the canvas dried.

He decided to become a painter himself after living with Alisha for a while, but when he asked her where he should begin she pointed to her latest smoothie canvas and said it would take him years to produce anything as good. She was supportive though and suggested they look into other types of art that he could pursue. With luck they would find something that suited him, and he might even get some state funding.

They settled on performance art as his most promising option, since he was an actor, but coming up with an interesting project proved to be difficult. They kicked around lots of ideas but they were all pretty lame. Then one night they drove past a bunch of the bent fentanyl addicts and thought of grouping some together as "posed art." Tor searched online and couldn't find any other artists doing anything similar, so he worked up a proposal that included photos and a video. And sure enough he got a grant from the state. It was a generous one too. The only problem was that he

had to leave California to do the project.

Tor killed his drink, pushed up from his chair and went out to adjust umbrellas. He went to Eloy first. The little man's scaly skin had made Tor think of a fish when he first saw him in the alley in El Paso, so he named him Eloy, after a goldfish he used to keep in a bowl back in Minnesota. All of the bums in the project were named after pets from his childhood.

Bonzo and Scrimp were already posed in their fighting tableaux when Tor found them, but he had to give each of the others some kind of business to do. He gave Eloy a dog leash. One end was looped around a wrist and the other was hooked to an old Tonka Toy truck, a big yellow one. Half of the truck's metal had gone to rust and a couple of wheels were missing.

Tor bent down to reposition the truck, and a Texas flag decal on its windshield made him think of his sole official interaction with the state. The county sheriff and a DPS trooper had shown up together about a week after he arrived at the art farm. They said they were responding to a report of fentanyl on the premises. He produced an affidavit that had come just that morning with a batch of hypos from California. The men both pushed their Stetsons back on their heads and studied the paperwork. Texas law was hard on fentanyl, but that's not what Tor used for his project. Not technically. As his affidavit attested, the drug in his hypos was a variation of fentanyl. Chemists had changed one molecule to turn it into something that wasn't outlawed yet. The trooper explained to the sheriff that by tweaking designer drugs the bad guys were able to stay one step ahead of prosecution. The sheriff called the county attorney, who confirmed what the trooper said about the molecule. Tor couldn't be charged with anything. The cops gave him hard looks as they left, but they hadn't bothered him since.

Tor adjusted Eloy's umbrella so it would block the sun until about three p.m., when another adjustment would be necessary. The saline bag clipped to one of the umbrella's ribs was empty but like the others could be replaced later.

Next up was Mrs. Gawkins. She was an old woman Tor had named after a cat his family owned when he was in elementary school. He'd picked white bums exclusively for his project, so he wouldn't be accused of racial discrimination, but it was hard to tell that Mrs. G was white. She looked like she was covered in dirty motor oil. "Who loves me?" Tor asked her. She spoke sometimes, in whispers like Bonzo and Scrimp. She'd say, "Mommy loves you," and then whimper a little. "Come on," Tor said, "tell me who loves me." But Mrs. G was silent. Tor snickered and straightened her apron. Her jeans and T-shirt were filthy, but on top of them he'd tied a clean white

apron that was embroidered with daisies. He'd stuck a spatula in her hand too, and in her bent stance it looked like she was tending to the rusted skillet on the ground in front of her.

Tor retied Mrs. G's apron in back, then as he adjusted her umbrella he sneaked a glance at the black sedan. The people were still murmuring away inside and he wondered who they were. He hoped they weren't religious fanatics. A couple of church groups had already stopped by to tell him he was going to hell. He didn't think his project was an abomination, but Christians did, and he suspected they were the reason that California told him to look for an out-of-state venue.

He'd gone online when he learned he would have to relocate. He checked Nevada first but couldn't find anything to meet his needs, so he looked at Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico. Then finally he came across The First Amendment Art Farm in Texas. The website said the owner was a libertarian and a believer in free will. Tor called him and they talked. The owner's name was Sheedy and he said that the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution mentions several things that basically add up to freedom of thought and the free expression thereof. And the art farm provided a place where artists could express themselves in word and deed. "As long as they don't harm children," he added in a menacing tone. "So you wouldn't object to my project?" Tor asked. He'd already described it. "Look," Sheedy said, "life is short and you should live it the way you want. And if it's important to you to do this project of yours, then hell yeah you're welcome here. But don't come whining to me about the consequences of your work when you're done. If you roll the dice, you have to accept whatever number comes up." Tor asked if he could get a contract faxed to him and Sheedy said he'd get right on it. A week later a box smelling of smoke and onions came in the mail. Inside were a bottle of triple-x hot sauce and a contract scrawled on the back of a tea-sticky menu from a barbecue place. So Tor was surprised by the way that the contract was handled, and he was surprised again when he arrived at the farm. The "Artist's Quarters" page on the website showed a new single-wide trailer, but the picture had been taken in the nineteen sixties. Time and rot had broken the trailer's back. It sagged across flat tires in an inverted U shape that made walking inside feel like mountain climbing. But the air conditioner worked and that was the important thing.

Tor prompted Mrs. G to say "Mommy loves you" one more time, but she wasn't in a talkative mood so he moved on.

Slomo was the last of the yard bums. He was cadaverously thin, and Tor had tied a piece of twine around the nub of his missing thumb. The string ran to a pink box kite in the middle of the yard. On his vlog Tor

claimed that the kite symbolized "a veracity of art in defiance of those who would deny the right to soar." He didn't have a clue what the statement meant, but it had sounded good when he said it and it earned him lots of upvotes.

He adjusted Slomo's umbrella and wondered what he'd vlog about later. The best time for making the videos was magic hour, when he was lounging in the long golden rays of the setting sun. The light made him glow like an Oscar.

When he was finished with Slomo he went back to the shade of the awning. His shirt was heavy with sweat, so he took it off and hung it on a nail on the side of the trailer. He was preparing to sit again when he heard a double thump of car doors closing.

He looked to the sedan and saw that the man and woman had gotten out. The woman was tall and young and her hair fell in a ripply blonde cascade over her shoulders. She was wearing a green blouse and black slacks. The outfit showed off a trim body that was plump in all the right places.

In contrast, her middle-aged companion's tank top showed a big gut lapped over the front of his blue jeans. He adjusted his cap and drank from a huge white cup marked "Sweet" on the side in cursive felt-tip. Tor watched him upend the cup, guzzle, then dump its ice and lemon rind as he went to the rear of the car.

He opened the trunk and swapped the cup for a camera. Tor recognized it as a professional video rig, with a shoulder support and top-mounted lighting array. There were no logos on the car but Tor knew the people must be with the news media. He wondered if they were local or network. Network exposure would be a real boon.

While the man worked on removing the lights from the camera, the woman walked to the yard's boundary chain. She rested a hand on it and stood looking at the bums. Even from a distance Tor could see that she was a beauty. She had full lips, a thin nose and high cheekbones.

The cameraman finished with the lights and joined the woman at the chain. He dabbed at the camera's lens with a brush. "Showtime," Tor said to himself.

He went out to the yard again, to Eloy, and extended an arm toward him. Artists in movies always did that. They held out an arm with a raised thumb to look at their models. Tor raised his thumb and pretended to consider Eloy from various angles, then he nodded approval and ambled over to meet his guests.

The man was still brushing at the camera's lens when Tor reached

the chain. The woman was flicking dust from her blouse. Tor slid his sunglasses down on his nose and saw that the eyes behind her squint matched the green of her blouse. She was lightly tanned and had a faint scattering of freckles on her cheekbones.

Tor introduced himself and learned that the woman's name was Wendy Vaunt. She said she was a reporter and asked if she could interview him about his art project. "You wouldn't mind some free publicity, would you?" Tor liked her drawl.

"No, I wouldn't mind. The more publicity the better."

She went to the car and returned with a microphone. The cameraman settled his rig on his shoulder and stepped back to compose his shot.

Tor was glad he'd removed his shirt, so he could show off his bronzed torso. He put his shades away in his shorts and turned so the camera would pick up his face from the angle he used for his 8x10 glossies.

The reporter, Wendy, nodded to the cameraman and lost her squint. She leaned forward to speak into her mike. "As an artist," she said to Tor, "or more to the point as a human being, don't you consider what you're doing here to be abusive?"

She thrust the mike like a dagger at Tor and held it close to his chin.

"Abusive?" He hadn't expected such a forceful opening to the interview. "Uh, no, it's not abusive."

"Why won't you answer?" she asked.

Tor knew what she was doing. She was making sure they'd have footage later that could be edited to make him sound evasive.

The cameraman inched closer and Wendy said, "California believes that this so-called art project may be a human rights violation. That's why you came to Texas, isn't it? To avoid prosecution?"

A shadow flitted past on the ground. Tor didn't need to look up to know it was from a buzzard. Sometimes the birds were as thick as gnats high overhead.

"Am I right?" Wendy pressed. "Are you running from the law?"

Tor didn't like the way the interview was going. Even in the record heat Wendy seemed cool and collected. She wasn't perspiring at all, but Tor glistened with sweat and knew that the two of them appearing onscreen together would give the home audience the wrong impression. He'd look like he was nervous and trying to squirm out of answers. It was time to put his acting skills to work.

He flashed his most dazzling smile and said, "I'm not running from the law. And I didn't come here to violate anyone's rights. I came because I

heard that Texas is a place where people can pursue their dreams with minimal government interference. Where experimentation and growth are encouraged, and freedom is valued. That's why I came here, to be free to pursue my art. And if you'll let me explain, you'll understand that I'm not violating anybody's human..."

"Battery's dead," the cameraman interrupted. "I got another one in the car."

He walked off and Wendy squinted at Tor. "Sorry to cut you off. You don't believe that individualist stuff you were spouting anyway. You're just taking advantage of loopholes and soaking up grant money. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, if it's legal, but what about them?" She gestured to the yard.

"You mean my..." Tor almost called the people in the yard his bums but caught himself. "You mean my models? They signed on for this."

Tor remembered the alley in El Paso and putting a pen in the bums' hands so he could wave release forms underneath. The squiggles on the paper might or might not stand up in court, but at least he had them.

"I'm sure they did sign on," Wendy said, "but even if they remember doing it, it's not right. This whole show isn't right. That's why California wouldn't allow it."

Tor pushed some sweat from his forehead up into his hair, and he wondered how Wendy knew so much about his project.

"It sounds like you did some homework," he said.

"I always research what I'm reporting on. That's how I learned that California wouldn't let you stage this event there. They said it would be demeaning to your victims. Pardon me, your 'models.' But I guess y'all think people in Texas don't have any dignity, huh." She went back to flicking dust from her blouse and said, "California's been exporting their BS forever. Look at the movies they put out, always 'pushing the envelope' when it comes to sex and violence. And the phony actors. I hate the ones who say they're against guns but make millions from films that glorify them. Like Sylvester Stallone. He says he's anti-gun but he's made a half-dozen Rambo movies. Gimme a break. And it's the same with sex. The movies get more perverse every year. They're targeting children now, sexually degrading them. And we're supposed to think that those foul California values are normal." She shook her head without looking up from her blouse. "I feel sorry for young families nowadays, like the ones in Llano County, a couple hundred miles to the south. Some parents there objected to pornographic books that were in the local library, and a bunch of lawyers from California showed up to file lawsuits. Lawyers from California made it

legal for people to crap on the sidewalks of San Francisco, and now they want to make it legal for children in Texas to be mentally molested by sexual deviants. So of course California would pay to send you here to normalize the use of fentanyl. It's part of their war against decency."

Tor didn't know what to say. Wendy had criticized California, and Hollywood. It was as if she'd crapped on the Walk of Fame.

"I, uh, I don't agree. California's great. They're years ahead of the rest of the nation."

"Yeah, well, I wish they'd get wherever they're going and lock the gate behind them."

"I guess we'll have to agree to disagree on California, but you're wrong about me coming here to help normalize the use of fentanyl. And even if that was the case, drug use is a personal choice. Nobody makes you take drugs."

Wendy looked up from her flicking. "Why that's downright libertarian of you," she smirked, "but you and I both know that drug use is a choice only up to a point, until the drug takes over. And fentanyl is a really, really bad drug. It killed more than a hundred thousand Americans last year. A couple days ago some border agents found enough, in just one bust, to kill a million people. It was in a truck at the Mexican border. The Chinese communists ship the chemicals needed to make it to Mexico, where the drug cartels manufacture it and then move it north. It comes across the border in trucks and in packages carried by illegal aliens. Border guards have to be really careful now when they do searches. You can absorb a lethal dose of fentanyl just from touching it."

Tor reached to adjust the hypos in his pocket. They'd shifted and the orange plungers were sticking out. Wendy saw. "Be careful with those things, or someday I'll be back here to do a follow-up story. Somebody'll find your bloated corpse and I'll stand behind the police tape and ask the audience, 'Did he die for art, or did art die for him?'"

Tor started to ask what the hell that meant, but before he could speak Wendy yelled at the cameraman to hurry up. Then she began an examination of her fingernails. Tor noticed that they were cut short, the way lesbians wore them. He wondered if she was a dyke. She was as aggressive as one, and she hadn't responded to his washboard abs, so maybe she was. He would have thought that kind of thing wouldn't be popular with Texans, but maybe they liked getting their news from butch women. He wondered again who she worked for.

"I forgot to ask who you're with. Are you local news or network?"

"Neither. I'm freelance. After we edit this piece together I'll see if

anyone's interested."

"If anyone's interested," Tor repeated. He felt himself swell with indignation. Was she trying to insult him? Someday he'd be a star. Someday she'd kick herself for not making better use of her time with him.

Wendy looked at the yard and said, "I don't know. I might be able to cut this into a larger piece I'm doing about the influence of the Mexican drug cartels on American politics. You know, one of the reasons the Democrats stole the last election was because the cartels threatened them. Trump was hurting their revenue stream with his immigration restrictions, so they told the Democrats to remove him from office, or else." She drew a finger across her throat in a cutting gesture. "So the Democrats stole the election in plain sight. It was a victory for narco-politics and a loss for the thousands of American families whose loved ones die from fentanyl each year."

The cameraman walked up and said he was reloaded.

"Never mind," Wendy sighed. "This story sucks. And I don't want to give pretty boy here any airtime."

Once again Tor felt indignation, and he was trying to think of something to say, when Wendy spun on a heel and walked away. The cameraman followed. Tor choked down his anger and headed for the trailer.

He was almost there when he heard the car start. He looked over his shoulder and saw it speed off in a cloud of dust, and while his head was turned he bumped into something. It was Bonzo and he was falling face first toward the chaise lounge. Tor caught him and pulled him back to a standing position. The shoe he'd kicked had scooted forward, so he nudged the other to restore the earlier balance. When Bonzo was steady again he muttered, "I'm gonna kill you," and Tor thumped the bill of his Coke cap. "Stop that," he scolded. He was still fuming from the interview.

He thought about returning to the trailer, to the air conditioning, but he was overheated and needed to cool down first. He dropped onto the lounge and settled against the angled back. Looking up he saw that moving Bonzo forward had narrowed the gap between the two bums. He scooted the chaise to re-center it, then when he settled and looked up again he thought how the view would make a good shot for a movie—the two men leaning into the frame, Bonzo holding his razor on one side and Scrimp with his icepick on the other. He might try to get a shot of them from the chair later, for his vlog.

Thinking about upvotes lifted his spirits. He smiled at Scrimp and said, "Did you hear Bonzo? He just threatened you. He lunged at you too, but I stopped him. So tell him he's a dead man."

Scrimp didn't respond, and Tor was about to egg him on again, when something moved in the yard. The kite jiggled in a little breeze that had sprung up. The wind reached Tor and felt good. He shut his eyes to enjoy it, but then he thought of Wendy and his mood soured again. He didn't like the way she'd tried to make him look like a criminal for simply doing an art project. The drugs he used were perfectly legal. The drugs. He remembered that the bums still needed to be dosed. He'd take care of them after the breeze dropped off.

The day was quiet and peaceful. With his eyes still closed Tor took one of the relaxing yoga breaths that Alisha had taught him, and he imagined himself back in Los Angeles. Someday he'd go on one of the talk shows there and tell about the art project he did before he was a star. He'd say, "Sure the project was risky. It could have killed my acting career before it even got started, but you can't make anything of yourself in life if you don't take chances. We're all responsible for our actions, so I grabbed the bull by the horns and..." Bull by the horns. He seemed to feel a horn piercing his head and wondered why.

He opened his eyes and saw that Scrimp was leaning in closer than before. And the hand with the icepick was further forward. Tor felt a twinge of pain at his temple and realized the son of a bitch had stabbed him.

He yelped and jerked away. He lurched to the other side and felt something brush his throat. Then something hot was spreading down across his chest. He turned and saw that Bonzo was also leaned in closer than before, and his razor was dripping blood.

Tor touched his chest and saw red fingers when he pulled his hand away. He touched his throat and felt blood pulsing out. Bonzo had cut an artery. The jugular. Or was it the carotid? Tor's temple throbbed and he grew confused. The caroti...caroti...carrot? Eat your carrots, Tor, so you'll have good eyesight when you grow up.

He applied pressure to his throat with one hand, and with the other he reached up and felt his temple. The icepick was still there and sunk to the handle. He pulled it out and tossed it. The temple was where they cut you with a scalpel when they performed a loboto... A lobo... He couldn't finish the thought. A lobo's a wolf. He remembered howling like a wolf in acting class, and waddling like a penguin.

A cold wind came up and Tor settled back on the chaise to enjoy it. He closed his eyes and saw orange through the eyelids. Eat your carotids, Tor. The force of the wind, wend, wendy increased. "Somebody will find your bloated body," she'd said. He tried to sit up but was pinned in place by the

downdraft from the wings of a passing penguin. The orange dimmed but he couldn't open his eyes. "Did he die for art, or did art die for him?" He still didn't know what that meant, and puzzling over it made his temple throb from the... What was it, a dice pick? If you roll the dice you have to accept whatever number comes up. Dice, ice, roll the die. Somewhere in the distance a voice said, "I told you you're a dead man."

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The Ghost of Dan Smoot

A noise awakened me one night and I got out of bed to investigate. I saw a bluish glow coming through my study's open door. I knew the light was from my computer's monitor, but I distinctly remembered turning the computer off.

When I reached the study I stopped and peered around the doorjamb. A man was sitting at my desk. Or rather, it was the outline of a man. I could see through him to the bookcase on the wall beyond. It was like looking through a bag of water.

I figured I was dreaming and waited to jump somewhere else, as I often do in dreams, but after a full minute I was still standing in the same place. And I'd come to recognize the man at the computer. It was Dan Smoot, a conservative political commentator from the middle of the twentieth century. I knew what he looked like from the thumbnail portrait on the mailers he used to send out. He issued a report each week, then in January the fifty-two issues from the previous year were bound into a book. I'd come across a batch of those books and that's what I was reading at the time.

In the portraits he had black hair and a strong jaw. At my desk his jaw was hard to see, and his hair had no color beyond the blue reflected from the computer monitor.

He turned his face to me and said, "I hope you'll forgive the intrusion. My name's Dan Smoot."

"I know who you are. I've been reading your work."

He gestured to the monitor. "And I've been reading yours."

"I'm...I'm dreaming, right? This must be a dream."

"No. It's a supernatural event."

"A what?"

"A supernatural event. I'm a ghost."

I wasn't really surprised. As I get older my knowledge of how much I don't know continues to expand. And it's not some slow, creeping expansion; it's a Big Bang kind of growth. A ghost? Why not?

"Okay, so you're the ghost of Dan Smoot."

I stepped into the room and reached for the wall switch, but he asked me not to turn on the light. He said he would fade if I did. So we remained lit by the computer monitor only, and he said, "I didn't mean to wake you, but I was passing by and got drawn in by your writing."

He turned back to the monitor and I went around behind him. I looked over his shoulder and saw that he was reading "The Game," a story I'd written not long before. I waited until he'd scrolled down to the end and finished, then I asked what he thought.

"Of the story? I liked it. It's packed full of history and political misdeeds." He swiveled in the chair and faced me. "I hope you keep writing about politics, Ed. It's more important now than ever."

"How would you know? I mean, you died twenty years ago."

"Yes, but I've kept informed. I've even jumped ahead a bit."

"You can see the future?" He didn't respond. "You can, can't you? Tell me what happens."

"More of the same unless people change their ways. That's why it's important for you to continue to study the past and write about it."

"Yeah, well, lately whenever I write about the past I wonder if I'm doing it so I can get away from the present. Things are pretty grim nowadays."

He nodded. I could see through his head to the story that was still on the screen behind him.

"Would you like to talk about it?" he asked. "About how grim things are?"

"Sure. But you already know, since you've kept informed. I mean, for starters the federal government's been overthrown. At least the executive branch has. Corporate fascists stole the last presidential election and put Joe Biden in the White House."

"Yes, that was brazen."

"Disastrous is more like it. Biden's doing everything he can to destroy America. He's opened the southern border and let more than five million illegals into the country in just over a year. And he's given billions of our tax dollars to his mafia buddies in Ukraine. Plus he's trying to normalize a whole range of sexual perversions."

Smoot's bag-of-water head darkened, which reduced the amount of light coming through to his face.

"The sexual perversion is especially disturbing," he said. "And the scope of it is hard to grasp. Homosexuality and pride are sins, but now America celebrates 'gay pride' for a whole month. And monkeypox, the new sexually transmitted disease, is showing up in children and pets." He shuddered. "Homosexuality, pedophilia and bestiality. Surely God will punish us, like He did Sodom and Gomorrah."

"I'd say we're doing a pretty good job of punishing ourselves. Look at the economy. Inflation is skyrocketing, and congress just passed a so-called 'inflation reduction act' that will make it worse. The act gives the IRS eighty billion dollars. That's eight times its annual budget. They said they'll use the money to hire nearly ninety thousand new agents. And a couple months ago, after they bought a half-billion additional rounds of ammunition, they added 'willing to use lethal force' to their job postings. It's pretty clear that they plan to kill off the middle class, either by audit or murder."

"The destruction of the middle class has always been a communist priority," Smoot said. "You're right about corporate fascists being behind Biden, but he's promoting communism. As I explained in volume seven, number seventeen of my report, both communists and fascists want centralized government. And in America they're working together to achieve it." He gestured over his shoulder, to my computer. "I saw that you plan to address their cooperation in a story."

"I do? Which one?"

"You haven't given it a title yet, but some notes for it are in one of your 'Jeremiad' folders. You describe how the Republicans and the Democrats play off of each other in order to advance an anti-American agenda." Smoot turned to the computer, clicked around and then read aloud. "George W. Bush gave his big bank donors a seven hundred billion dollar bailout as he left office (fascism), then Obama followed up with eight hundred billion for unnecessary social programs (communism). One and a half trillion stolen from the Treasury would have led to electoral problems for whichever party took it, so the theft was split between a Republican and a Democratic president. Trump and Biden did the same with spending on Covid, but the amount was much higher. Several trillion. In two years under Trump/Biden the U.S. increased the number of dollars in circulation by twenty percent. It's obvious to even the most simple-minded that this kind of spending will diminish the buying power of the dollar and eventually destroy it, resulting in the breakdown of American society."

Smoot swiveled to face me again. He said, "You're right about the dollar collapsing under the weight of so much spending. And it's a planned

collapse. Democrats and quite a few Republicans want to destroy our economy so they can rebuild us as a communist nation."

"We call that kind of Republican a RINO now. Republican In Name Only."

"I know. And they're doing as much or more than Democrats to advance the communist cause in America. Conservative voters watch for loss of liberties when leftist politicians are in power, but they let their guard down after Republicans are elected."

"You talked about that pretty often in your reports. I'm only on my second book of them, but they've taught me a lot. I guess the biggest surprise so far has been Eisenhower. He was a Republican, so I always assumed he was a conservative. But according to you he wasn't."

"Eisenhower," Smoot muttered. His face darkened again. "He was elected president to fight communism, but he did just the opposite. After he took office in nineteen fifty-three he gave half of Korea to the communists. And then when Stalin died he passed up a chance to destroy the Soviet Union. All he had to do was fund the anti-communist rebellions that broke out in the Soviet member states, but he didn't, so the Soviets were able to reestablish control and continue on as a dictatorship. Eisenhower aided the growth of international communism the whole time he was president. Near the end of his second term he gave a speech where he said, quote, 'We envisage a single world community, as yet unrealized but advancing steadily toward fulfillment through our plans, our efforts, and our collective acts.' End quote. That's communism, a one-world collective. That's what Eisenhower worked for."

"So, why didn't conservatives hold him accountable?"

"Because they got distracted. Technology flourished in America after World War Two, and like everyone else conservatives were transfixed by flashy new gadgetry. They forgot about the communists in their midst. And now you're paying the price. Like with that IRS situation. The military isn't allowed to forcibly enter private homes in America, but the IRS is, so communists are militarizing the agency."

"To steal people's money."

"That's what communists do. They steal money and put it into a big federal pot, then they redistribute through subsidization."

"And whatever the government subsidizes, it controls. I read that in one of your reports. You wrote a lot about communist methods and philosophy."

"Yes, well, it's not much of a philosophy. Its fundamental flaw lies in the fact that each communist is an individual. And according to communist

doctrine, individuals are incapable of managing their private affairs. So how can a group of individuals be expected to manage the affairs of a nation?"

Smoot chuckled at the absurdity of what he'd just described, and while his mind was elsewhere I tried again to find out about the future. I did it in a roundabout way though, by asking if conservatives would do well in the midterm elections that were coming up.

"Now now," he said, serious again. "I told you I can't talk about things like that. But why don't you tell me how you think the elections will turn out?"

"Okay. Worst-case scenario, the bad guys will once again steal every race they can and continue to drive us into poverty. Over time they'll force most of us off the land and into compact cities, where they'll release plagues and starve us to death."

"And the best-case scenario?"

"Conservatives will win. Our efforts to affect political change by spreading information will pay off."

"We tried to do that with my reports, to spread information to voters."

"I know, and no disrespect to the work you did, but your snail mailers were awfully slow in getting the word out."

"That's why we expanded into radio and TV, to reach people more quickly. But we could never get beyond the local markets. The national networks were controlled by leftists who wouldn't carry our programs."

"Yeah, well, things are different now, with the internet. A story or an opinion can reach millions in a day. And that makes it easier to hold the bad guys accountable. We can expose their scams almost as soon as they run them. But the downside to that is that now, because they have to jump from one scam to the next so quickly, they've pretty much emptied their bag of tricks. So lately they've begun pushing for civil war in America. They don't care if it's race war, class war, or a war between political groups; they just want us killing one another. Which I guess would be worst-case scenario number two. Instead of depopulating in a slow and orderly manner, they blow things up so they can declare martial law and butcher us as they rebuild."

"Write about both scenarios. People need to know what's in store for them."

"So that's what's going to happen to the country, one of my worst-case scenarios?"

"All I can say about the future is that totalitarians plan to destroy America. They have to, because of our constitution. It's the single biggest

impediment to world government. As I stated in report number twenty-six, volume six, the basic principle of American society is that government has no power except that which the people give it, the people having received their rights from God. America is the only nation, ever, whose institutions and organic law were founded on this principle. And the communists can't allow such a nation to exist. They must destroy America and eradicate all memory of its constitution. If they can do that, then the world will become a collection of regional tyrannies that can be controlled by a central authority. And it will be a thousand years before men are able to rise once again to the level of freedom they let slip away."

We passed a long moment in silence, then my bedside alarm went off. I get up early to write and it was still dark outside the windows. I didn't know if I'd be writing that morning, with Smoot at my desk, but when I came back from turning off the alarm he was gone. My computer was still on so I sat down and went to work.

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The Matriarchs

The summer had been a scorcher even by Texas standards, but then in September the heat broke. With one last broil and a subtle turn of light the Hill Country slipped into autumn. The temperature only reached into the upper eighties now during the day and dipped to the sixties at night. But the spot where Jess was stretched out wouldn't cool that night. The ground beneath her cheek would heat to ninety-eight point six, wouldn't it?

She hadn't tried to get up yet, or even move. She knew she needed time to recover from the shock of the fall. It had all happened so quickly. She was giving her garden a final check for the day when she noticed something odd near the plum tree. A dark line crossed the path that led to it through the grass. The line hadn't been there earlier, so she went to investigate and found cut ants on the tree. They were stripping its leaves. Two lines of ants marked the gray trunk. One moved up and one moved down. The ants going down were taking bits of leaf to an underground nest, where they would be deposited to grow fungus. Or that's what Jess had read somewhere, that cut ants ate fungus grown from leaves.

Her vinegar and cinnamon insect repellent was by the back door, so she turned to go get it. And that's when she fell. She hooked a foot and lost her sunhat as she went down stiff as a plank. The grass alongside the path

acted as something of a cushion, but when she hit the ground she heard a sharp snap. She was afraid she'd broken a rib.

She finally felt composed enough to try to rise. If she could get to her hands and knees she could use the plum tree to pull herself up, so she placed both palms on the ground and pushed.

She was ready for the pain of the rib, but instead there was an explosion of fire across her pelvis. She gasped and lay unable to breathe until the blaze throbbed down to a stab in her left hip. The snap she'd heard when she fell was the sound of a hip breaking, not a rib.

A broken hip was one of those old people's injuries her son and daughter had started warning her about when she turned seventy. That was twenty years before. They wanted her to move into an apartment, where she would be around other people in case of an emergency. They assumed that people would be the solution to the emergency rather than the cause. "No," she told them whenever they brought up the subject, "I'll stay where I am." She couldn't imagine giving up the house and the peace and quiet of the country.

As if mocking her thoughts of quiet a man's voice yammered something from inside the house. She'd left the TV on but it had been silent for some time, so the sound might have come from one of the telemarketers that were constantly leaving messages on her phone's answering machine. Her proper phone, not her cell. She never carried the cell. Her daughter called her on it sometimes as a test and she always failed. In the inevitable follow-up call on the landline Annie would say, "You should carry the cell, mom. You never know when you'll need it." "I know," Jess would say, "but it takes me awhile to get used to new things." "Nine years," Annie said the last time Jess referred to the cell as new. "You've had the phone nine years, mom. It's not 'new.' In fact, we're going to have to upgrade you pretty soon because they're discontinuing that technology."

Jess felt something on the back of a hand and saw an ant crawling across it. It was a cut ant, and it stopped, rose up and twitched its antennae, like it was checking her out. She flicked the hand and sent the ant flying.

Sound came from inside the house again, but this time she knew it was the TV, not the phone. Queen Elizabeth's funeral had been the day before and now they were running replays of it. She'd watched the procession through London twice already that day and planned to watch it once more before bed. Voices murmured. She couldn't make out the commentators' words, but she knew they were describing what the audience could expect to see before the procession began.

Jess thought of Dooley's funeral. She missed him so. They were

married forty-eight years and he was dead now for more than twenty. His funeral had been attended by their children, grandchildren and a great-grandson. And Jess's might be attended by a great-great-grandchild, now that Marcy was pregnant.

The new birth would make it three generations since Dooley asked Jess if she wanted to see an old house he'd found for sale in his travels. He was a trucker and away a lot, but between trips one spring morning they drove north from San Antonio so he could show Jess his discovery. Little Trevor was in diapers and Anne was on the way, and Jess knew the moment she saw the house that her children would grow up in it. She'd packed a picnic lunch and she and Dooley spent the day picturing the place reroofed and freshly painted. In the back yard they'd have a garden and beyond that a neat-rowed orchard and grape arbors and maybe even a small dairy. The barn and the twenty acres of brush that were part of the property would allow room for all that and more.

But over time the dream shrank. They did the fix-up of the house and put in a garden, but instead of grapes and an orchard Jess just planted a fruit tree here and there. And Dooley turned the barn into a garage where he could work on his trucks.

They celebrated with a cookout the day he bought his first Freightliner. He was thrilled to finally be driving for himself. He hauled cargo all over the southwest for five years before he bought a second truck, and a year after that he got a third. Drivers came and went and they were always polite to Jess, who raised two children, gardened and kept the house clean. She helped Dooley do repairs to the house. He called it their castle and sometimes he'd ask if they should put in a drawbridge or a moat.

A jolt of pain made Jess suck air. She shifted position and cringed at the feel of bone grinding in her hip, but the pain eased once she resettled.

She'd had lots of free time while Dooley was on the road, then even more when the kids started school. She had friends she could visit with but not that many and she took to watching TV to fill her days. Talk shows were her favorite. Over the years she went from watching them on a small black and white TV, to a console with a 19-inch color tube, and then to a big flat-screen that looked like a chalkboard when it was turned off.

She especially liked when the talk shows devoted an episode to Queen Elizabeth and her family. She'd always followed Elizabeth closely. On the day they televised her coronation Jess felt absolutely intoxicated. She felt that she was with Elizabeth as she entered Westminster Abbey a queen in name and emerged a queen in fact.

Then she followed Elizabeth's growing family as her own family grew.

Elizabeth gave birth to Charles and Margaret, and Jess had Trevor and Anne. She'd named Anne after Elizabeth's sister, as a tribute, and Dooley was too busy working to question or care. The important thing to him was that the children were happy. He played with them when he was home and called them as often as he could when he was away.

A bead of sweat ran sideways down Jess's forehead and she was thankful the sun was settling toward the horizon. At least she wouldn't get burned too badly. And if she was there the next day... Well, she'd worry about that if and when.

She thought of Trevor and Anne again and remembered the sound of their little feet pattering through the house. The patter deepened to the clomping of shoes, and their baby squeals deepened to grown voices saying goodbye at the front door. You'd think the house where they grew up would be special to them, but it wasn't. They rarely returned to it while they were in college, and then they got married and started their own families far away. "We're in their rearview mirrors now," Dooley used to say.

He was still driving when the children left home, so Jess was suddenly alone for long stretches of time. She began having friends over for tea sometimes and that went on for years, but then the friends lost their mobility and their lives and the tea parties faded like the presence of the children had.

Dooley faded too. He died not long after he sold his trucks and retired. The kids and their families came to help bury him, then they returned to their cities and their once- or twice-yearly visits. The only relative she saw more often than that was Anne's granddaughter Deedee.

A distant screech pulled Jess awake. She'd been drifting but the bagpipes put an end to that. They wailed from the TV, and below them was the drumbeat of the procession. Seventy-five beats per minute she remembered one of the commentators saying, a heartbeat pace marking time for hundreds of marchers in full dress uniforms and the most solemn of formal attire.

Jess thought how nice it was that the Queen's whole family was assembled for the funeral. She wondered if they'd cut down on visits to her over the years. Like with Jess, did her relatives come to see her only when protocol required? The press in Britain did what it could to give the royal family its privacy, by and large, so Jess wasn't sure how Elizabeth passed her final days. Could it be that in the end she was reduced to just one or two people who cared enough to chat with her regularly?

In Jess's life there was Prissy. They traded calls morning and evening. Priss was Jess's age but housebound, and she loved to talk on the phone.

Sometimes their calls would last a couple of hours but cover nothing. They could spend a week talking about how canning seals had changed over the years.

Jess twisted her head so she could see the garden and the house beyond. She judged from the shadows that it was about six o'clock, about the time that Priss always rang. She liked to talk just after the news ended and before her prime time shows began. But Jess wouldn't be there to answer the phone this time. Priss would be surprised, and maybe worried enough to notify the sheriff.

"Hello!" Jess yelled, testing her voice. Was it loud enough to be heard if somebody stopped by to check on her? "Hello!" she called again. She sounded raspy but her voice was strong. Anyone standing near the back door should be able to hear it, even above the sound of the TV.

She drifted again. The thump and keen of the music brought her thoughts back to Elizabeth. She'd gone through a fair amount of drama with her family, especially with her son Andrew. He was born a decade after Charles and Margaret, so nothing much was expected of him, and he managed to stay out of the headlines when he was young. But then he met Koo Stark. She was a Hollywood actress who seemed really nice, but she'd done a nude shower scene in a movie. And Andrew had no business dating a woman that anyone in the world could watch taking a shower. Jess remembered one of the talk shows speculating on what brand of soap the couple used when they scrubbed each other's backs.

Andrew and Koo became an item the same year that Charles married Diana, tragic Diana fated to die in that horrible car wreck. She dutifully provided the throne with two male heirs, but the birth of the younger one, Harry, raised a lot of eyebrows. When she and Charles were going through a rough patch in their marriage she took to riding horses. For weeks she practically lived at their stables, and then Harry was born. With red hair like the stableman's. Of course the sleazy tabloids added the questionable parentage to their stew of royal scandal. They always kept a pot boiling, and they dished out stableboy stories until another redhead darkened the door at Buckingham Palace.

Fergie.

Jess felt her gut tighten. Sarah Ferguson married Andrew in 1986 after beguiling him in some strange way that always made Jess think of what happened to her Uncle Moosh. He was a bail bondsman who fell under the spell of one of his customers. They met when he sprang her from jail on a pickpocketing charge, and after a whirlwind courtship they ended up at a chapel in Las Vegas. She went to the Blushing Bride's Toilette but didn't

come back, and Moosh found that he had no wallet and no way to pay for the Eternal Love Bouquet he'd grabbed on his way past the chapel's gift shop. He would have returned the flowers but couldn't because he'd already plucked their petals to scatter in front of the altar. The preacher called the law and Moosh was arrested. And since he'd signed his house and car over to his fiancé he couldn't raise his own bail. He said later that his heart felt as empty as his earlobe. It was missing the stud with the three carat diamond that his beloved said she wanted to have mounted as a wedding ring. After Vegas he filled the hole in his ear with a gold-plated stud and spent a year pouring cheap whisky through the hole in his heart. He drank until the plating wore off the stud and his ear turned green.

So Jess remembered Uncle Moosh whenever she thought of Andrew and Fergie. They separated after having two daughters, and Fergie drifted through a series of flings that became a running joke in the gossip columns.

And then she got her toes sucked in France. That happened in private but paparazzi took telephoto pictures. Fergie lay stretched out topless on a chaise lounge by a pool while a bald man held her lifted foot to his mouth. Bryan was his name, may it live in infamy. What must the Queen have thought when she saw the front-page pictures of a hustling upstart sucking her daughter-in-law's toes? Andrew divorced Fergie soon after the incident and to Jess's way of thinking it was good riddance to bad rubbish.

The call of a hawk in the distance made Jess wonder what her crumpled form must look like from above. Probably like one of the misshapen figures stuck to her refrigerator's door. Every few weeks she received a crayon drawing done by one of the children in the family, and she would add it to the stacks beneath the magnets. Some of the drawings were supposed to be of her and some were no telling what. Her granddaughter Deedee had drawn an odd one once. It showed Jess with an expressionless face in pink and gray, but the face of her purple and black shadow bore a complex twist of...something. She couldn't decide if it was a look of surprise or anger.

Deedee was an intense girl who'd been visiting every two or three weeks since she got her driver's license the year before. She would come down from Dallas, spend an afternoon talking, and then drive back. Jess knew she was using the trips as an excuse to get away from problems at home, but she didn't mind. She enjoyed the company.

On one of her visits she told Jess that she'd been studying monarchies. She was only seventeen and Jess wished she would show an interest in the usual teenage things like music and dating, but for some reason she was obsessed with government. She carried a smartphone and

said she got all her news online. Jess didn't know much about the internet, but it seemed to deliver far more information than newspapers or TV did. Deedee would tell her about rebellions and coups and cabinet shakeups taking place all over the world, and quite often she'd end her stories by shaking her head and saying, "People get the government they deserve."

They hadn't talked about the Queen's death yet, but Jess knew that Deedee thought the British royals were corrupt. And their subjects wouldn't throw them off because they were afraid to upset the status quo. One time she said, "The British are like frogs in a pot of water, Meemaw. You know, a pot that's being brought to a slow boil on the stove. They don't realize how much trouble they're in yet. They think the Queen is some nice old lady who would never hurt them, but she has the power to crank up the flame anytime she wants. Like, did you know she can dissolve parliament? Just shut it down whenever she wants. She can dissolve it in Britain or in any of the nations that make up the British Commonwealth. That's nearly a quarter of the world's landmass."

From there Deedee had led Jess through a brief but bloody history of the British Empire—through wars and conquests and colonizations—then she mentioned The Green New Deal. "It's just another of their wars, but a mental one, to colonize our minds."

"I don't understand," Jess said. "The green stuff has to do with gasoline engines and electric cars, doesn't it? How's that connected to the royal family?"

"Because they're behind the Green New Deal. Or their Anglo-American banking establishment is. The establishment controls the world's flow of oil with the American petrodollar, but they know that can't last. So they're hurrying to put a new currency in place. One that will be based on carbon credits. That's why they created the phony science of climatology, to try to convince us that the world is being poisoned by carbon dioxide from fossil fuels. But CO₂ is good for the earth, not bad. Plants need it to grow. More CO₂ in the air makes the world greener."

"I see," Jess said. She only half understood but tried to give a look of full understanding.

"And don't get me started on carbon-based banking credits," Deedee said, but since she was already started she told Jess that before long nobody would be able to buy or sell unless they had an acceptable carbon footprint. "Everything we do will be tracked, and we won't be allowed to participate in society if we produce too much carbon dioxide. And then someday they'll start killing us off because, well, we're carbon-based life forms. You can see where it's all going. Someday it'll be like one of those science fiction movies

where they get rid of you when you turn thirty."

There was more to that conversation, a lot more as Deedee jumped from horror to horror. Jess nodded and took in what she could. Much of what Deedee said made sense, but Jess hated seeing her get so worked up about the world around her at such a young age. When she finally ran out of steam Jess gave her milk and cookies and then sent her on her way with a kiss and a jar of tomato preserves.

Jess came to with a swelling of music. Had she fallen asleep? The music was Elizabeth's funeral march, with its heartbeat pulse. The sun was down and dusk was darkening to night. Some stars were already out.

The march used for the funeral procession had mesmerized her over the past couple of days. The music was a lugubrious repetition, as one of the commentators said, but each time around, the gloom would break for a moment with a flourish of horns. During that moment Jess often pictured a death shroud parting just enough to let a soul rise through it. Elizabeth's soul.

Jess felt a tingle, first on one of her arms, then along both arms and both legs. Was it a circulation problem? She'd been still for quite a while, so maybe she wasn't getting enough blood into her limbs. Then the tingling spread to her torso and head, or to the cheek that was resting on the ground at least. In fact all of the tingling she felt was around the parts of her body that touched the ground. Why was that? Whatever the reason, dark was coming on and she hoped that help would arrive soon. She hoped Prissy had called the sheriff before settling in for her evening of television.

The music continued to throb in the distance and its steady cadence lulled Jess into drowsing. She seemed to rise a bit in her half-sleep and then begin to move. It felt as if she were gliding. She angled away from the path, into the tall grass, and then she angled down. A constriction slid along her body like she was being swallowed by the earth. She roused enough to open her eyes, but they filled with grit so she shut them again and fell back into half-sleep.

When she awoke later she blinked the grit away and saw that she was in some kind of chamber. She'd stopped moving and lay in a large shallow bowl of blue luminescence. Without moving her head she could see ants scurrying around on the blue, and she could also see that she was bloated. The hand resting nearest her face was swollen twice its normal size.

She looked beyond the hand to the wall of the chamber and saw whitish dots against black. She thought she might be hallucinating. If that was the case then she needed to call out before she slipped into a state

where she couldn't think to call.

"H...hep..." Her tongue was thick, swollen like her hand. She tried again. "H...h...hep me!"

"That's why I've brought you here, dear, to help you."

It seemed to Jess that she wasn't hearing through her ears. The voice was inside her head.

"That's right, dear. That's how I communicate."

"Buh...buh..."

"Don't bother trying to speak. I can read your mind."

I don't believe this, Jess thought. This has got to be a hallucination.

"Partly," the voice said. "I told my workers to be careful transporting you, not to let too much of their defensive acid get into your system through rubbing against you, but some transference was unavoidable. It has made you numb. And yes, the acid can cause hallucinations."

"Who are you?" Jess asked in her mind.

"I am called Formica Maxima, The Great Ant."

"So, you're the queen of a... I'm in an ant colony?"

"If that's how you choose to think of it. But to me it's the center of the world."

Jess assumed she was in the queen's chamber, if she was really in an ant colony, but she couldn't see the queen. There were some dark holes among the whitish dots. The holes may have been recesses in the chamber's wall, and the queen may have been in one of the recesses.

As Jess studied the wall one of the dots broke free of it and fell to the blue below. The dot wriggled and disappeared into the luminescence. That was an egg, Jess thought, or the larva that broke free of an egg and was now feeding. The blue glow was from the fungus that grew from the bits of leaves the ants carried underground.

Jess tried to speak but her tongue prevented her, so she thought, "Why did you bring me here?"

"Because you're dying," the queen answered.

"Dying? No, I just had a fall."

"A fall that was worse than you realize. You're swollen not just from the acid but from internal bleeding. I feel the tremors and vibrations in the earth around me, my million antennae registering the minutest changes, and I can feel the workings of your body. Since you fell, blood has been shifting out of its normal courses and pooling inside you. You won't last the night. But then neither will I, so I thought we might pass together. I'm hoping we can divert each other with conversation."

All Jess could think to say was, "But I don't want to die."

"Please don't distress yourself, dear. You're comfortable here, aren't you?"

Jess took a quick inventory of her aches and pains and found that at the moment the worst was a crick in her neck. A swarm of ants rushed to congregate beneath her head, lift it slightly and turn it until the pain was relieved.

"That's...that's better," she said. "How'd they know to do that?"

"Because my wish is their command."

"They'll do whatever you say, or think?"

"Of course. They know no other way."

Jess felt a quiver pass beneath her and the queen said it was music from the funeral.

"You can hear my TV from here?"

"Yes. And so could my predecessor, and hers, and the ones before, all of us listening and passing along the accumulated knowledge through our melded memory."

"So what have you learned? From my TV I mean."

"Among other things that you loved Queen Elizabeth. You followed her life through its highs and lows. From state visits to family deaths. From jubilees to...Fergie."

Jess shuddered and thought the queen and all the other ants must have shuddered with her. The whole chamber shook. Dirt and eggs from overhead fell into the luminescent mulch.

"Poor Elizabeth," the queen said. "We know something of how she must have felt when Fergie went rogue, don't we? You and I both, as matriarchs of our families, have reigned over tragedy and joy. We've acted as custom demanded, the same as Elizabeth, but what is the customary reaction to a strange man sucking sand from your daughter-in-law's toes?"

"I couldn't say," Jess answered. "And neither could my friends. We were all pretty upset when that happened."

"I heard that too, the vibrations of all your conversations over the years. Your telephone conversations and the ones that took place in your house."

"There haven't been many talks in the house lately, except with my granddaughter, Deedee."

"Yes, I've heard the two of you, and I must say, she's quite well informed for someone her age."

"Is she? I usually get lost trying to follow what she says. And to be honest I have to doubt a lot of it."

"Well, she's right about the world being on the verge of a surveillance-

based banking system. But she's wrong that it's just the Anglo-Americans behind it. The radio waves that snake through the ground carry more information than you receive in your government approved broadcasts, so I know that the proofs to Deedee's claims are out there. And over time she'll find them. She'll learn about the United Nations and the World Economic Forum and the other groups that are attempting to enslave humans with a global government. The Council on Foreign Relations, the Committee of Three Hundred, and the hundreds of mafias and intelligence agencies. Those groups work together whenever it benefits them, and lately they've been working together a lot. I sense a quickening in the dark forces of tyranny."

Jess felt pain and closed her eyes, and when she opened them again she saw a mass of ants moving to her side. They climbed one atop another until they were maybe a hundred high leaning against her hip. "They'll massage your injury with acid," the queen said. The ants began to move back and forth in unison. The queen said not to worry. "You may feel faint or even..." Her voice faded away in a dream of floating. Jess rose, hovered someplace beyond sensation for a while, then felt herself sinking. She settled back into consciousness and the pain in her hip was gone.

"You were...you were saying something about dark forces," she thought to the queen. "And something about a quickening."

"Yes, the world's elites are in a hurry now to get rid of self-governance. They want to eliminate the West's democratic system of horizontal power distribution and replace it with the more natural vertical model. Top-down authoritarianism, where the people at the bottom have no rights except those which the ones at the top allow them. My colony is like that. I could order one half of my workers to kill the other half, and the command would be carried out without a question as to why. You're in the process of developing that in America, with your stolen elections and governmental bureaucracy, but they've had the system in Britain for a thousand years now. The people there believe they live in a constitutional monarchy, but in truth the royals have absolute control. Your granddaughter was right about Queen Elizabeth being able to dissolve parliament whenever she wanted."

"You make it sound like she was a dictator."

"She was, technically, but a benevolent one. I expect her son Charles will be less so. He's a globalist, and they always have a low regard for their countries' welfare. Charles will rule with an iron fist if he has to."

Jess was about to ask a question when the queen said, "One moment. One moment."

It seemed to Jess that she felt something, maybe on her own or

maybe conveyed through the queen, but she felt a faint vibration.

"Is that music from the funeral?" she asked.

The queen was slow to respond, then said, "I don't know. Perhaps you feel the music, but I feel something deeper. To the west, past your fence line. There's a...pushing. And some deaths. Five, no, ten. More. I'm not sure what's happening, but it could be an incursion. I'll have to pull workers from other areas. If it's another colony expanding then it needs to be dealt with."

Jess remained silent so the queen could focus on her task, and after a moment a low rumble rose up. It came from behind the walls of the chamber, surrounded the chamber, and then fell away to one side. To the west, Jess assumed. No telling how many ants were on their way to meet the threat.

When peace returned to the chamber Jess said, "Tell me some more about the groups you mentioned. The ones that are working against us."

"Groups? Oh, yes...the humans. I don't know where to begin with the groups, really. There are so many. The Masons, the Club of Rome. What do you know about the Jesuits?"

"They're Catholic monks, aren't they?"

"Hardly monks. The Pope is a Jesuit. And he was in the news just a couple months ago when he visited Canada. The official story was that he was there to apologize for Church transgressions against indigenous peoples, but the real reason for the visit was so he could meet with the Chinese Communists in an out-of-the-way place. They're preparing to take out a loan from the Vatican bank, and they wanted the Pope's personal guarantee that the Church will be able to honor it. It's for nearly a trillion dollars, to be put toward China's continuing assault on America."

"But an assault on America would be an assault on its religions. Like Catholicism. The Pope wouldn't take part in something like that."

"He would for power. The word 'catholic' means 'all-encompassing,' and the Roman Catholic Church has been encompassing everything it can for two thousand years. It's one of the oldest and largest power structures in human history. And now it plans to absorb China."

"Through a banking deal?"

"Yes. After the Pope met with the Chinese he ordered the world's Catholic-controlled banks and institutions to transfer as much money as they could to the Vatican bank. He wants that done by September thirtieth, the end of this month. The move is intended to give the Chinese confidence in the loan. They're wary because Catholic priests have been charged with sexual abuse in nearly every country on earth. The Church bureaucracy

covers up the incidents, but that can't go on forever. It's just a matter of time until the Church is declared an international criminal enterprise. And when that happens, countries will start freezing bank accounts. So the Pope ordered the transfer of funds to the home bank. He also reorganized the Knights of Malta a couple weeks ago, to seize their assets. The Church is amassing as much wealth as it can in order to finance the next phase of Communist Chinese expansion in America."

"But I still don't see how the Catholic Church can benefit from that. If the Chinese conquer America, Catholics will suffer."

"The Vatican believes the Chinese will fail. Think of the loan as a wager, with China betting it can conquer America, and the Vatican betting it can't. And if China fails, it won't have the cash to pay off the loan. So it will pay in other ways. The Church will get its investment back tenfold in real estate, sex slaves, the suppression of rival religions, and so on."

Jess felt exhausted from trying to keep up with the ins and outs of international intrigue. She felt sluggish too and thought of blood pooling inside her body. For the first time since she fell she felt close to death. She could probably just let go and be done with things, but she wanted to finish her conversation.

"You...you said Charles is a globalist. Do you think Queen Elizabeth was too? I mean, did she work with the Chinese and the Catholics and those other groups?"

"She worked with them, but at the same time against them. She did what she could to maintain Anglo-American supremacy in the midst of change. But she left the system teetering. To pay the empire's bills she had to sell it off bit by bit. Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand are now under the rule of the big banks, and the United States..."

Jess drowsed. She drifted away, woke to pain in her hip, then drifted again. She came and went, and while she did she heard the queen talk about countries putting up water rights and mineral rights as collateral for loans. And slashing pension benefits to the elderly.

"...the trucking strike in Canada," the queen said.

Jess felt settled for the moment.

"I remember that. The Freedom Convoy last winter. What about it?"

"Well, Prime Minister Trudeau used dictatorial powers to break up the strike, and then he froze the bank accounts of citizens who'd given money to it. That's where everything is headed for humanity, control of spending. The globalists' goal is to force electronic money on the world so that anyone who disrupts the system can be shut down."

The queen talked on and Jess felt pain again, then numbness, and

then she rose up to see the earth from high above. The whole surface of the planet was spread out flat below. And there was a bright light to mark New York City, and one to mark London. Then one blinked on in Beijing. "And Riyadh," she heard the queen say, and a light appeared in Saudi Arabia. "Mumbai." A light appeared in India. And then the lights in London and New York began to flicker. Jess felt a flush of panic.

"No," she said. "What's happening?"

"Decay. It begins as soon as a thing stops growing. Things rise, thrive for a while, then return to their component parts. The lights in London and New York will go out soon."

"Don't let them," Jess begged. "Please."

"I don't have the power to stop the process. Nobody does. Decay's a force of nature."

"Is that it then, the ultimate force? We're governed by nature?"

"So it would seem."

Jess thought of Deedee saying people get the government they deserve. But a government by nature? Who deserved that? Not America. The country had overcome nature's vertical power structure. Americans had turned the vertical to the horizontal.

"True," the queen said. "Your country's founders renounced Britain's Divine Right of Kings and said that everybody has divine rights. The Bill of Rights says people are born with unlimited freedom granted by God. So the founders gave you self-determination, but you grew complacent and let it slip away. You let your free and open government be seized by people who operate in secret."

A great sadness came over Jess. "So what now?" she asked. "What will happen to America?"

"I suppose it will break down into component parts. But that might not be the end of the country. The components of the United States are the individual states, and after a breakdown they might be able to reassemble. To be reborn as something stronger, if people like your granddaughter have a say in things."

"Deedee. Yes, she'll see what's happening and work to fix things. And she'll teach others. But what about you and me? What will happen to us?"

"We'll break down as well. We've served our matriarchal function and now it's time for others to replace us. But someday we'll rise again. Through shadow or gene we'll continue the push of life."

Jess felt herself settle deeper into the blue bed of fungi. An ant ran up onto the back of a hand, and as she watched, the skin beneath its feet pulled apart and it fell from view.

Her body spread out along the bowl of the chamber and fused with the soft glow. An ant fell from its hatching overhead and she felt it begin to chew into the mulch. She remembered her children suckling at her breast. She'd once considered the passing of sustenance from her body to theirs to be the ultimate act of motherhood, but now she thought in larger terms. The mother becomes the matriarch and the matriarch suckles the mother.

She felt the faint, cadenced thump of the funeral march pass through her dissolving bones, and she lamented Elizabeth's death. And her own. But she knew they weren't passing into oblivion. She was confident that it was like the queen ant had said—the breaking down would lead to a re-formation and another rise. And when she rose again it would be into a freer world, one born from rediscovered principles seeded by Deedee and others like her.

With a final glance from her decomposing eyes Jess saw the egg-speckled dome of the chamber become a star-speckled sky. A peal of horns split the beat of the march and she felt her consciousness push through the momentary rent. The promise of a new beginning drew her on, past the shimmer of water on Koo Stark's breasts, past Uncle Moosh's diamond ear stud, and past the glittering sand on Fergie's toe-sucked foot.

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Follow the Science

Farley and Max are brainstorming an idea for a screenplay. It's about America's changing values. Let's listen in:

"Why do we have to call it that? I'm tired of the government telling us to 'follow the science.' Their science is fake."

"Exactly. And that's what the movie will be about, the bogosity of today's science."

"How do we show that? The bogosity?"

"Well, I thought we could open in a high school locker room. A bunch of girls are showering after gym class, and then the steam clears to reveal a dude standing in the middle of them."

"Damn. Do they call the coach?"

"No. There's nothing the coach can do about it. The dude says he's a girl, so they have to let him shower."

"Does he have a penis?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't matter. Chromosomes don't mean anything in

the new science. He can claim he's one of eighty-seven different genders, but the only way to get into the girl's shower for sure is to say he's female. So he hangs his soap-on-a-rope on his erection and..."

"Hold it. Naked teenagers and an erection would be an R rating, maybe an X."

"Would it? They're sexually mutilating grade schoolers in the name of transgenderism now, so a little shower scene is pretty tame in comparison. I think we can get a PG, or even a G."

"You may be right. So, we open the movie in the shower, and then what?"

"We follow one of the girls to her next class, a math class built around the Green New Deal."

"Drag queen teacher?"

"Of course. And they do math questions like, 'If you have ten people, and euthanize two, how many should you have left?'"

"Eight."

"Wrong. The correct answer is, 'You should have none left, if you care about the planet.'"

"The leftist depopulation agenda. Got it. Then after math let's send the girl to a cooking class. It's vegan day, so they make things with lots of soy. To lower sperm counts."

"Yeah. And then in her social studies class they watch a video about Canada's MAID program."

"MAID program? I think I read something about that. What do the letters stand for?"

"Medical Assistance In Dying. The government of Canada will help you kill yourself if you're sick or poor. And they want to expand the program to minors. If the government has its way, it'll help children commit suicide without parental consent."

"You know, I don't think we can compete with stuff like that. I mean, our screenplay can't. Fact is crazier than fiction now. How'd society get to this point?"

"An elite-controlled media pushed a hybrid of Marxism and corporate fascism on us and... Hey, I've got an idea. Maybe we can do another play about the Covid pandemic."

"Nah. Everybody said our last one was unbelievable."

"Then let's do a documentary. Or a bio-pic, about Laura Glass."

"Who?"

"Laura Glass. She helped develop the rules we followed during the Covid scare. See, her father was working at Sandia National Laboratories

when President Bush decided to update the nation's pandemic guidelines."

"Which Bush?"

"George W."

"So this is a horror film now?"

"Hmm. Right. We won't mention him."

"Go on with Laura."

"Well, when she found out her dad was updating the guidelines, she asked if she could work with him, for a school science project. And the two of them came up with things like six-foot distancing and self-isolation. The father put together a package of recommendations for the government, and Laura got a good grade on her project."

"So that's why we had to stay in our apartments during Covid, because of what those two did?"

"Yes, and... Hold it. Wait a minute."

"Why are you smiling? You look like you did when you got the idea for your farting musical about Hillary Clinton. I had to use a whole can of air freshener on that one."

"I know what our play needs. During Covid we didn't really follow the science. What did we follow?"

"Not common sense."

"True. But stay with me here. We followed the science..."

"What are you doing? Is this charades now?"

"Stretch it out. We didn't follow the science, we followed the science pro..."

"Pro...fessionals? Pronouns? Prophylactics?"

"We followed the science project. Laura Glass's project."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess we did."

"And that'll be the new name for our story, 'Follow the Science Project.' We'll make Laura into an empowered young woman who changed the world. She rewrote the book on... Where are you going?"

"To get the air freshener."

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The Autumn of the Big Guy

The crowd parted for Joe as he hobbled forward. He smelled perfume and hints of cigar smoke here and there, but he couldn't pick up the scent of bubblegum from earlier. Bubblegum and cotton candy it was, and it

belonged to a little girl in a pink dress. Her blonde ponytail had bounced past the couch where Joe sat and he was up and following as fast as his creaky old joints would allow. The girl disappeared into the crowd and he went in after her.

He caught a glimpse of the ponytail and elbowed some admiral aside to gain a step, but then he hit a roadblock at a pair of fat ladies covered in diamonds. "Outta my way!" he snarled, and when the women moved he saw the girl. She stood with her back to him maybe ten feet away. He doddered toward her and was bending down when he felt hands grip both elbows. Dammit. They wouldn't even let him get a sniff.

The pair of Secret Service agents turned him and guided him back through the crowd. They took him to the leather couch that still bore his butt print. He sat and looked around. He was in a big room somewhere, on a couch with an agent seated at his side. Both of them were decked out in tuxes, same as all the other men in the place. The gals wore glittery evening gowns.

A huge TV with its sound turned down was a few feet from the couch. A banner that said "Election Night 2022" scrolled across the screen, and Joe remembered that he was the top elected guy now. The numero uno. He needed to make a note of that, numero uno. He could toss it into a speech to appeal to the Hispicos or Mexicalis or whatever they called themselves nowadays. His wife had called them tacos when she was in San Antonio. He felt inside his jacket for a pad and pencil, but he didn't have one so he told the Secret Service guy at his side to take a memo.

"I'm numero uno."

"Yessir."

The agent didn't write anything down and Joe thought that was probably for the best. Too many documents had been floating around lately. He remembered a week ago, or was it a year? No, a week ago they found that box of classified documents in his garage. He seemed to recall some things about Jeffrey Epstein in there, and he hoped that one of his aides had removed the really nasty stuff. Maybe the car wax was in the box. He looked for it a while back to polish a spot on the Corvette, but he couldn't find it. If it wasn't in the box then someone may have stolen it. But the garage was kept locked. That would be a good point to make if anyone asked about the secret documents. He'd say, "C'mon, man. It's not like I'd leave America's battle plans in an unlocked garage. There's a Corvette in there." The press would laugh and that would be good, what with all the worry about the war in the Ukraine now, and the Russians and atomic bombs. He hoped he hadn't left any nuclear stuff in the box. That would be

bad, almost as bad as...damn. He needed to act fast. He leaned to the Secret Service agent at his side and said, "I want your people to do something."

"Yessir. What is it?"

"Find the car wax."

"Car wax? Yessir."

The guy's face didn't betray anything. He would have made a good poker player, like Joe used to be. He beat Amarillo Slim once at the world championship of poker. True story. People had forgotten but it was before the... Before the... What was it? Oh, the wax.

"You got that?" he asked the agent.

"Yessir. We'll find the car wax."

The agent lifted a hand to his chin and spoke into the sleeve of his jacket. "Code zero," he said, and Joe wondered for maybe the millionth time what that meant. His guards had been using the phrase a lot lately, especially after he issued orders.

The TV showed a picture of the White House and he couldn't remember the last time he'd been there. They gave him lots of vacations. But he remembered the day he took office. They thought they might have to blow the door off its hinges, but instead they forced their way in by using computers and judges.

He asked some senator who was passing by how they were doing. The man stopped and said, "I beg your pardon, Mr. President?"

Joe pointed to the TV. "Am I winning?"

"Uh, well, yes. I suppose you are."

"I suppose you are," Joe mimicked in a girly voice. "What a bunch of malarkey. Either I'm winning or I'm not."

"Then you're winning, Mr. President. Of course this isn't the big one. That's in 2024. Let's hope there's not another...insurrection." He winked knowingly and smiled.

A man in Joe's earbud said, "The insurrection of 2020 was carried out by the Democrats, not the Republicans. We fouled the voting on Election Day and rigged the delegate count on January sixth. As soon as the Republicans began challenging our fraudulent delegates, federal agents fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the peaceful crowd of Trump supporters outside the capitol building. At the same time hundreds of agents we'd planted in the crowd began destroying property. Mike Pence adjourned congress, and by the time it reconvened the mainstream news outlets were reporting that Trump had ordered his followers to attack the Capitol. There was no way the Republicans could continue to challenge the delegate count after that."

"Well thanks for the history lesson," Joe said, "but I was there. Who

are you, anyway?"

Someone behind him, a man's voice, said, "I'm one of your campaign workers, sir."

"Not you. The one in my ear. Who are you?"

Nobody answered and Joe said, "Are you a campaign worker?"

"Uh, yes sir." It was the voice behind the couch again.

"Not you, the other... Oh, forget it. Come around in front here."

"Who, me?" the voice in the earbud said.

"No, the other one."

"Are you talking to me?" the voice from behind the couch said, only now the speaker was standing in front of Joe. And he looked like a teenager. Most people did lately, but this guy might actually be one, with his zits among a half-dozen black chin hairs. He introduced himself as Dryefus or Doofus or something.

"Who are you campaigning for?" Joe asked.

"For you, sir. For your reelection. We don't know who you'll run against yet, so right now we're working to create a broad field of competitors for Donald Trump, to keep him from getting the Republican nomination."

"Why isn't he in jail yet?"

"Well, we're working on that, but he's a populist. And for every action against a populist there's a big reaction. His numbers go up every time we attack him. Exit polls today are showing that seventy-nine percent of voters are unhappy with the direction the country's going. And if Trump's the Republican nominee..." He shrugged, a gesture of uncertainty.

Joe said, "So people don't like the way the country's going?" Doofus shrugged again and Joe lost his temper. "Of course you don't care! But they'll blame me!"

Doofus didn't flinch. He said, "We'll find a way to deflect, sir, from both you and the party. We'll have to give up the House of Representatives tonight, no way around that, but we'll be solid again by the time you run. And in the meantime we'll have enough Republicans to vote with us on the important issues."

"So how do you get their votes?" Joe asked. "You slip 'em a buck or a bottle of booze?"

Doofus squatted down in front of Joe and leaned forward. "Well," he said in a confidential tone, "it's considerably more than a buck for the ones who want money. We let them do their stock market trading with inside... You know..." He tapped the side of his nose with an index finger, and Joe wondered if he was a Jew, touching his nose like that. He didn't have a Jew nose, but he was talking about money. "And as far as booze," Doofus went

on, "we apply that when they're hooking up for sex in what they think are secure locations. Let's just say that with today's video technology we can capture every hairy detail." He tapped the side of his nose again and Joe thought that if he wasn't a Jew then he might be trying to deliver some kind of cocaine message from Hunter.

"We've got mad skills when it comes to manipulating state elections," Doofus said. "We target big cities, where the bulk of the votes are, and we go to the Republican precincts in those cities and futz with the voting machines. Turn them off, say they need recalibration and so on. If we can cancel those votes, then the Republican count from the rest of the state can't make it up."

Doofus yammered on about metadata and early voting, and Joe lost track of what was being said. Even the words began to sound strange. He asked Doofus why he was speaking Spanish.

"Spanish?"

"Yeah. Why you speakee taco?"

"I don't under... Oh, I see. You don't understand what I'm saying." He touched the side of his nose again. "Very shrewd."

Joe grew tired of the conversation. He waved Doofus away and looked at the TV again. A drug commercial was on, and he thought of Bob Dole's promos for Viagra. He shook his head. It was a sad day when a man who ran for president started doing ads about chemical hard-ons. Why did Dole need Viagra anyway? He should have taken showers with his daughters or granddaughters. That would have brought his old soldier to attention. Joe thought of his girl, Ashley, in the shower and felt himself getting...what was the word? Tubescient? They had some good times together, but she shouldn't have written about them in that diary the reporter got ahold of. What a mess that was, but it was nothing compared to the one her brother made. Hunter shouldn't have saved all those emails and sex videos on his computer. They said that one of the videos was of him with his niece. Joe wondered which girl it was and why Hunter never shared her with his dad. He'd been brought up better than that. Fortunately the FBI was doing a good job keeping a lid on the computer situation. Joe just wished that Hunter hadn't called him the Big Guy in the emails. Anybody with half a brain could figure out who he meant.

But none of that really mattered. History had big plans for him. Someday Joseph Robinette Biden would be remembered as the man who guided America through its rebirth into the global family. He'd have to kill the country to do it, but so what? History's written by winners and America had been on a losing path for a hundred years. Why stick with a loser when

you can come out on top? No doubt he would be hated by Americans for a generation or two after he died, but that was okay. Why should he care what a few million people thought about him when he could be admired by billions? Someday everyone would praise him, after they learned how hard he'd worked to destroy the United States. And the country HAD to be destroyed. He felt his heart hammer and his blood pressure jump. America must die because its constitution gave its citizens WAY too many PROTECTIONS! Against HIM! And the SCUM who hid behind the constitution deserved to be GUNNED DOWN by F-15s!!! He'd TOLD them so but they still..."

He heard the voice through his earbud again.

"Calm yourself, Joe. Steer the course with a steady hand." Joe sighed and relaxed. The voice went on. "You've already drained the oil reserve that our military will need in a war, and you've given away half of our stockpile of ammo to the Ukraine. And telling illegal aliens to surge the southern border was a stroke of genius. We now have troops from every nation hostile to the United States crossing into the country unimpeded. And when the time comes, those troops will arm themselves with weapons that you brought home and hid after you pulled us out of Afghanistan. Genius, and few are aware of what you're doing. Few in America, at least. But the rest of the world is catching on and beginning to distance itself from us. That's good. Our traditional trading partners need to form new alliances and dump the U.S. dollar. With luck it will collapse soon and we'll have to adopt the United Nations' new digital currency. Electronic banking is crucial to the U.N.'s 'Great Reset' program, the yoke of tyranny that will drag humanity down. America will soon feel the weight of that yoke because of you, Joe. You are the numero uno, the el supremo. You are the cheesiest chunk on the stack of nachos, the supremiest chunk on the pile of..."

The voice broke off and Joe heard a suppressed laugh in his earbud. Obama, he thought. He'd hired someone to make fun of him. "Son of a bitch," he muttered as he reached up to remove the bud.

But the ear was empty. It didn't have an earbud. Surely that couldn't be; he'd heard a voice. He tilted his head and tapped it lightly on the temple, but nothing fell out of the ear on the opposite side. He tapped again and then gave himself a good wallop. A second Secret Service agent sat down beside him on the couch, and together with the other one they pulled Joe's arms down and pinned them to his sides.

"But Obama's in my head," Joe explained, and then he wondered if the whole earbud thing hadn't been one of Obama's backstabbing tricks to make him look bad. His blood pressure crept up as he remembered the day that Obama laid down the ground rules for him to take over as president. He

said that Joe would have to do what he was told once he was in office. Of course he went along because who wouldn't in order to become president, but DAMNED if he'd let Obama take credit for the destruction of the country. HE WASN'T THE PRESIDENT ANYMORE SO THERE WAS NO WAY HE'D GET THE CREDIT!

Joe squirmed but the agents wouldn't release his arms, so he relaxed. He wondered if people knew how great he was. He started out with nothing, with only... He wasn't sure how much he started out with. What were the names of those offshore banks he used? They'd have a record. There were a bunch of them, in the Caribbean, right next to Switzerland somewhere, but it didn't matter. If you minded the pennies the dollars took care of themselves. The agents eased up and he reached into a pants pocket. He pulled out some coins, thirty-eight cents worth he counted, thirty-eleven on the second count.

He turned to one of the agents and said, "I think I got short-changed, buddy. How much did that hotdog cost?"

"Hotdog, sir?"

"Yeah, the one at the Brooklyn Dodgers game. I struck out Babe Ruth, you know. True story."

"But sir, Babe Ruth died in... Hold on." The agent touched his ear, listened to something coming through his earbud and said, "Copy that," into his sleeve. Then to Joe he said, "I've been instructed to tell you that Donald Trump stole your money, sir. But you'll beat him handily if you face him in the next election."

Damn right he'd beat him. He put his change away and ran a hand over his head. His hair was thin now, but it was thick back when he was a lifeguard. Trump never had to work as a lifeguard. He inherited his money. The Bushes never had to work either, with their trust funds and Skull and Bones connections. And Bill Clinton, who anybody could see was a Rockefeller just from the shape of his face. His mom was an Arkansas party girl back when the Rockefellers owned the state. No wonder Bill got a leg up in life. But Joe never got a leg up, not until he went into politics. Smartest thing he ever did. He went from doing nickel and dime jobs to the U.S. Senate, where he made millions in backroom deals. Not bad for a shanty Irishman who got where he was by his own pluck. Pluck and the luck of the Irish, faith and begorrah. America used to hate the Irish. Help Wanted signs in windows used to say "Niggers and Irish Need Not Apply."

Joe chuckled and leaned over to one of the agents at his side. "You want to hear something funny?"

"Yessir."

"Well, there used to be these signs..." He glanced at the agent and saw that he was black.

"Yessir? The signs?"

Joe told himself to be careful. "Oh, uh, well...the Irish had a hard time when they first came to America. There were signs everywhere that said 'Negroes and Irish Need Not Apply.'"

"Really, sir? I thought they said niggers and Irish."

The agent on Joe's other side got up and walked away snickering.

The black agent's words surprised Joe but the guy didn't seem to be angry. You never knew though, so Joe said, "C'mon, man. I'm just funnin' with ya," and he lifted a hand to rub the agent's head. But then he remembered how people used to rub the heads of blacks for luck, and he stopped the hand just short of a rub. He redirected it to pretend he was waving to someone across the room. Nobody waved back but he gave a thumbs-up anyway and an OK sign. Then he remembered that the OK was one of the newly-designated racist signs, so he tried to wipe it away like he was wiping something off a chalkboard. And what if the thumbs-up was racist? He reached up with his other hand and air-wiped that sign as well. Both hands were going at the same time, proving he wasn't a racist.

"Excuse me sir," the black agent said. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," Joe said, lowering his hands. "Just funnin', mah man."

He made a mental note to use black slang more often, and he thought of Hillary Clinton and her phony black accent. Even Michelle Obama's sounded phony. They both hated black people. Michelle had a job once chasing them away from a hospital. Trump didn't hate blacks but you knew he was racist because he was a Republican. Lincoln was a Republican and freed the slaves, so Trump was a racist because he was a Republican. Why couldn't people understand that? Joe on the other hand wasn't a racist. He'd made that clear when he told the world that he knew some blacks who were clean and articulate. And then he rapped out that cool sound bite on the radio, where he said "you ain't black" unless you voted for him. He needed to do more shows like that, so he could get down there with the blacks and talk to them on their level. Maybe he'd ask his writers to work the you ain't black thing into a speech. "If you don't vote for me, then you ain't black, mah peoples." He could deliver the speech under a "Niggers and Irish Need Not Apply" banner, with him in blackface and shaking a tambourine like in a minstrel show. And maybe Oprah could join him onstage. She was really articulate, and probably pretty clean.

He looked for Oprah in the crowd but didn't see her, but he did see a pair of sunglasses. A pair of dark aviator glasses was aimed right at him.

The guy wearing them was dressed in a sharkskin tux. Joe went rigid. "He's here," he whispered to the black agent.

"Who, sir?"

"The Khazarian hitman in the sharkskin suit."

"Heads up," the agent said into his sleeve. He got up from the couch and stood in front of Joe, to block him. "Possible shooter," he said to his sleeve. "Sharkskin suit and... Hold on..." He asked Joe where the hitman was.

"Right over th... Get outta the way!"

The agent wouldn't move, so Joe leaned sideways and pointed past him. But the guy in the shades was gone. A woman in a red dress was standing where he'd been.

"Wow," Joe said. "Look at the tits on that one."

The agent scanned the crowd and then spoke into his sleeve.

"Code zero. Stand down."

Joe got a whiff of something. Root beer and popcorn, which meant a young boy, and sure enough a boy in short pants walked past the couch. Joe tried to rise to follow but a hand on his shoulder held him down. A voice from behind said, "Snack time, sir," and a moment later he was presented with a cone of cookie dough ice cream. He knew what the agents were doing, distracting him to keep him away from the kids, and that was fine. But someday they wouldn't need to. Lots of legislation that would decriminalize sex with minors was floating around, and with luck he'd get in on that while he still had some lead in his pencil. He felt himself getting tubescent. They'd told him that social engineers used public schools nowadays to prep kids for all kinds of fun things. They were teaching them about man love and butt love and enrolling them in sex change programs. What a rush that would be, to screw a kid you couldn't even tell the sex of.

Joe saw that a bunch of people were smiling at him, and he realized he'd been sitting with a big goofy grin on his face. His semi hard-on felt sticky. He wondered if he'd shot a wad, but then he noticed that the ice cream cone in his lap was half melted. He barked at the Secret Service to do something. Agents surrounded him and spread their jackets open to shield him from view while they sponged and towed him off.

The toweling felt good. Joe was about to tell the agent doing it to stroke harder, but then one of the doctors appeared. He said, "I'm going to give you a shot now, Mr. President. You have a speech coming up, so you need some Focus Juice." The Focus Juice wasn't as good as the Go Juice, but Joe knew that would come later, just before the speech. "Well get on with it," he groused.

The Secret Service continued to stand with their jackets spread open, and the doctor leaned down, pulled Joe's shirt collar aside and jabbed. Joe felt a sting in the muscle beside his neck.

When the doctor was done the agents went back to their posts and Joe tried to remember how long the juice took to kick in. He started counting to ten, and by five he was counting Jews in the crowd. Number eight was the kid from earlier, the one with the nose. Joe wished he'd asked him if you can call Jews Hebes now or were they still sensitive about that kind of thing. He didn't mind being called a Mick. It used to bug him when he was going to school with all those snooty rich kids, but now he wouldn't mind someone calling him a Mick or even a potato eater. Or a sheeny. No, that was another name for the yids. Maybe he could work all of that into his Niggers and Irish speech. He could call himself a Mick first and then talk about the Hebes and the gooks and the rest. He'd laugh while he was doing it and get the crowd to laugh along with him.

He felt his smile sloughing off his face. The Focus Juice was taking effect, and he thought about how clever they were, the Jews. They ran politics in America. It was nearly impossible to win a national or a state election now unless you supported Israel, but once you signed on to do that, your future was assured. Endless streams of money from Jewish-owned banks would flow through your campaigns. Jews used money and the ADL to maintain iron-fisted political control of America.

The ADL. Joe chuckled. The Anti-Defamation League was against defamation like Obama was against a hard one up the poop chute. The ADL was founded in honor of a Jew who raped a thirteen-year-old girl and then tried to blame a black man. That right there should have warned folks away from the organization, but no, they contributed boatloads of money to it and now it was bigger than big. It was so powerful that if you didn't do exactly like it said then you'd be tagged as an anti-Semite and have to kiss your political career goodbye. The ADL was nothing but a cheesy shakedown group, but it was too big to fight, so you might as well play along.

Some said that the ADL was run by Jews with ties to the Khazars. The thought of the Khazarian mafia made Joe's butt pucker. They were worse than Corn Pop at the swimming pool, and he'd been a bad dude.

The Khazars went back more than a thousand years in the Ukraine. The region had been a crossroads for trade, and Khazarian bandits kept watch over the caravans. If they learned that nobody at a caravan's end point would recognize the guy in charge, then they'd kill him and put a ringer in his place. The ringer would deliver the goods and collect the payment.

Ruthless and gutsy people, Joe thought. Many believed that the Catholics or the Muslims would conquer the world, but he was betting on the Khazars. Literally betting on them. He'd been using the Khazarian mob to invest his family's money for years. They took cash from the Biden shell corporations and laundered it through U.N.-protected human trafficking operations. The Khazars dominated the white slavery market. The most beautiful gals in the world were from Eastern Europe, so that gave the Khazars a home field advantage in picking top dollar merchandise. Joe thought of some of the merchandise he'd sampled—so juicy, with full lips and big...

"Excuse me, Mr. President." It was the doctor again. "It's time for your Go Juice. This shot will get you ready to make your statement."

"I know what it does!" Joe snapped. Sometimes it made him angry when they treated him like an old man. Hell of a thing to do to a man his age. "Get on with it!"

Secret Service agents surrounded him again, spread their jackets open, and he felt the sting beside his neck. Then when the agents dispersed he sat thinking back over his business dealings with the Khazars. As an elected official he had to avoid direct contact with them, so he always brought family members in on the deals. He doled out contracts and consulting jobs, and all he asked in return was ten percent. Easy peasy. Ten percent to the Big Guy. Nobody should have got their panties in a twist over that, but then Trump came along and gummed things up.

The stay-behind network that Obama left in Washington hid the worst evidence of the financial crimes, but still, Trump discovered enough to put Biden away. So Obama suggested using the Department of Justice to tie Trump up with phony legal charges. If it looked like he might spill what he knew, then a judge could issue a gag order to silence him.

Joe felt the Go Juice take hold. His heart jackhammered and he pictured Trump gagged. BOUND and gagged, with those guys from Mexico kicking his ribs in. What were they called? The Democrats' enforcers? The Shinola drug cartel. They needed to speak a little TACO on Trump's ribs! And on his LAWYERS! Those bastards needed to be SILENCED, along with all the people who VOTED for Trump! ALL OF THE DOGS THAT WANTED TO CRAP IN THE BIDENS' REVENUE STREAMS NEEDED TO HAVE THEIR TONGUES RIPPED OUT!!!

Joe's heart continued to hammer as he pictured those who opposed him choking on their own blood. The nation was a chalice waiting to be filled with the overflow, and he was working hard to set the stage for the bloodletting. Whenever he could he said that white supremacist terrorism

was the biggest threat facing America. Nothing could be further from the truth, but the claim was part of a larger plan cooked up by Obama and his commie mentors from the 1960s. They'd always said that a race war was needed to cleanse America, and now it would not only cleanse but it would serve as cover for an attack on the country's infrastructure. The foreign troops that had crossed the border would take aim at the conservative heartland while the feds started race riots in the cities. With luck the whole mulligan could be stirred into all-out warfare between the U.S. military and the American people. Obama liked to say that he came up with the plan, but when the history books were written, JOE BIDEN would be celebrated as the man who destroyed America! JOE would get an entire CHAPTER, and OBAMA would be a FOOTNOTE!!!

A gal with a firm ass slinked past the couch and Joe's heart pounded even harder. There were several nice asses beneath the dresses in the crowd. He wished he could watch them play volleyball in thongs, though not telling what you'd see on a women's volleyball team nowadays. Probably a bunch of hairy-assed she-men spiking the ball into women's faces. But women had ASKED for it! Feminists spent DECADES pushing into the world of men, demanding equality, and now MEN were pushing BACK!

Joe smiled thinking of men strapping on boxing gloves and crushing ribs beneath tits. He thought of soaped-up men leering at their female counterparts in locker room showers, and then he remembered little Ashley. He pictured her in the shower and felt a stir in his trousers. Children were next. Like with the feminist movement, the children's rights movement had been pushing kids into the world of adults for years. And now adults were pushing into the world of children. Not just with legislation to lower the age of consent, but with homosexual sex-ed in schools and gay cartoons and drag queen story hours.

Joe used his hanky to wipe sweat from his forehead, then through flared nostrils he caught a whiff of cotton candy and bubblegum. And he saw the blonde ponytail.

He got a Go Juice jump on the Secret Service. The girl disappeared into the crowd but he followed. His nose guided him and he pushed ahead like the old Joe Biden, the one who rushed for a thousand yards against the Dodgers in the Super Bowl. Hands grabbed at his elbows but this time he pulled free. He ignored the promises of ice cream too and of comfy naps and all the other inducements to break off pursuit. Nothing could stop him, he thought, but then he felt the prick of a needle. His left butt cheek stung with it and he wondered what they'd given him.

It didn't matter. The girl was straight ahead and he was going in for

the grope and sniff, but then one of his knees nearly buckled. His pulse slowed and he felt like he aged ten years in two steps. A couple of Secret Service guys braced him and half-carried him to a podium.

He felt a little off balance when they let go, and he held onto the podium for support. They must have dosed him with Slow Juice. Sometimes they slowed him down when he was after the kids, but they shouldn't have done it when he was scheduled to speak.

What was he supposed to talk about, anyway? Oh yeah, the election.

"Are we winning?" he wheezed into the microphone, and there was a burst of applause and cheering. "We're winning!" he croaked as he punched the air with a shaky fist. Some people in the crowd punched back and it looked to him like they were giving the old Black Power salute. He said, "Right on!" and then he saw the black Secret Service agent from earlier. He signaled to the guy to join him, and he came to the podium.

Joe leaned close so no one else would hear and he said, "We've got a problem." The agent slid a hand inside his jacket, reaching for his gun. "Not that kind!" Joe snapped, then he lowered his voice and asked the agent how he got to...wherever they were.

"How'd I get here, sir? In one of the limos."

"Would you know which one if you saw it again?"

"Yessir."

"Good. Then what I need you to do is, go to the limo and get your tambourine. I's gwine'a make a speech to mah peoples."

The agent looked like he didn't know how to respond, then he said, "Excuse me, sir," and held a finger to his earbud. He listened, nodded and said, "Copy that," into his sleeve. Then he looked at Joe and said, "I've been instructed to say that mah peoples are already with you, sir."

"Right on," Joe smiled. All you had to do to get through to them was cut the malarkey and speak the lingo they understood. He was on a roll so he leaned to the microphone and said, "Is Oprah here? I want to take a bath."

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Switcheroo

Wes Wolfram heard the patter of running feet in the hallway and looked up to see two boys zip past the door. A moment later one of them reappeared. He made a racing engine sound when he ran into the office, and a screeching tire sound when he came to a stop in front of the desk. A

serious sugar high bugged his eyes as he stood panting across from where Wes sat.

According to the nametag on the kid's juice-stained T-shirt he was Wendell Aarp, president of Say it with Pins. Which meant he was Aarp's son. It was Take Your Child to Work Day at Say it with Pins' corporate headquarters, and the children wore pinback tags with their parents' names and job titles on them. Aarp wore a half-dozen buttons in addition to the tag. The grownups had let the kids adorn themselves with misprints, and one of Aarp's buttons said "World's Greatest Dud." Another said "Peabody High Schol." Wes wore a schol button and one that said "Service with a Smite!" His nametag identified him as Joseph Jones, from accounting. He'd made up the most unmemorable name he could think of to help give himself cover for the job.

Aarp squinted at Wes's tag and said, "Joseph Jonethhh?" He sprayed spit. The braces on his teeth had a lot of work to do before they closed all the gaps. "You be me and I'll be you!" He unpinned his nametag, leaned across the desk and swapped it for Wes's. Wes let him because he was the president's son. "There," Aarp said when he was done. "If anyone asthk you jutht thay..." Somebody raced past in the hall. Aarp screeched off in pursuit, leaving Wes to wipe spit from his face.

He leaned back in the springy office chair feeling ancient compared to the kids running around the building. He'd told Jeannie earlier that he was tired of his work. They were going through their morning routine and he said it was getting harder to keep up with the children. "It takes a toll," he grumbled, looking at himself in the bathroom mirror. He examined some wrinkles around his eyes and patted his receding hairline. His combover had grown quite elaborate lately, but he wouldn't have to bother with it that day. The Say it with Pins job was casual dress, so he'd be wearing a baseball cap with his T-shirt and jeans. But the wrinkles... He opened Jeannie's jar of face cream, leaned close to the mirror and smeared some of the goop beside each eye. He'd been using it for a week but it was too soon to tell if it was working. As he rubbed it in he wondered how much longer he would be able to maintain the appearance of an eight-year-old. His height wasn't an issue--he'd reached his full growth as a midget years before--but masking the mileage was another matter.

A sing-along broke out in the conference room down the hall. It took Wes a moment to identify the howl as "Row Row Row Your Boat" because none of the oars were hitting the water at the same time. He sighed. Imitating a kid could be exciting, but for every police sting operation he took part in there were twenty jobs that were a grind to get through. Like the one

the day before. He'd worked a twelve-hour shift at a big department store. They were losing lots of merchandise, so they hired him to watch for shoplifters. He pretended to be a kid wandering around while his mama tried on clothes. It was agonizingly tedious. After eleven hours and fifty-five minutes the only person he'd caught was a woman who kleptoed some socks. But then he got lucky. In the confusion of closing time he saw a man at the jewelry counter swallow a diamond ring. He was arrested but Wes hadn't received his commission on the recovered loot yet. The store wouldn't pay off until the laxatives did.

The crowd in the conference room launched into "This Old Man" and Wes went back to work. He returned the folder he'd been looking through to its place in the desk's file drawer. Then he tried the computer but it was password protected. Going back to the drawers, he rifled through pencils, paperclips and rubber bands. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. One of the Say it with Pins' vice presidents had hired him to find an embezzler. "It's somebody high up," she said. "We could catch him with an audit, but it would be better for the company if you could just quietly find some physical evidence." She said the following Friday would be the best time for Wes to go through the executives' offices. "It's Take Your Child to Work Day. Nobody will notice you in the confusion." Wes told her he wouldn't know what to look for and she said, "Oh I'm sure you'll find something."

When he first described the job to Jeannie she said it sounded like the veep was trying to frame somebody. Wes hadn't thought of that but realized she was right, and he decided he wouldn't look very hard for evidence. Auditors could root out the truth. That morning he brought up the job again and Jeannie said, "It'll be like a game of Clue." Her chin was resting on his shoulder so she could check her makeup in the bathroom mirror. She was only five foot one and short to most people, but to Wes she was a copper-haired Amazonian beauty.

"What'll be like a game of Clue?" he asked. "The hunt for the embezzler?"

"Yes. And my guess is that the vice president did it, in her office, with a Swiss bank account."

"You make my job too easy. So what are you doing today?"

"Same ol' same ol'. Put in the hours and then get caught up on the important stuff at the water cooler."

Jeannie was a systems analyst for a computer company that had offices scattered around the country. Wes met and married her when they were both in Houston, then she was offered a transfer to Austin. She really wanted the job, so Wes told her he wouldn't take no for an answer. He

needed to make a new start anyway. A lot of the work he did was school related, and it had gotten to where he couldn't go anywhere in his free time without bumping into kids from his alma maters. And parents get upset when they see their children talking to a midget with a five o'clock shadow, so it was off to Austin.

The group in the conference room began bellowing "Old MacDonald had a Farm." Wes finished at the desk and went around the office checking cabinets and shelves. He still wasn't sure what he was looking for, but the girlie magazine he found hidden in a company binder wasn't proof of embezzlement. Not that he could see at least, and he flipped through it twice searching for clues before he moved on.

The hallway was empty. He headed away from Old MacDonald's oinking pigs, toward a break room near the elevators. He needed a cup of coffee.

He passed a stretch of cubicles. The kids at the computers in some of them made him think of the fourth-grader he'd met a couple weeks before while on a school job. Her name was Delores Flores. She was probably the smartest child with a computer that he'd ever come across. He sat next to her at the back of the classroom, and one afternoon she yawned and said she needed a nap. She tapped at her computer's keyboard and a moment later their teacher's phone made a little siren sound. She asked the class to give her a sec so she could take an important call. It turned out that Delores had hacked into the phone, or rather into the security company that had an alarm communicating with the phone. The alarm notified the teacher that her house was on fire, and she ran off to save her cat. The class got a recess and Delores stretched out on a bench on the playground. Before she closed her eyes she smiled at Wes and said, "I think I'll call this...Operation Cat Nap."

Delores liked to present herself as mature beyond her years, but one morning when she unzipped her backpack Wes saw a pair of Barbie dolls peeking out at him. Delores noticed and got upset. She zipped the pack up and said the dolls were her sister's, but the lie wasn't convincing.

The next day she told Wes that she'd hacked into the school's computer system and made an interesting discovery. She grinned and said, "I think I'll call you Operation Tungsten."

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Didn't they use to call tungsten something else? Didn't they call it...wolfram?"

Wes realized that she'd learned his real name wasn't Lazlo Pink. He felt flustered but kept his head and said he still didn't know what she

meant.

She winked at him and said, "You owe me for keeping your secret, Mr. W," and then after that she giggled whenever she called him Lazlo.

In the break room he found a pot of fresh, hot coffee. The real kind, not decaf. He poured a cup and blew on it as he stepped to the door.

A boy and girl ran past in the hallway. A couple doors down they encountered a man who stopped the boy and checked his nametag. "You're not him," he muttered and let the kid go. Then the man saw Wes and came toward him.

Wes sipped coffee and studied the guy as he approached. He was skinny, maybe thirty-five, and wearing baggy-kneed slacks and a too-large dress shirt. At first Wes thought he was bald, but when he got closer he could see that he wore his blonde hair cut short.

The man reached Wes and leaned down to look at his nametag. "Bingo," he said. "Come with me, son."

"I'm on break. You want a cup of coffee?"

"No. And you shouldn't drink that. It'll stunt your growth." He took the cup from Wes and stepped into the break room to set it on a table. Then he said, "Let's go," and prodded Wes ahead of him out the door.

He rested his hands on Wes's shoulders and steered him down the hallway and around a corner to the elevators. He pushed a button, and when a car arrived he steered Wes inside. Wes wasn't worried. He figured Wendell Aarp, the president of the company, had sent the man to look for his son.

"My name's not Aarp," he said as the elevator's doors closed. "He switched our nametags. My dad's name is..." It took a moment to recall the bogus name. "Jones. Joseph Jones." The man didn't respond and Wes said, "Fine. Mr. Aarp can straighten things out."

Wes was surprised when the man didn't direct the car to the building's top floor. That's where Mr. Aarp's office was. Instead they went down. Wes thought they must be going to the parking garage. Aarp was probably ducking out early and had arranged to have his son brought to his car.

But the elevator didn't stop at the garage. It continued on to the basement, and when the doors opened Wes was steered down a hallway to a door marked "Janitor." The man pushed it open but it hit something and stopped halfway.

He prodded Wes into the room. It was small, dank and dimly lit by a single fluorescent tube overhead. Nobody else was there. Wes was about to ask what was going on when the man closed the door behind them and

said, "You can sit in that chair."

Wes's eyes weren't accustomed to the light yet, and he squinted looking around. Cardboard cartons were stacked two deep and a half dozen high against one wall, and against another there were metal shelves crammed full of cleaning supplies and clutter. A kitchen area with a sink and small refrigerator was in a corner. Clutter seemed to have flowed down onto the top of the fridge from one of the shelves, then from the fridge down onto a desk butting up against it. The only chair in the room was at the desk. Wes went to it and sat.

The man sat on a cot. It was what had prevented the door from opening fully. "No one will bother us here," he said as he took a cell phone from his pocket and speed dialed. He held the phone to an ear and when his call connected he said, "Yes, hello, this is Colin Massey, calling for my wife. Oh. Well, can you ask her to call me when the meeting's over? Thank you."

Wes watched the man, Massey he said his name was, put the phone away and lean forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He looked at the floor between his feet and began wringing his hands. He seemed quite agitated, and for the first time Wes felt a bit of concern. What if he'd been kidnapped? Ransom cases could go wrong in a hundred ways, so he would have to be careful. But he needed to find out what was going on.

"Excuse me," he said in his most innocent child's voice. "Are you the janitor, Mr. Massey?"

"Huh?" Massey looked sideways at him, scrunched his face in thought, then snorted. "You got my name from the phone call." He reached over a shoulder and patted himself on the back. "Way to go," he said, talking to himself. "Why not give him your Social Security number while you're at it?" He looked at Wes again and said, "No, kid, I'm not the janitor. I don't have a job."

"So are we waiting for the janitor?"

"No. He won't be in for a while."

Massey gestured to a calendar that was on the wall near the desk, then he went back to staring at the floor and wringing his hands.

Wes looked at the calendar. A picture labeled "The Great Dismal Swamp" was above the fold. The photo showed enormous cypress trees rising from black water and disappearing into gray mist. A well-notated calendar page hung below the fold. The scrawl in that day's box said the janitor wasn't due for a couple of hours.

Wes still didn't know what was going on. He would need to probe more deeply. And like a child would.

"Are you... What do they call it? Are you kidnapping me, Mr. Massey?"

Massey shook his head. "No, of course not. Or...yeah, maybe. Hush up. I need to think."

Wes sat quietly for a moment, then he got up from his chair and went over to the shelves to look at things. It's what a bored kid would have done. There were boxes of scrubbing pads and rubber gloves, and up high one that said "24 Count." Twenty-four what? He reached up and tugged at the box. Something on the top shelf wobbled. A handheld clothes iron tipped toward him.

The iron seemed to fall in slow motion. It came closer, and closer, and then a blur came in fast from behind.

Wes heard the iron hit Massey before it clattered to the floor. The man had darted over from the cot to shield Wes with his body. And he got thumped with an iron for his trouble. He staggered back and reached up to feel the top of his head. When he took his hand away there was blood on the fingers.

"What the hell?" He looked at Wes. "Are you okay, son?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. But you're bleeding. Why don't you sit down?"

Massey returned to his place on the cot and Wes went back to his chair. He noticed a box of Kleenex beneath the cot and pointed it out. Massey used a tissue to staunch the blood coming from the wound. Wes waited, fiddling with a stapler on the desk, then when it looked like Massey's bell had stopped ringing he said, "So why'd you bring me here?"

"Huh? Oh, it's a long story."

"We have time."

Massey squirmed but didn't take his hand away from the tissue. "You wouldn't understand," he said, but he seemed to want to talk.

"Try me," Wes prompted, and it was like opening a floodgate.

"Well I...I drive a forklift at the Say it with Pins warehouse in Dallas. Or I did. The foreman fired me two days ago and I couldn't believe it. I mean, all those years... Yesterday morning I didn't know what to do, so I pretended like nothing was wrong. I helped my wife get the kids ready for school, and I dropped them off, but then I couldn't go to work. And I couldn't go home. My neighbors would have seen the car in the driveway and said something to my..." Massey went back to wringing his hands. The tissue remained stuck to the top of his head. "So I decided to do something today. I need that job. And there's no one at the warehouse that will stand up to Biggs."

"Who's that?"

"The foreman. Dominic Biggs. He's the one that fired me. So I drove down here to see your dad. I thought that if I could just talk to the president

of the company I could..."

He wrung his hands harder. Somewhere in the ball of fingers a knuckle popped.

"Go on," Wes said.

"Well, when I got here, it was crazy with all you kids running around. And I couldn't find your dad, so I came up with the idea to snatch you and... I don't know. I mean, if somebody took one of my kids I'd do anything he said. That's all I was thinking. Or no, I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry kid."

He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees again, and cradled his face in his hands. He began to sniffle.

Wes didn't know what to do, but he supposed that Massey hadn't eaten much lately. In addition to his other problems he was probably suffering from low blood sugar.

"Do you want a snack?" he asked.

"Huh?" Massey looked up, wiped his eyes with the back of a hand and said, "Sure. Whatever. There should be something in that fridge."

Wes went to the refrigerator and saw a honeybun in cellophane on top of it, next to a coffeemaker. A cup of mud and a honeybun would pick them both up, so he began looking for coffee grounds.

"Let me," Massey said as he moved Wes aside and pulled the refrigerator's door open. He dug around and found some vegetables. Wes grabbed the honeybun, but Massey took it away and gave him a carrot. "This'll be better for you," he said.

Wes felt a flash of irritation, but then he thought of how Massey had been looking after him. He gave him a healthy snack instead of junk food; he took his coffee away earlier and warned that it would stunt his growth; and he'd shielded him from harm even though it meant getting whacked with an iron. All of that added up to a good man watching out for someone he thought was a child.

Massey returned to the cot and Wes returned to his chair. They sat chewing their carrots. The tissue that was stuck to the top of Massey's head hung to one side like a floppy little party hat.

"Why'd the foreman fire you?" Wes asked.

"So he could hire a replacement that will pay him a kickback. None of us oldtimers will do that, but the new hires do. It's the only way they can get the job. I'm the third driver that Biggs has replaced."

"But he had to have a reason to fire you. Something he could put in your file." Wes knew he was running a risk of sounding too adult by displaying a knowledge of termination procedure, but Massey didn't seem to notice.

"Oh, he always has a reason. And he's crafty about it. He writes us up for nothing and tells us we have one strike, then two strikes, and then when he fires us for strike three he can back it up with paperwork. I got fired for safety violations that never happened, but it's his word against mine."

Massey chucked the nub of his carrot into a wastepaper basket and popped a knuckle. "I need that job. My kids, my wife." He began to sob. "I can't even hold onto a job driving a forklift." He reached for the box of tissues under the cot, found it was empty, and plucked the one from the top of his head. He used it to blow his nose.

Wes tossed his carrot and said, "I might be able to help you."

Massey looked at him and dabbed at his eyes with the bloody tissue.

"Help me? How?"

"Well, I'm not really a kid. I'm a midget and I make my living by...troubleshooting."

"Troubleshooting? Midget? I don't understand."

Wes took out his wallet, took out his private investigator's license, and went to Massey. He held the card up for him to read and said, "I'm a juvenile impersonator. Say it with Pins hired me to look for an embezzler. Maybe I can help you while I'm here."

Massey didn't respond. Wes put his license away and went to the kitchen area to fix a pot of coffee. Massey watched, then after a moment he said, "Way to go, dummy," talking to himself again. "You can't even get a hostage situation right."

"Forget about me being a hostage," Wes said. "We'll pretend this never happened. And I mean it when I say I might be able to help you."

He got the coffeemaker going, then while it rumbled and dripped he flipped through the pages of the wall calendar. The past was heavily notated but the future not so much, and the backing pictures showed mountains and valleys and deserts. But the Great Dismal Swamp was the most interesting of the photographs. It drew Wes in with visions of snakes cutting through dark pools of water bottomed with bones. A human skull was turning its eyeless face to him when he heard the coffeemaker sputter to a finish. He found a clean mug, filled it and returned to his chair at the desk.

"You really are a grownup," Massey said. "You move like one. I should have seen it before."

"You had other things on your mind." Wes took a sip of coffee and smacked his lips. "Ah, yes. Just what I needed. Now I can focus."

He sipped coffee and thought. He puzzled over the pieces of Massey's problem. How could he undo what had been done to the man? He asked

Massey what Biggs' job had been before.

"Before he became foreman? He drove a forklift, like me."

Wes sipped his coffee. Steam rose through his sinuses, caffeine scratched through his veins, and then the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. He had a solution, if he could get somebody to hack into Say it with Pins' computer system. Jeannie might be able to do it, but Wes couldn't ask her to jeopardize her career. So maybe...

"Got it," he said as he set his cup on the desk. Massey was back in his fretting position, elbows on knees. Wes told him he knew someone who could help, then he searched his phone for Delores Flores' number. They'd swapped contact information before he left the school job. He found the number and texted Delores to call him as soon as possible. Then he went for more coffee.

As he filled his cup Massey's phone chirruped. Massey sat up and checked it. He said it was his wife, but he didn't feel like lying to her just then. He activated the speaker and they listened to her leave a message. "I'm returning your call, honey. Sorry I missed you, but I'll see you at home later. Can you stop by the store and pick up some asparagus? Love you."

Massey put the phone away and said, "Great. On top of everything else I have to eat asparagus tonight."

Wes settled at the desk with his coffee. He sipped and waited for Delores to call as he listened to Massey pop knuckles. When his phone rang he put the call on speaker.

"Hi, Delores."

"I'm calling for Lazlo Pink," she giggled.

"Ha ha. I'm glad you remember me."

"I'd never forget Operation Tungsten. But hurry up. I'm in the bathroom but I only signaled for a number one."

"Okay. I need somebody to hack into a company's computer system, and I figure you're the one for the job. The company is called Say it with Pins. Its headquarters are here in Austin."

"I think you forgot something. I don't owe you, you owe me."

"I didn't forget, but I really need help on this and, well, you're the best person I know with computers."

He waited, hoping the flattery would work, but she didn't respond.

"Plus," he said, "I saw a Thumbelina Barbie the other day. She might be looking for a new home." He'd seen the doll in an antique shop that Jeannie dragged him to the previous weekend.

After a short pause Delores said, "Fine. What do you need?"

"For you to break into the Say it with Pins system. I can look around

and get you some numbers off the computers to help breach the..."

"No need," she interrupted. "I'm already in."

"That was fast."

"Not fast enough. Time's running out on my number one."

"Yeah, yeah. I want a man named... Wait a minute." Wes held his phone toward Massey and asked him to spell his name.

Massey looked dubious but spelled, then Wes told Delores that Massey was having a problem with his boss. He held the phone out again so Massey could spell Biggs' name.

"Okay," Delores said after a moment. "I have both their files here. What do you need?"

"For them to switch jobs. Starting Monday Biggs goes back to driving a forklift, and Massey becomes the foreman."

Massey waved a hand. "Hold it. That's crazy. Biggs won't allow it."

"I think he will," Wes said, "if we let him continue at his current rate of pay. You got that, Delores? Biggs switches to the forklift but keeps his foreman's pay." To Massey he said, "He'll be mad about losing the kickbacks, but who's he going to complain to? And he'll keep quiet if he thinks payroll forgot to downgrade him."

Delores asked how much Massey should make as foreman.

"Bump him up to whatever Biggs is making now. Oh, and delete any records of Massey's firing. You should see something about three strikes."

Delores said, "Done, done and...done. Anything else?"

"Sign Wendell Aarp's name to this. He's the president of the company."

Wes spelled the name and Delores said, "Okay. As of now Mr. Massey and Mr. Biggs have officially switched jobs. I'll call this...Operation Switcheroo. And you better not forget Thumbelina. Do you know what'll happen to you if I don't get her?"

"I'm afraid to ask, but what'll happen?"

The sound of a commode beginning its flush came over the phone. The sucking roar rose in volume and was about to crescendo when the call cut off.

Wes hung up and Massey said, "Are you...are you sure that will work?"

"Yes. Delores is really good with computers."

Massey shook his head, then once again he asked, "Are you sure that will work?"

"Yes. Stop worrying. Just show up for work Monday and play it like you heard. Pull Biggs aside and say that somebody in human resources called and told you about the change. He'll be mad, but he'll keep quiet

when he finds out about the pay. Now get out of here. Go home and spend the weekend with your family."

They shook hands and Massey left. Then, as Wes was preparing to go back upstairs, he decided that Take Your Child to Work Day could carry on a bit longer without him. He poked around the room, exploring. He opened one of the boxes in the stack against the wall. It contained a thousand buttons that celebrated "The Class of 3019." More misprints. But another box held a thousand perfect little smiley faces. They were round and bright yellow. Wes pinned one next to the nametag on his shirt and took another to the calendar. He pinned it on the picture of the Great Dismal Swamp, high up between two huge cypress trees. It looked like some wildly optimistic sun smiling down through the great dismal mist.

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In the Electric Mist with Dan Smoot

I was jolted awake by what sounded like three loud knocks at my front door. The last one resonated for a moment, then it faded and I heard Jan breathing evenly beside me. Otherwise the night was silent. But had someone knocked? It seemed unlikely. I live in the sticks and to get to my house a person would have to force open an electric gate and drive or walk quite a ways. Still, maybe someone was at the door.

I slipped out of bed and stood listening. Light from a half moon oozed through the windows and bathed the room in muted gray. I thought I might need my pistol so I reached for it, but then I decided to leave it on the nightstand. I didn't want bullets flying with Jan in the house.

The bedroom door closed noiselessly behind me and I stood taking things in. Windows glowed here and there, and a weak blue light shone through the gap at the bottom of my study's door. I knew the light was from my computer and figured I'd forgotten to shut it off before bed.

I went to the door and opened it, and I stopped. The ghost of Dan Smoot was at my desk. He sat hunched forward like he was reading something on the computer's monitor. It was definitely Smoot; I'd seen him at the desk once before. His body then and now seemed to be made of water. This time he was lit from the front by the screen's glow, and from behind by moonlight coming through the study's patio doors. The two lights met inside and gave him an eerie radiance.

I cleared my throat and said, "Hello, Mr. Smoot."

He held up a finger indicating I should wait.

I looked out the patio doors. My house sits on a gravel pad, and in back the ground slopes down to a small field with seven young oaks in it. Beyond the field is a snarl of cactus and mesquite that hides a barbwire fence to the south. We'd had a lot of rain lately, and everything was green but looked black and gray in the moonlight. A slight breeze shook the waxy oak leaves and made them glimmer.

Smoot finished reading, and he chuckled as he swiveled to face me in his chair. He was trim and had a strong jaw. Light from the monitor made the features of his face stand out in ridges and dips.

"Hello, Ed. Sorry to keep you waiting but I wanted to finish your story."

I stepped into the room so I could see what was on the screen.

"That's the piece I'm working on now," I said. "It needs a couple more polish readings."

He nodded and then looked at the stack of books on the floor beside the desk. They were his books, or rather, nine hardbound volumes of his weekly newsletters from the 1960s. He'd been a conservative commentator back when it took ink and postage to get your message out. The books sat gathering dust beneath a coffee cup with an old brown apple core in it.

He looked from the floor to the stack of paperbacks beside the computer. They were detective novels by James Lee Burke. Jan had introduced me to his Dave Robicheaux series and I was enjoying it. The book where Robicheaux meets John Bell Hood was splayed open on the desk, to mark the place where I'd left off reading.

"It appears you've forgotten about politics," Smoot said.

"I'm just taking a break for a while, reading for diversion."

He gestured to the computer. "The story you're working on doesn't address any of today's current events."

"I'm writing for diversion too. Focusing on news all the time was making me sick."

"Yes, it can be overwhelming. But there are insidious people roaming the land, Ed, venal men and women who would crush your marrow into landfill if they could. Don't you think it's time to get back in the fight?"

I started to answer but hesitated. He noticed.

"Ah. You want to extend the break. Maybe write another story about your midget detective. What's this one called?" He squinted at the monitor and said, "Switcheroo." He smiled at me. "Well it's cute. It's really...heartwarming."

I couldn't tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic, but I felt defensive.

"Hey, a publisher wanted me to do a series based on that character, so yes, I'm thinking of writing another story. Maybe even a novel."

I expected him to object, or argue, but instead he leaned back and said, "I never wrote fiction, but I can see the allure. Documenting real-life gloom and doom is depressing. But it's a shame you've given up writing topical stories. Over the past couple years you've become quite adept at using fiction to expose the machinations of the people who run the world. I understand though if you feel you can't go on."

"It makes me sick, like I said. Physically ill. The people in charge are getting more and more depraved, and I feel nauseous now when I write about them. I don't know if I can do it anymore."

"Right. I understand."

He didn't understand. As far as I could tell from his writings he'd never backed down from calling out injustice and abuse. For decades he'd worked week in and week out shining light on corruption. It was because of him and other unbreakables that America wasn't wholly communist yet.

I sighed like I'd sprung a leak. From the rarified height of escapism I began a slow fall back to the smog of current events that was waiting where I'd left it.

"You're right," I said. "It's time for me to get back to work."

"Great!" He snapped upright in his chair, sending ripples across his watery body. "The insidious are only in positions of power because their lies go unchallenged. But you have the advantage of truth. Make them fight for the high ground foot by bloody foot. So what are you planning to write next?"

"Next? Well, I haven't really..."

I wondered if Jan could hear Smoot's voice. If not she'd be able to hear mine, so I excused myself and went to check on her. I opened the bedroom door a crack and saw that she was still asleep.

Back in the study I sat beside Smoot, in my usual chair. He was in Jan's. We'd put the second one at the desk after she began staying over. When we weren't busy with other things we'd surf the internet together and sometimes stream an old movie. We both like the slick black and white Hollywood productions from the 1930s and 40s. Just that evening we'd watched Greer Garson earn her Academy Award as Mrs. Miniver. Afterwards Jan went around imitating Garson. "Did you know that the twelfth Lord Beldon was hanged?" she asked me, repeating a line from the movie. And then she asked if she should dye her hair to match Garson's. She meant red, but in black and white movies red hair tends to look gray with a luminous sheen. So I told her that her hair already looked like

Garson's, but I should have left out the part about the gray. That earned me a punch on the shoulder.

Anyway, when I returned to my chair in the study I saw that Smoot was on the internet, reading a news story about the rape of an illegal alien by a dozen other illegals. He asked again what I was planning to write.

"Oh, uh, maybe I'll write about the border crisis."

He swiveled to face me.

"If there hasn't been a change of plans," I said, "then the last of the Trump-era restrictions on immigration will expire next month, in May. The restriction's called Title 42, and when Biden lets it lapse the number of crossings at the southern border will explode. It will be as if there's no border at all."

"I read that ten million people have entered the country illegally in the two and a half years since Biden took office."

"Ten million or more. No one's sure how many. But there are some exact numbers on children. The last time I checked just over three hundred and forty-five thousand unaccompanied minors had been taken into custody under Biden. That's according to the Customs and Border Protection agency. And of the three hundred and forty-five thousand, almost eighty-five thousand have gone missing. That's from the Department of Health and Human Services. The government turns unaccompanied minors over to sponsors who get paid to take care of them, and eighty-five thousand have disappeared. They could have been sold to pedophiles, or to sweatshops, or they may have had their organs harvested."

Smoot's face pinched like he was in pain. He bowed his head and mumbled, saying a prayer for the children. He'd never been especially heavy-handed with Christianity in his newsletters, but his religion was one of the things that had made him unbreakable.

I heard him murmur an amen, and then he looked up and said, "Why don't you write a story where your midget detective investigates the disappearance of some children? He could pretend to be a young migrant."

"No, he's already been established as a comic character, and there's nothing funny about what's happening at the border. Our government's trafficking children."

"Then create another character. A child. You have to admit that that type of story would be most effective told from a child's point of view."

"Yes, but..." My mind drifted, contemplating the dark and evil nature of child abuse. Then suddenly I thought of Frank Capra. Jan and I had watched several of his movies, and I wondered what had happened to the positivity portrayed in them. Capra's favorite leading man was James

Stewart. In movie after movie he had Stewart belt out speeches that left Americans wanting to work hard, obey the rules and live virtuous lives. Where had that attitude gone? What morbid turn of mind had made a meal of it and then shat it out as the modern world?

"So anyway," I said, "that nauseous feeling I mentioned...it's real and I have to treat it like I would any other sickness. I have to be careful what I read in the news now. The latest fad among leftists is to mutilate children in the name of transgenderism. They call it sexual reassignment surgery, where they castrate boys and cut the breasts off of..." I felt my gorge rise and had to stop. When I could speak again I said, "I can barely read about what they're doing to kids now, and writing stories about it... That'd be too demoralizing."

"Then write a story about Marxists. You're demoralized because of them. They've been attacking America for more than a hundred years, gnawing away at family, church and government institutions, and now they're attacking the fundamentals of science. They tell people to forget biology, that gender can be changed with scalpels and force of will. But that's crazy. It's magical thinking. And people who promote it should be in mental institutions, not running the government and carving on children."

"You're right," I said, feeling a little better. It was like Jimmy Stewart had given me a swift kick in the butt. "Yeah, the mental illness stuff needs to be addressed. And the Marxism. But how can I cover all that? How far back would I have to go?"

"To the beginning if you want to present the full picture. Go back to the 1840s, when the British banking elites realized they were losing their empire to the merchant class. Businessmen had become incredibly strong, both financially and morally. They worked hard and read the Bible. So to reassert themselves the elites funded a sort of competition. They paid academics to come up with new ways of looking at things. Darwin and Marx were the big winners, and the elites began pushing their work on the public. Darwin's theories were used to attack faith in religion, and Marx was used to attack the financial system. But Marxism threatened to catch on too quickly, so the elites switched to socialism. It steals from people the same as Marxism, but because it's slower it's less painful to the person being robbed."

"The elites set up the socialist Fabian Society," I said. "I've read some of your writing on that."

"Yes, I used to go into quite a bit of detail about the Fabians in my newsletters. Let me see if I can pull some of that up." He closed his eyes and said, "From report number forty-six, 1963. Quote, 'A small group of socialists

formed the Fabian Society at London in 1883, for the announced purpose of converting the British economy from capitalism to socialism. Writer George Bernard Shaw, a leading member of the Fabians, said the Society made it possible for respectable citizens to support socialism without any suspicion of lawless desire to overturn the existing order. The Fabian artifice of feigning respectability while subverting society for revolutionary purposes gave socialists easy entry into government, banks, stock exchanges, universities, and all other respected centers of power and influence.' End quote."

"That's impressive," I said when he opened his eyes again. "I mean, not only is what you said impressive, but also the fact that you're able to quote something you wrote sixty years ago."

"For all the good it did to write it. The Fabians succeeded with their plan, and the Anglo-American system of free enterprise was gradually converted to socialism. And now it's morphing into Marxism. Or worse. Marx was a Satanist, and this sexual mutilation of children..." He shook his head. "It's diabolical."

"Well, Satan may be behind it, but he's got a lot of help. There are thousands of politicians, lawyers and judges working to keep American conservatives from stopping the mutilation. In some places you can actually be arrested for not supporting it."

Smoot shook his head again and said, "It's amazing how many people have lost their sense of right and wrong. I blame Sigmund Freud. He was another of those academics I mentioned, the ones the people in charge used in their assault on society. They were having success against religion with Darwin, and against the merchant and working classes with the Fabians, but the family unit remained an impediment to total control. So the elites began pushing Freud's sick teachings. Did you know that his father molested him?"

"Yes. And Freud carried on the tradition. Then in order to justify his depravity he came up with a pseudoscience that says kids want to have sex with their parents. As if that makes pedophilia okay. Psychiatry couldn't help but grow into an abomination after a start like that. Shrinks today support the surgical mutilation of children's sex organs and call it 'gender affirming care,' the opposite of what it really is. The whole thing is so far beyond monstrous that I..."

Jan asked what I was doing.

Her voice startled me and I spun toward it in my chair. She was standing in the study's doorway, yawning and tying her robe closed.

I turned back to Smoot and he was gone. In his place a patch of air

seemed to shimmy in the half-light of the room's moon and monitor glow. Jan came over and sat in the empty chair. As she rubbed her eyes I looked at the computer's monitor. The story that Smoot had been reading was still there, the one about the gang rape. I closed it and saw that he'd left "Switcheroo" open as well. Jan looked and said, "Has your detective solved the case yet?"

"Yes. And I've made a decision. I'm going back to the kind of stuff I was writing before, the political stories. So I might get kind of grumpy."

Jan considered, then yawned and said, "That's okay. I'll still come visit when you want me to, and we can watch comedies if you need cheering up. Maybe Lubitsch, or Preston Sturges."

She swiveled her chair so that she was facing the patio doors. I turned too, and we sat side by side looking out at the yard. There was the moonlight, a breeze, and the glint of trembling leaves.

Jan said, "I think it's lovely having a tree named after you."

It took me a moment to realize that she was alluding to what Mrs. Miniver had said in the movie earlier. A man named a rose after her, and she said the gesture was lovely. I'd named an oak after Jan.

"I can change the tree's name to Mrs. Miniver if you want."

"Don't you dare," she said sleepily. She rolled her chair sideways so it was touching mine, and she rested her head on my shoulder. We sat with our backs to my desk and looked out the patio doors, from the high ground down to the field of trees and the chaos of thorns beyond.

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Hammaman's Parallel Universes

It was a bright spring day and the parking lot's asphalt was beginning to warm. The lot served a football stadium and was enormous. The dome that had been set up in the lot was enormous too, almost as big as the stadium.

"Yo, Dayvon! I think it's called a teepee, not a peeteel!"

Herb sighed and looked ahead. He was maybe thirty men back from the dome's entrance now, still a ways to go but better than being a thousand back like when he'd joined the line nearly an hour before.

Red, white and blue trucks were buzzing around everywhere. About half were panel trucks marked SUPPLIES, and the rest were tankers marked AIR. The way they backed up to and took off from the dome made Herb

think of bees worrying a big blue flower. The dome was basically a huge bladder of blue plastic tarp material contained within a cage of galvanized tubing. Air from the tankers kept the bladder inflated.

"That's what I said!" Dayvon shouted from behind Herb. "A peeteel!" He and his friend Tyrane had been carrying on a conversation across a dozen men in between. They started out talking about family, then they bitched about white people for a while, and then they compared notes on where they intended to go. Dayvon said he wanted to get himself a harem in Vermont. That surprised Herb, since Vermont had a mostly white population, but Dayvon said that Hammaman's found him a universe where the state didn't have any ofays in it. According to him some runaway slaves got together with the Indians in Vermont hundreds of years ago and drove all the white people out. So he planned to go there and put together a harem of squaws in a teepee.

Herb wondered if Dayvon and Tyrane would have talked the same way in front of women and children. Transport days at the domes alternated between male and female and between children and adults. The brochure that came with the sign-up package said the alternating had something to do with the technology. There was a picture of a young, smiling family in the brochure, and the caption beneath it said that even though not everybody could jump at the same time, they could reunite on the other side.

The line moved forward and Herb accidentally kicked the heel of the man in front of him. It was an old Jew with a beanie on the back of his head. He scowled over his shoulder and said, "So to you I'm invisible now?" then he turned away muttering about the klutzy goyim.

Herb would be glad to get inside the dome. Once there he'd be able to line up with people of his own race. The brochure said the segregation was necessary on account of the technology, same as with the genders and ages, but a disclaimer made it clear that providing unequal service on this side of the jump was illegal. Depending on where you went though the rules could be different. You could even go to a universe where you wouldn't have to live with people of other races. Like Dayvon in his ofay-free Vermont.

Herb had read through his Hammaman's brochure until it was coming apart at the folds, and he knew from a section about the history of the company that its reclusive founder lived in Louisiana. That fit with the commercials, which usually featured Cajuns. The ads that ran on Herb's favorite hunting channel starred a recurring character named Pierre. He wore grubby clothes and a Red Man tobacco cap. In the latest commercial he was paddling through a swamp in an old pirogue that trailed a line from

a fishing pole. The chitter and rasp of swamp creatures drew you into the place, then after a moment Pierre paused in his paddling and looked at the camera. "It's me back again," he said with a thick Cajun accent. "If you tired 'a da hand you been dealt, cash it in an' come on down to Hammaman's Parallel Yuneeverses." He started paddling again, and the camera shifted to show him passing through a door frame that stuck up out of the water. Then the picture cut to a sleek black cigarette boat, one of the long speedboats that drug runners use along the Gulf Coast. And on the cut, Hammaman's official theme song kicked in. It was Johnny Mercer's big band version of "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive." Pierre looked like a different person after the cut. From his swamp clothes he'd switched to a dark blue blazer and a white captain's hat with lots of shiny gold on the bill. He was standing at the wheel of the boat and grinning ear to ear as he skipped along the glass of an open sea. He looked at the camera again and yelled above the roar of the boat's motor. "Ah lahk mah new baby!" He waved a hand at the boat. "You could get one jus' lahk it if you come on down to Hammaman's! An' it don' matter if you a po' boy where you at! You pay whatchu can now, an' we fix you up wit' a good job on da odder side!" After giving the camera a thumbs up he roared away with Johnny Mercer singing, telling viewers to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.

The cost for transport to a parallel universe was steep, but Hammaman's held to what it promised about partial payment now. Herb was glad they did, because that was the only way he could have afforded the jump. Even after selling everything he owned he didn't have enough to cover the cost of his ticket. But he wouldn't mind working to pay off the debt. All he needed in order to be happy was beer and TV at the end of the day, plus two or three hunting trips a year.

The line moved forward and the old Jew in front of Herb reached the door. He straightened his beanie and stood waiting. The door had a couple of LED squares on it. The one with a red X was lit, but after a few seconds the green checkmark blinked on and the Jew pushed past it. Herb moved forward and entered when the check gave him the go-ahead.

A man just inside the door asked Herb for his paperwork. He had a Cajun accent and was dressed in a red jumpsuit. Herb took his printout from a pocket and handed it over. The attendant scrutinized it and then poked at a handheld electronic device. As Herb waited he listened to the din of voices inside the dome. It was a low murmur punctuated by an occasional shout or laugh.

The attendant returned Herb's printout and directed him to the Caucasoid table, one of four tables in the middle of the dome.

Herb looked around as he walked across the floor of white plastic squares. They were the quick-assembling, interlocking kind. The brochure said Hammaman's could put one of the domes up in three days. No small feat, given the size of the things. Herb estimated that the interior of the one he was in was close to a hundred yards across, with sidewalls twenty feet high and a ceiling that rounded up to about forty. The latticework of the metal frame outside cast dark lines on the plastic, except across the top, which was white plastic instead of the blue used everywhere else. The white disc was about fifty yards across and flooded the interior of the dome with diffused sunlight.

A solid white wall ringed the inside of the dome. It was tall and had open doorways set into it. The recesses were spaced evenly every few yards. They were red inside and identified by big blue numbers stenciled above them. The numbers ran from one to sixty-five.

Herb reached his table and got in line. A couple dozen guys were ahead of him. He looked to the left and right. The setup was just like in the commercials. He was in line at the Caucasoid table, the one for white people. It was between a Negroid table for blacks, and a Mongoloid table for Asians. Beyond the Mongoloids was a table for "Mixed and Miscellaneous."

The lines in front of the doors around the perimeter weren't as long as the ones at the tables. They were based on the jumpers' primary interests rather than race. Herb wondered which line was for hunters.

The dark-haired man ahead of him spoke over his shoulder. He said he wouldn't miss Dayvon and Tyrane. "Neither will I," Herb said, and the man turned around. Tattoos ran up his arms and into the sleeves of a Harley-Davidson T-shirt.

"You order with or without dark meat?" he asked Herb.

"Pardon?"

"You got any Negroids where you're going?"

"Uh, no, I don't. I checked 'no' on all the race boxes except Caucasoid."

"Me too. Look at them." The man gestured to the line of blacks.

Several of them were shoving and threatening one another. "The Caucasoids and Mongoloids are nice and peaceful, and so are the ones in the mixed line. But the Negroids? Bunch of apes. And I can smell their feet from here."

A voice behind Herb said, "That's basically what they say about us." Herb looked back and saw that the speaker was a gray-haired man who held a briar pipe to his mouth. There was no smoke coming from the pipe but the bowl was scorched.

"I ain't nothing like them," the tattooed man said.

"Not to outward appearances," the other said, "but you are culturally."

The tattooed man started to say something else, then just snorted and shook his head. But Herb was curious. He turned sideways in line so he could talk to both men, and he asked the pipe smoker what he meant.

"Well," the man said, "blacks adopted redneck culture and... Oh." He nodded to the tattooed man. "No offense intended."

"None taken."

"Then as I was about to say, the Africans who came to America as slaves needed to replace their lost tribal cultures with something new. And since most of them lived in the South, they tended to emulate the poor whites there. They watched and learned, and over time they developed a culture with both African and redneck elements. It was a regional culture before the Civil War but expanded after the former slaves were able to travel."

The tattooed man said, "So you think I act like a nig...a Negroid?"

"I didn't say that, but let's do a quick comparison. Both black culture and redneck culture tend to, one, resent authority, two, mistrust education, and three, practice a Jesus-based religion." He pointed with the stem of his pipe. "I think I see a crucifix there among your tattoos."

The tattooed man rubbed a forearm and turned to face forward again. The line moved and Herb shuffled sideways so he could continue his conversation with the pipe smoker.

"You sound like a professor."

"I used to be. Taught anthropology. My name is Muldane."

Herb introduced himself, and he and Muldane talked. Or Muldane talked and Herb listened. The professor gave a mini-lecture on Masai mating rituals, then he got onto the topic of divisiveness. "A small number of people control the world," he said. "If the masses were to unite then we could easily overthrow them, so they keep us divided. They're masters of manipulation, and they've given us either/or societies. In America for example you're either for the Republicans or you're for the Democrats. You're either for or against abortion, for this war or that and so on. We're presented with wedge issues and forced to take sides. And the most effective wedge issue of all is race. It's the great divider because you can usually tell at a glance if someone's different on a genetic level. So our federal government keeps a heavy thumb on the race button. They say they don't of course, but then they give us things like affirmative action, preferential admissions policies in colleges and preferential hiring in employment. Those are divisive practices that make many of us feel disenfranchised, which creates tension. That's the way the people who control the world want it."

The professor seemed to run out of steam, but after he sucked on his pipe for a moment he asked Herb where he was going.

"To Louisiana. The swamp."

The tattooed man turned around and said, "Like in the commercial?"

"Yes. It looks peaceful. I want to get a pirogue and just enjoy the solitude, maybe hunt alligators and bear."

The professor chuckled and said, "I wanted to have a bit of fun with Hammaman's, so I set them what I thought would be an impossible task. I told them I wanted to study primitive cultures in Africa, but like both of you gentlemen I checked the 'no' box on Negroids. And to my surprise Hammaman's said they found a universe for me." He chuckled again. "I bet they had to sift through trillions before they found an Africa without blacks. No telling what its primitive cultures will be like." He returned to sucking on his pipe and stared off into space, lost in thought.

The tattooed man reached the table and was processed. Herb watched as he handed his printout to a man in a red jumpsuit, who read and then typed something on a laptop computer. "So you goin' to...Fefan, Truk," he said with a Cajun accent. "Don't know where dat is, but Hammaman's'll git'chu dere. An' let's see...you five-foot-ten?"

"Yeah," the tattooed man said. "Why's that matter?"

"Folks in Transport will need to fine tune dependin' on how tall you are." The employee handed over a plastic card and pointed to a door. "Jus' take dis to twenny-fo' an' you be all set."

Then it was Herb's turn to be processed. He presented his printout and the man typed. He confirmed that Herb was five-foot-nine and then he said, "Hey, I know dese coordinates. Dis mah granny's ol' parish." He looked at Herb. "Why you wanna go dere, man?"

"Because of the commercial. I liked what I saw."

"Yeah, but dis here da swamp, not da ocean at da end 'a dat commercial."

"That's what I want, the swamp."

"Well, alraht den. You good to go." He handed Herb a card and told him to join the line at door number thirty-one. "An' be careful 'a dem gators when you git dere," he cautioned as Herb walked away. "Dey bite you on da ass, an' you ain't got no ass left!"

Herb went to his door. A jumpsuited man was on duty beside it, and a dozen or so customers were waiting to pass through. Several were dressed in ghillie suits—the puffy weaves of camouflage cloth strips—and one wore hip waders and a necklace of duck calls. Herb was definitely in the hunter's line.

He studied the lines to the right and left. One was made up of whites and Asians. Each man stood reading a book. On the other side was a line of blacks and whites who were tossing a football around. Beyond them was a line of men with gas masks covering their faces. Probably climate alarmists, Herb thought, going to universes where they could eat soy burgers in solar-powered houses.

The man in front of Herb was tall and ghillied. His suit had lots of white in it. Herb asked him where he was going.

"To Alaska," he said over his shoulder. "I want to hunt big game in a universe where Trump wasn't cheated out of his re-election."

"So you think the election was stolen?"

The man turned around and scowled down at Herb.

"Hey," Herb said defensively, "I think it was stolen, too. But not many people talk about it anymore. They're afraid to."

"Well, you and I don't need to worry about that now, do we? We're leaving. So yes, I say the presidency was stolen. The theft happened on Election Day 2020, but the true overthrow of the government occurred during the certification of the electoral votes on January sixth, 2021. As soon as Republicans began to challenge the legitimacy of the votes, federal operatives disguised as Trump supporters staged a riot at the U.S. capitol. And then the complicit news media told us that the country had just experienced its most dangerous crisis ever. You remember all that."

"Yes, I remember," Herb said, and he thought of how America had begun its descent into tyranny just days after January sixth. Democrats and turncoat Republicans joined forces to launch a war against the right-wingers they claimed were behind "the insurrection." Dozens of conservatives were jailed without due process, then dozens more, and then hundreds. And once the warrants were flying, the liberals began to turn on one another; if you called yourself a Democrat but didn't support the persecution of conservatives, then you too risked imprisonment.

When the number of political arrests passed a thousand, a podcaster Herb listened to made a sobering prediction. He said, "America now has a despotic federal government, and the people who run it know they can never relinquish control. If they do they'll be executed for treason. That means we're about to see concentration camps. The government has no choice but to lock up its millions of critics. Hitler had camps, Stalin had camps, and they're coming to the U S of A."

So a lot of people were worried about the future, and then, like the answer to a prayer, Hammaman's Parallel Universes appeared with its revolutionary new technology. The company's transport centers began to

spring up around the country and people felt hopeful for the first time in years. Hammaman's offered an escape from uncertainty and fear.

The man in front of Herb stepped forward and handed his plastic card to the attendant. Herb leaned sideways and looked past the ghillie suit to the door opening. A red wall and red carpeting were just inside.

The attendant fed the ghillie man's card into a slot on the wall, said, "Six-foot-three" into a lapel mike, and then gestured to the door. "In an' to da raht," he said with a Cajun accent. "Your destination," he smiled, "she awaits you." The ghillie man stepped through the door and disappeared to the right.

Herb moved forward and presented his card. Being so close to the door now he could hear music coming from inside. It was Johnny Mercer's "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," from the commercials.

The attendant fed Herb's card into the slot by the door, radioed "Five-foot-nine," then smiled and said, "To da left. Have a good trip, man."

Herb stepped forward, turned left and started down the hallway. It was about three feet wide and completely red. Some little lights in the low ceiling provided visibility, but not much. Herb walked slowly. The carpet felt thin underfoot.

"Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" faded out and then started over again. The hallway made a ninety-degree turn to the right, then one to the left. Herb sang along with Johnny Mercer under his breath. "You've got to accen-tuate the positive, e-lim-inate the negative..."

He made four or five more turns, a couple of them one-eighties, and began to feel as if he were lost in a maze. He wasn't sure where he was going but it was away from the center of the dome. The noises from there faded, smothered by the music, and then he heard the faint growl of truck engines. He knew he was getting close to the dome's outside wall and he started to worry. Where was the transport room they showed in the brochure? Hammaman's better not try to rip him off. He'd sold everything he had and they better give him his money's worth.

He turned another corner and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the wall straight ahead. A ceiling light just in front of it illuminated the words TRANSPORT WAIT HERE stenciled in white letters on the red.

Herb stopped at the wall and stood waiting, wondering if he'd be told to go left or right. Hallways ran in both directions. After a moment he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and realized the carpet felt a little thicker than what he'd been walking on. And he couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard a squishy sound below the music when he changed his stance. Could the carpet be wet? He was about to bend down to check when

he saw some movement up high. Something wiggled, first to the left side, then to the right. He didn't know what the wiggles could be and turned to check out the one to the left.

He took a couple of steps and looked up. In the dark red overhead he saw what appeared to be the toes of a pair of boots sticking out over the edge of a platform, one toe to each side of his head. Then the outline of a head and shoulders leaned into view. A voice like a loud grunt said, "Here da hamma man!"

A powerful blow knocked Herb back and down. His head and shoulders hit the squishy carpet and he lay face up, looking at the light on the ceiling.

A man yelled, "He turn left, Baptiste! You owe me a beer!"

Herb couldn't move. He felt blood running down his temples and past his ears. He saw the pale faces of two men peering down from opposite sides of a platform directly above.

"Hail no I don't owe you no beer," a different voice said. "You whack 'im too high."

"Dat 'cause dey make a mistake on da five-nine. It trew mah swing off."

Somebody grabbed Herb's ankles. A door opened and he felt himself being dragged toward the rectangle of light.

A panel truck was backed up to the door. The truck's rear doors were open and Herb could see a pile of bodies inside, men with their foreheads bashed in. Just before he was thrown on top of the pile he heard Johnny Mercer sing about eliminating the negative.

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The Intubated Breath of Truth

At bedtime the dark stretch of land outside Pep's window had the usual three pinpoints of light. Then he saw a new one. It started out dim and grew to a steady glow on the other side of the valley. He couldn't tell what was causing it, so he decided to investigate. He pulled his overalls on and grabbed his boots.

There was just enough moonlight for him to make out the footpath that led to the low-water dam at Wakeman's Creek. He splashed across and then stopped to put on his boots. The new light was still there and still unidentifiable, but brighter now that he was closer.

He took the zigzag path up from the dam. Halfway to the highway he came upon old Miz Crabbe. She was huffing along fine under her own power but he offered her a supporting arm anyway. She rejected it with a swing of her cane and he pushed on.

When he reached the highway he headed for the light. It looked to be about a half mile away. He sidestepped potholes and weedy cracks until he arrived at the source, a travel trailer, and while he stood taking things in he marveled at the size of the crowd that had gathered.

He counted eighteen people. That was more than he'd ever seen in one place at one time. They said twenty-three lived in the town of Mumfree, nine miles down the road, and beyond that was Philadelphia, with more than four hundred. Trying to picture four hundred people in one place made his head swim.

The trailer was parked on the shoulder of the highway, and most of the light came from a half-dozen torches on the side facing the road. The torches were on long rods that had been driven into the pavement in a wide semicircle. Mr. Pizeney told the crowd that the torches used to be called tikis. "Don't know why," he said, "but then I don't know why my wife calls us happy, either." Mrs. Pizeney gave him a punch on the shoulder and people laughed.

Four big dray horses were hitched to the trailer. They stood with their leather loosened and their feed bags on. The trailer was kind of like the one that Pep lived in, but his rested on rotted rubber tires. The one at the side of the highway was fitted with big wood-spoked wagon wheels.

In addition to the tiki torches a pair of oil lamps provided some light. They hung from swinging arms high up on the side of the trailer, front and back. The space between the lamps was painted with a banner-like sign that said THE INTUBATED BREATH OF TRUTH. Pep sounded out the words to himself and wondered what they meant.

A wide rectangular opening took up most of the trailer's side. A roll-up shutter covered the hole, and as Pep watched, the shutter rattled up to reveal a hunchback in a red jacket with brass buttons. The man had frizzy black hair and a long scar on one of his cheeks. He latched the shutter open and pulled a black curtain sideways across the hole.

A moment later a door slammed on the other side of the trailer and the hunchback emerged from around the back. He was carrying a crate of bottles. Pep watched him set the crate on the ground and lower a countertop that was folded up beneath the opening on the trailer's side. The counter ran the width of the opening, and when it was resting on the support chains at the two ends it looked solid. The hunchback placed the

crate on the counter and then went back around the trailer.

The crowd pushed forward to look at the bottles. Pep got close enough to see that they had labels on the front and corks in the tops, but they seemed to be empty.

The hunchback returned and placed a second crate on the counter, then he asked who hadn't received a number for the drawing yet. Pep raised his hand and the man gave him a slip of paper. A large 19 was scrawled on it in pencil. Miz Crabbe came huffing up behind Pep, and the hunchback handed her a slip. "That's the last of the numbers," he announced to the crowd. "Hold onto them for the drawing at the end of the show. The winner will get one free bottle of The Intubated Breath of Truth." Somebody reached for a bottle and the hunchback said, "You can handle those but don't remove the corks. Improper use could result in cerebral infarction. The professor will address you shortly."

"A cerebral infarction's like a stroke," Mrs. Haywood said loudly enough for everyone to hear as the hunchback disappeared again behind the trailer. People passed a couple of the bottles around but were careful not to touch the corks. The labels didn't give much information so everyone had a different opinion about what The Intubated Breath of Truth might be.

Whatever the bottles contained, Pep wished he had something he could swap for one. It was too bad about the blight on the corn. He could barely survive on what he grew, and there wasn't enough to trade. Still though he might win the free bottle in the drawing. He shoved the slip of paper with the number on it into the deepest pocket of his overalls, to keep it safe.

The curtain on the side of the trailer slid open to reveal another curtain farther in. It too was black, and between it and the trailer's open side were two large wooden puppets. They hung swaying on each side of the opening. The puppets were bent forward slightly and seemed to be staring down at a wooden stool between them. Pep had seen pictures of how people used to dress, and one puppet, the male, was wearing what could have been a doctor's white coat or a barber's smock. It was probably a doctor's coat because the female wore blue nurse's scrubs. The puppets were pretty beat up. The male's long gray face had several chips of paint missing, and the female's hooked nose had been broken off at the tip.

A man in a green suit stepped into view inside the trailer. He was thin and pale and had shoulder-length gray hair. He crouched to keep from bumping his head as he walked to the stool in the center of the stage area.

He settled onto the stool, looked out at the crowd and adjusted a red scarf that was looped around his neck. The ends of the scarf passed through

a gold throat clasp shaped like a beetle. The beetle and the man's dark eyes danced with reflected tiki light.

"Good evening," he said, spreading his hands in a welcoming gesture. "I am Professor Emerick J. Alexander." His voice was raspy and not very loud. Pep and the others inched closer to hear better. "I debated which play to present tonight. We could have staged a production about the SEERS pandemic, or World War Three..."

"The Chinese Fire Drill!" Mr. Skokie yelled, and people laughed.

"Quite," the professor smiled. "But for tonight I want to reach farther back in time. I want to present a play that's close to my heart because the events described in it led me to develop *The Intubated Breath of Truth*."

The hunchback came around from the back of the trailer. He carried a large tray that was covered with a black cloth. The crowd made way for him and he set the tray in the center of the fold-down counter.

The professor thanked him and produced a stick that was about two feet long. It had a black claw on each end. They looked like dried buzzard claws. One was spread open and one was closed. He reached through the side of the trailer with the open claw and hooked the cloth that covered whatever was on the tray. He pulled the cloth away and a couple of people at the front of the crowd let out little gasps.

Pep leaned forward to get a better look and saw a widemouthed gallon jar about three-fourths full of purple liquid. Eight pieces of black rubber tubing were attached to the top of the jar's black metal lid. Each tube was about a foot long, and the way they hung down made them look like spider legs hugging the jar. A much longer tube passed through the center of the lid. One end ran to the bottom of the jar and the rest was coiled on the tray.

The hunchback began inserting the spider leg tubes into some bottles that were on the tray. The bottles were like those in the crates. After he inserted a tube in one he'd stand it up beside the jar and move on to the next.

As the hunchback worked, the professor undid his scarf. It fell away to reveal that he was clean shaven from his Adam's apple up but had a strip of mussed gray hair across the apple. The strip was about an inch wide and ran four or five inches side to side.

The professor produced a small glass jar, removed the lid and dipped two fingers in. The jar contained wax, which he rubbed into the mustache. Then he used a little comb to part the hair in the middle and rake it to the sides.

When he put the comb away Pep saw that there was a hole just below the mustache. Mrs. Haywood turned slightly to tell the people behind her

that the hole in the throat was from a tracheotomy. "They put a breathing tube in." The professor twisted the ends of his mustache into upswept tips as Pep studied the hole. It looked like a little mouth, a sideways slit with little lips top and bottom.

The hunchback finished putting the eight tubes in their eight bottles and then nodded to the professor. He leaned forward and picked up the long tube that led from the jar. He lifted its end to his throat and inserted it in the hole there.

He pinched his nose shut, breathed in through his mouth, then closed his lips and exhaled into the tube. Bubbles shot from the end of it at the bottom of the jar. They rose through the purple liquid, and things had gotten so quiet that Pep could hear the little pops they made breaking the surface.

After the professor had inhaled and exhaled several times the hunchback said, "This one's full," and pulled the spider leg from one of the bottles. He plugged it with a cork and then did another. The professor blew through the tube until all eight bottles were corked and lined up in front of the jar.

And then a gong sounded somewhere inside the trailer. The professor pulled the tube from his throat and dropped it to the counter. He looked out over the crowd and said, "Tonight, my friends, you will hear my testimony and watch our dramatization, and then afterwards you will receive an exceptional offer on The Intubated Breath of Truth. Simply make your purchase and then when you get home place your bottle on your bedside table. Remove the cork before you go to sleep and your dreams will be energized with the truth of my long-researched observations in all areas of history, science and mysticism."

The hunchback lowered the flame on one of the hanging lamps and asked for someone at the other end of the counter to do the same. Monk Taub lowered the light, then the hunchback disappeared around the back of the trailer. When the professor heard the door close on the other side he looked out at the crowd and said, "Consider this the prologue to tonight's play. I want all of you to travel back with me to when Covid-19 first appeared in America. I was young and in the hospital at the time, recovering from a motorcycle accident, when the government said the country must prepare for a wave of death. Hospitals were told to clear out all non-Covid cases, and I don't know what would have become of me if I hadn't tested positive for Covid. They were fake of course, the tests, but my result was positive so I was allowed to stay where I was. And then one day I learned that the government paid hospitals a bonus of fifty-three thousand

dollars for each Covid-related case they reported. And if they intubated a Covid patient they got a hundred thousand, something I learned after I awoke from a drug induced slumber. My jaw was wired shut from my accident so they'd cut a hole in my windpipe to insert their tube."

The professor paused to clear his throat, and Pep thought again how his voice was raspy, but in a soft way. It was smooth but ripply like the water running over the dam at Wakeman's Creek. It soothed you and drew you along with its sameness. And the professor's mustache danced when he spoke. His Adam's apple bounced up and down, and the mustache bounced with it. The bounce drew attention to the hole in his throat, which widened and flattened with the movement of the skin around it. The hole could have been a tiny mouth saying something too soft to hear.

Professor Alexander continued, his black eyes twinkling in the tiki light.

"Shortly after I was intubated I learned that hospitals received three hundred and sixty thousand dollars for each Covid death they reported, so before my caretakers could maximize their profit on me I removed my tube and limped away into the night. My wounds healed quickly, but I decided to keep the one in my throat open, in case I should ever need it again for breathing."

He paused again and looked at the unmoving female puppet. "What'd you say?" he asked it. He cocked his head like he was listening. "No my dear, I won't shut up. My prologue is..."

The puppet jumped. People recoiled as it clattered and there were even a couple of screams. But then things settled down again and Pep figured the hunchback had jerked the puppet's strings. The others realized the same thing and a little titter of embarrassment ran through the crowd.

"She's eager to get started," the professor said, smiling and twisting a tip of his mustache. "But before we begin the play I must say a word or two about the remarkable product you see before you."

He used his clawed stick to reach out and tap the jar on the counter.

"This filtration device is the culmination of years of research. It produces a ninety-nine point nine percent pure version of The Intubated Breath of Truth. I first experimented on mice with The Breath, then on cats and dogs, and in each trial I detected what seemed to be a sharpening of the senses. But it was impossible to tell if the sharpening was an actual increase in intelligence, so finally I did a human trial. I tried The Intubated Breath of Truth on my assistant, and he gained more than forty IQ points."

"It's true!" the hunchback yelled from inside the trailer. "I used to think that manmade climate change was real!"

That got a big laugh from the crowd. The professor let the noise die down and then he continued. "As I said earlier, you will be able to buy your very own bottle of The Intubated Breath of Truth at the conclusion of tonight's play. Buy one bottle for yourself and one for a friend or loved one. It's what Jesus would have done for Buddha. And now, as the Bard might couplet, the prologue's done and the play must run!"

With surprising speed the professor got to his feet, grabbed his stool and exited to the side in a crouching dash.

A moment later the gong sounded and the puppets clattered to life. They bounced and twisted this way and that, then they settled down to a loose-jointed jitter. They faced each other and the female said, "Hi, Dr. Fauci," in a high, screechy voice. Her words were out of synch with the flapping of her jaw. "You seem excited today."

The male puppet, Dr. Fauci, gave a stiff full-bodied nod and said, "Indeed I am excited, Nurse Piglosi." His words were timed better to his jaw. "I just got some new numbers on that coronavirus I helped create. The one called Covid-19."

Fauci had a raspy voice. The professor was working him, and the hunchback was working Nurse Piglosi.

"Are the new numbers good?" Piglosi asked.

"Not very good in people's homes, but great in places where we control the environment. Patients in hospitals and nursing homes are dropping like flies."

Piglosi said, "We're doing well in the hospital where I work. The victims walk in under their own power, and we immediately put them on Remdesevir, an old cyanide drug that killed more than half the test subjects in its last trial. No telling how many we've killed since we began using it."

"Excellent," Fauci said. "The sedatives we're giving Covid patients are doing well too. The drugs are the same that prisons use to suppress breathing during execution by lethal injection. Convicts take them and go on to die, and Covid patients go onto respirators."

Piglosi let out a cackling, jaw-clacking laugh, then she said, "The respirators are my favorite part. We run the tube down the throat and turn the pressure up high to rupture the lungs. It's like blowing up balloons until they pop." Some people in the crowd grumbled but Piglosi pushed on. "We don't want witnesses, so we don't let friends or family visit the patients. They die alone, then we make internet videos of ourselves dancing while we wheel their bodies off to the morgue. Watch me shake my booty!"

She cackled again and did a spastic, clattering dance. Pep wondered if it was meant to be a joke, and he looked at the old people in the crowd.

They all seemed to be upset. Miz Crabbe was even wiping a tear from an eye, so he supposed the stuff about the murders in the hospitals was true.

Nurse Piglosi exited the stage still dancing, and Dr. Fauci moved to the center. He faced the audience and said, "The Covid pandemic was a medical and social control experiment conducted by the United Nations. The damage the experiment did to humanity was incalculable. Among other things, the Covid shots' mRNA technology reprogrammed cells to replicate the spike protein of HIV. This led to the breakdown of people's immune systems, and over the course of three years we saw death rates jump by up to forty-four percent in the most heavily injected countries. Covid also initiated the era of worldwide mass starvation events. The pandemic began in 2020, and by 2023 more than eighty million people had starved to death because of things like lockdowns leading to a shortage of farm workers, disruptions to fertilizer shipments, and so on. The U.N. incorporated lessons learned from Covid into later depopulation events that would kill nearly eight billion people."

Pep was fascinated by the play, but the rest of the crowd seemed to be growing restless. People shuffled their feet and began chatting here and there.

But all of that stopped when the stage lighting changed. A radiance appeared from above. Its source was hidden but the light bathed Dr. Fauci in a golden glow. He moved aside, looked up and said, "Lo, what thing is this?"

A new puppet descended on the other side of the stage. It was an angel with a sword in its hand and wings of aluminum foil. The foil glittered under the overhead light.

Fauci dropped to a kneeling position and said, "Is this a sign, or is it a judgment?"

"A judgment," the angel said, hovering. "You must answer for the billions you poisoned."

"I'll answer but not apologize, praise be to Satan. My foul deed is done and cannot be undone."

"Not true," the angel said. "One shall appear who will bring The Intubated Breath of Truth. He will pass among the people and tell them this: Buy one bottle for yourself, and one for a friend or loved one. It's what Jesus would have done for Buddha."

With that the angel moved toward Fauci and lifted its sword. The sword came down on Fauci's head, the light above snapped to blood red, and Fauci fell. The gong sounded as a hidden hand drew the curtain closed.

There was a scattering of applause and Miz Crabbe said that execution had been too good for the sons of bitches. Then the hunchback reappeared

from behind the trailer and went to the counter.

It took a couple of minutes to settle on the price for a bottle of The Breath, but after three eggs was agreed upon everybody knew it would be one for a hatful of root vegetables and two for a rabbit.

Pep didn't even have an ear of corn on him, but then he remembered the drawing for the free bottle. He asked which number was the winner.

The hunchback took a card from a pocket and held it up for the crowd to see. It was a white card with a big 19 written on it in pencil. "Number nineteen gets the free bottle," he said.

Pep couldn't believe his good luck. That was his number. He took the slip of paper from his pocket to double check, and sure enough it was nineteen.

He waved the slip above his head as he pushed forward to claim his prize. Mr. Pizeney offered half a rabbit for the bottle, but Pep said no and hustled away from the gathering. He couldn't wait to get home, to set the uncorked bottle beside his bed and let The Intubated Breath of Truth rise through his dreams. He was in such a rush that he forgot to remove his boots before he splashed across the dam at Wakeman's Creek.

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Funnyman

Ellie watched Hubert pace and tug at his shirt collar. He'd stick two fingers in at the throat, pull, and then straighten his necktie. It was an old habit, one she'd forgotten about. She'd also forgotten that he muttered while he paced. He would talk to himself and then every once in a while stop and ask Ellie's opinion about a joke. It was part of the process he always went through to get ready for a set.

Another comic was doing his routine at the moment. Ellie could see him from where she sat on her stool. She and Hubert were behind a curtain to the side of the stage, and the comic was at a microphone stand in the center. From her angle Ellie could see past him to one of the tables out front. It was occupied by two people—a man in a dress and a woman with long dark whiskers.

"I'm sorry," the comic said. He was a cringing little guy whose voice was barely audible even with the amplification of the PA system. He hadn't gotten a laugh yet. His act seemed to consist of whining and apologizing, and Ellie wondered what made him think he was funny. Funny was

something you were either born with or developed with lots of careful honing. Hubert was naturally funny. He made people smile when he bounced into a room, and laugh when he opened his mouth. Or he used to. But times had changed.

Ellie watched him pace and thought how he was so much skinnier now. Skinnier and of course much older. He'd just awakened from a forty-seven year coma. His hair was gone and he had wrinkles, but surprisingly few of those. Nurses must have rubbed an ocean of lotion into his skin over the decades.

Nearly five decades. Such a long time, Ellie thought. She'd stopped going to visit him a little over three years after they placed him in the nursing home. The court granted her a divorce and she moved on with her life. She buried a second and third husband and raised four children, but Hubert didn't know any of that. He woke up early that morning and asked to see his wife. To his way of thinking nothing had changed since 1976.

It surprised Ellie that the nursing home was able to locate her. She'd gone back to using her maiden name, but they did a bit of detective work on the internet and found her phone number. After they called she packed a bag and made the four-hour drive across the state. She found Hubert pacing the halls of the home in some old clothes that the staff had given him.

He signed himself out and then as she drove them around town looking for a motel he asked her to line up a gig for that night. He said he needed to get back to work while his jokes were still fresh in his head. She didn't know how to tell him that the number of things you could joke about had dwindled to almost nothing, but she agreed to try to book him somewhere.

She found a motel, checked them in, and then while he took a shower she went out to buy him some nicer clothes. He wanted a black suit, "Something in the thirty-forty dollar range. Off the rack but with a hand-tailored look." She found one that cost four hundred at a discount clothing store. With shoes, shirt and the rest the total was more than six.

As he got dressed at the motel, she used her phone to search for local comedy clubs. She couldn't find any. Laffland, Billy's Belly Laff and all the other places she remembered from the old days were gone. The only thing she could turn up was a listing at a local liberal arts college. An events calendar for the student union said they had an open mike that night for "politically informed" music and stand-up comedy. She called and signed Hubert up for a fifteen-minute set, and she made sure to use his stage name of Jokes McFadden. She also asked them to mark him down as a "funnyman" rather than a comic. He'd always thought of himself as a

funnyman, even called himself one on official forms and documents. That was probably why the IRS looked into their taxes one year—they didn't know what kind of work a funnyman did. Hubert put on part of his act for the man who came to audit them, and he told a joke that equated taxes with rape. The auditor issued a finding that did the same.

Hubert paused his pacing at Ellie's stool and tugged at his collar. "They didn't have rayon?" he asked but didn't wait for an answer. He rubbed his stomach and said he was hungry. "If we have ten bucks to spare we should go to a steakhouse after the show. Get a couple of sirloins with all the trimmings." Ellie just smiled and nodded. She'd talk to him later about inflation.

He went back to pacing, then stopped again and said, "I think I'll open with a fag joke. But I'll need to give it a little intro, a thing where I apologize to the fags in the audience. Not an apology apology, but I have a, what do you call it, an interior motive. See, there's nothing an audience hates more than to miss the setup to a good fag joke, so the intro will let them know that one's coming up."

"Yes, dear," Ellie said, reminding herself not to censor him. She'd wanted to tell him all day long that the world was less tolerant now, nearly humorless. People had been trained to be so overly sensitive that you couldn't joke about anything for fear of offending someone. You could even be sued for hurting a person's feelings. She would have warned him about all that but she knew he'd think she was exaggerating. So she kept quiet. He'd have to learn on his own.

As if to illustrate her thought about humorlessness, she heard a woman in the audience interrupt the man onstage and spout some figures about global warming. The comic listened politely, then apologized and went on to his next whiny joke.

Hubert didn't notice the interaction. He was lost in his pacing and muttering. Ellie wondered how he would have dealt with the woman. Probably by saying, "We got ourselves a real philosopher here, folks. That's philosopher with a capital F." People always laughed at that one.

Some light reflected off the silvery X on Hubert's temple. Ellie remembered how he got the scar at his last appearance. He was performing at Morty's Laff Palace on the Fourth of July, 1976. The Bicentennial. Two hundred years to the day since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The country was crazy with patriotic fever in '76. American flags were everywhere. Schools, businesses and churches were draped in patriotic bunting, and TV sets beamed red, white and blue.

The crowd at Morty's got into the festive spirit on July 4 by mixing red

and white wines with Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. They called the resulting drink an Old Gory. Everybody was choking them down, then someone downed one too many and lit a Roman candle inside the club. Hubert was onstage in his Uncle Sam suit at the time, and the rocket hit him in his top hat. The doctors said the hat saved his life. It slowed the candle and held it to two inches of cranial penetration. Hubert spun around spewing sparks and blood. Fortunately the candle didn't explode, but sparks set the Uncle Sam suit on fire. The bar's patrons put out the flames with Old Gories and vomit. It took a surgeon more than an hour to remove the melted suit. He said that cutting away the polyester made him feel like he was opening a red, white and blue cocoon.

"What do you think, Ellie?"

"Huh?"

Hubert was standing in front of her.

"My first joke, after the fag warning. I think I'll do the one about the mailman. You know, where I say he tells me he thinks old man Spungin down the road is a fag. He humped his leg when he was delivering a letter. And I say, 'Spungin's not a fag, but he's going blind. He must've humped you by mistake.' And the mailman says, 'So he didn't see me wink?'"

Ellie smiled. "Yes, dear. Open with that one."

Hubert gave her a thumbs-up and went back to pacing.

Ellie looked at the table she could see from backstage, the one with the bearded woman and the man in a dress, and she wondered how America could have changed so much since 1976. Back then men were men and women were women, and the country was drenched in red, white and blue. Now there were dozens of listed genders and everywhere you looked you saw rainbows celebrating Gay Pride.

And transgenderism. Mustn't forget to celebrate that. Just recently Ellie heard a man on a podcast say that it was destined to become a religion. He compared it to Buddhism because neither has a god; they're both just collections of beliefs. And someday, since Buddhism has been recognized as a religion by the American legal system, the transgenderists will demand the same recognition. They'll get it too, and the new religion will spread like wildfire. Most churches set aside just two or three hours a week for reflection and education, but the public school system bombards students with transgenderist propaganda all week long.

"Hey, what do you think?"

Hubert was holding his open hands to the sides of his head. He flapped them and bugged his eyes.

"Your fish jokes," Ellie smiled.

"Yeah. I'll do this one." Hubert crouched and tilted his head so he was looking up. "Hey, Cedric, have you seen those new fishing lures that look like dog turds?" He straightened up and faced the other way, looking down. "I've seen them. Fishermen must have a pretty low opinion of us. They think we're dumb enough to go for phony gourmet food."

Ellie smiled and Hubert resumed his pacing. She remembered when he came up with the fishing lure joke. The turd was originally a used tampon, but he thought that was too racy and asked her what he should change it to. He said it needed to be the grossest thing she could think of, so she suggested the dog turd. But would she do the same today, or would she suggest tumor meat?

She'd gagged when she first learned that she may have eaten the meat without knowing. A magazine article she read described how climate alarmists developed a way to grow beef and pork in laboratories. They wanted to reduce the amount of methane released into the atmosphere by livestock. Investment groups looked at the lab process but decided against putting money into it. They said that mass production wouldn't be profitable. So somebody suggested using tumor cells, which grow fast and don't need many nutrients. Cheap and fast got the moneymen onboard, and they began building meat farms. At last count more than a hundred million tons of tumor meat had been dumped into the world's food supply.

The article would have been disturbing enough if it had ended there, but the writer went on to ask where the tumor cells came from. No one knew. Were they malignant or benign? And could they be human? In its closing paragraph the article asked if the people who run the world were secretly forcing cancer and cannibalism on the public.

"Hey," Hubert said, "What about this one?" He adopted a casual stage stance and said, "A buddy of mine smokes that wacky tobacky. You know, that 'tard in a stick. And the last time I saw him he said, 'Wow, I'm a bird. Wow, I'm a galaxy.' So I told him to give up the drugs. They'll only lead to a life of shame and degradation. And he said, 'Wow, I'm going to be a Democrat.'"

Hubert watched for Ellie's reaction, and she almost said he should change Democrat to Republican, to play to the audience, but no, she'd stick to her plan about not censoring. Let him learn the hard way how the so-called progressives in America were trying to shut down free speech. Let the people he was about to face give him a taste of the angry new world he'd awakened into. Once his shock passed she'd start explaining to him how society had changed.

Maybe the update would be less traumatic over their sirloins. While

he was onstage she'd do a phone search and try to find a restaurant where they could get a couple of steak dinners for under a hundred dollars. Hubert's ten-dollar memory might pay for the tip. With luck she'd find a place that wouldn't have a bunch of testosterone-injected vegan women blocking the entrance. They liked to show their concern for people by assaulting the ones who disagreed with them.

The comic had left the stage without any applause. Ellie didn't know he was gone until she heard a different voice come over the PA. She looked at the mike stand and saw a lanky young guy standing at it. He had shaggy hair, three inches of underwear showing above a rainbow belt, and he held a clipboard.

"And now," he said, studying the board, "we have... Says here we have a funnyman named Jokes McFadden." He looked in Ellie and Hubert's direction. "You ready?"

Hubert had stopped pacing and stood quiet, head bowed. He was preparing himself the way he always did before he made an entrance. Ellie gave him a couple of seconds and then she said, "Make 'em laugh, Jokes."

Just like old times he popped to life and jogged out onto the stage. He beamed a smile and waved with both hands as he approached the mike. When he reached it he said, "Thank you! Thank you!" even though no one had applauded. He tugged at his shirt collar and launched into his act. "First of all, I want to apologize to any faggots out there."

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The Painstakers

Deezak Vir awoke facing Vivv Nazlock on a cadaver mound. Half of Vivv's head had been cleaved away. Deezak stared at the remaining gold eye beneath its blue-scaled lid and hoped his friend had died a proper warrior's death.

Slowly, Deezak went about checking himself for damage. He flexed and probed. He was missing a heel talon but all his other parts seemed to be there and working. He spread his jaws and flicked his tongue. It felt as if it had been dragged through sand.

He wondered how he came to be on the mound. His drinking companions must have thrown him there as a joke. No telling how much ferm he'd swilled before he passed out. He flicked his tongue again and salivated, thinking of the fermented blood that gave him the desire to fight

but robbed him of the ability. He was lucky to be alive.

He slipped and fell to the ground as he was climbing down from the mound. When he got both feet under him he wobbled slightly, so he snapped his tail out from between his legs and whipped it around seeking balance. It took a moment but he finally steadied himself.

The blade side of his body felt light and he realized his sword was missing. Fortunately he saw it among the cadavers. He pulled it free and returned it to the scabbard that hung from his belt. The belt and scabbard were all he wore.

He tested a loose tooth with his tongue and looked around. From the blood red gloom he judged it was close to noon. The pyramid of the union hall still stood in the distance, showing that the world had survived the shaking he gave it the night before. He decided to take up the shaking where he'd left off and headed back to the saloon.

Two of his drinking companions were still there. They laughed when they saw him stumble in through the open side of the building. He dropped into a chair at their table.

"We thought you were dead!" Kkgrivv Venir snorted. "You looked so peaceful on that mound."

Zivlak Gaul said, "Maybe you shouldn't drink so much, hatchling."

"Sss the only way I can stand you," Deezak hissed.

He signaled for a horn of ferm and the waiter rushed one over. He knew that if he was slow his blood would be vatted, and after it fermented he'd serve the customers in a far different way.

Deezak drank and his companions told stories. Kkgrivv Venir told about the time he cut five warriors in half with one swing of his sword. The night before it had been four. Then Zivlak Gaul told about his first painstaking job. "I took the pain for a human who was a car mechanic and a sadomasochist." Deezak said he didn't know what a sadomasochist was. Zivlak explained and then said he was glad when the man finally used his wrench to loosen his nuts rather than tighten them.

A whiff of doubt hung over the table at the end of the story. Zivlak sensed it with a flick of his tongue, and he drew his sword as he sprang to his feet. He swung at Deezak, who ducked out of the way, then he took aim at Kkgrivv Venir. But the old warrior was ahead of him. His blade flashed and Zivlak's hand fell to the ground. The hand still gripped the sword.

"Blast you!" Zivlak roared. He stepped back and held his arm up. The stump pumped blood. A waiter ran over with one of the tourniquets they carried for such occasions. After he tied the arm off Zivlak swatted him away and shook his stump at Kkgrivv Venir. "It'll take a full cycle for this to

grow back!"

Kkgriv had already sheathed his sword and taken a drink from his horn of ferm. "So what?" he belched. "For a cycle you won't be able to make trouble. I did you a favor. No, two favors. By rights the severed hand belongs to me, but I'll let you keep it." The quills on the back of Zivlak's neck bristled up and dripped rage. Kkgriv flicked his tongue and said, "Now now. Putting out scent like that is dangerous for someone with no sword hand. Calm down and finish your horn."

Zivlak muttered as he bent down and pried the talons from the hilt of his sword. He put the weapon back in its scabbard with difficulty and stuffed the hand in his belt. Then he sat and reached for his ferm with his missing hand, muttered again, and used the other.

Deezak went to the bar. He got a fresh horn, but then rather than return to the table he walked to the edge of the saloon and looked out over the Fireswept Plain.

They said the plain was the site of Moloch's first victory over the old gods. It was broad and flat and its red sands stretched to black mountains in the distance. The three-sided pyramid of the union hall looked huge even from five thousand body spans away. The pyramid was dull black stone on the outside, but inside it was magnificent. Three massive mosaics tilted together and rose to disappear in the smoke from the sacred pyre that always burned in the middle of the floor.

The expanse in front of the union hall was thick with warriors going about their business. They moved between campfires, saloons and the big, squat rivik plants. Each plant had a three-petalled purple blossom at its center and a lamp pole beside it.

Deezak turned his attention to the announcement board near the pyramid. It was dead black at the moment but could spark to life at any time. The board was broad and tall. Its support columns boosted it to half the height of the pyramid so that warriors for thousands of spans could see it when it lit up with job offerings. Each face of the pyramid had its own board, and the three showed different jobs at different times. All through the day the plain rumbled with periodic stampedes, first here, then there, then there.

Old timers said that the boards used to be a lot busier before humans developed so many medicines. Painstaking work was abundant, and warriors used to walk around with their tails held high. Now they walked with tails dragging through the sand or tucked between their legs.

But some of the more important warriors still moved with the ancient dignity. Or so Deezak had heard. He'd never actually seen anyone of real

importance because they never visited the plain, but he knew that warriors like Azazel and Beelzebub had grown quite wealthy taking the pain of the powerful.

Deezak's stomach growled. The last time he'd eaten was two days before, when he stumbled across a clutch of eggs that was hatching out behind the saloon. He ate two of the newborns and traded the third for a blade sharpening. He would search for another clutch later, but first he needed more ferm.

He returned to his table and found his drinking companions sullen, probably from the hand incident. A waiter brought him a horn, and when he lifted it to drink he saw past it to a flicker on the announcement board.

He stood up and watched as sparks began to form into words. He saw the word "cancer" and took off running.

As he ran he split his attention between the board and the plain around him. From the board he learned that three painstaking jobs had become available—two cancers and an anxiety attack. He didn't care about the low-paying anxiety job, but with one of the cancers he could pay his bills for a full cycle and go on a hell of a binge.

Once he knew what the jobs were he began to scan the rivik plants. The lamp poles next to the ones where the applicants would be chosen would light red for the cancer jobs and blue for the lesser one. The ground rumbled beneath his feet. A thousand other warriors had joined him in running. None of them knew which poles would light up, but they wanted to be in motion, on their way in some direction rather than just standing still. A haze of red dust rose to Deezak's knees and then to his waist.

And then one of the pole lights flashed on. Deezak ran for the distant point of red. He was determined to claim one of the three petals available in the rivik blossom, but long before he got there the light went out. Then another came on, another red one. Deezak changed course. He ran hard but once again the light was too far away and blinked off before he could reach it. The third light, however, was nearby. A pole just a few paces from Deezak lit blue and he dove for one of the petals in the blossom. He butted heads with another warrior who was diving in, and the other fell to the ground. Deezak dropped into the cup of the petal and became the plant's third warrior. The light on its pole went out.

The rushing around on the plain turned into milling and the warriors who'd failed to secure a petal drifted back to whatever they'd been doing. The dust began to settle. Some fights broke out here and there but were quickly over. The warrior that Deezak headbutted got to his feet and staggered off promising to descale him if they ever met again.

Deezak looked at the other two warriors in the blossom. When the blue light came on again the three of them would lunge at one another and swing their swords until only one remained alive. The survivor would pass out, instantly transported into the consciousness of the human needing relief from pain. Priests would carry the body of the enthralled painstaker into the union hall.

It was usually a few ticks before the lights on the poles lit up again to signal combat. Deezak had been through the process a half-dozen times and knew it was a good idea to relax before you fought. If you were too tense you might commit yourself to a strike that would present a target for your opponents. It was best to lag a little and adjust your attack as a counter to what the others did.

Deezak had been wounded twice in his blossom fights. Both times the priests in the hall tended to his wounds as he lay communing with his human. Sometimes warriors died from their injuries while they communed, and those deaths were recorded in the hall's records. Occasionally though a warrior would disappear. He'd enter the hall enthralled and then just vanish. Whenever that happened a rumor would go around that he had been selected to work with one of the more important humans, like someone from the Bush or Clinton families. And lately there was Biden, a new name somehow connected to the Obamas.

Most warriors had never associated with powerful humans. They worked with common people who, for some unknown reason, had been deemed worthy of painstaking. But saloon talk and idle speculation attributed the disappearance of the warriors to powerful people buying extra services. They needed additional protection from pain so that they would never be able to relate to it. Otherwise they might not be willing to inflict harsh measures on those they ruled.

Whatever the case with the powerful, Deezak was thankful for the anxiety job. He didn't look forward to it—dank little minds with dank little pains bored him—but he took comfort in knowing that the anxiety would pay some bills and buy a horn or two of ferm.

The blue light flashed on and the other warriors moved. Deezak reacted. He sprang from his petal, and with a strong upward slash of his sword he gutted the first warrior. Then with a hiss and a backhand he removed the head of the second. And then he fainted.

It felt like something was entering her, something vibrating up through the floor of the big empty bathroom. First her sandals and the soles of her feet tingled, then her calves, and then she thought it must be an

earthquake. She'd been through several since she came to California two years before. She looked around at the graffitied toilet stall and knew it wouldn't provide any protection if things began to fall. The solidly framed entrance to the bathroom was the place to be, so she finished up and stood to pull up her panties. But then as she let the hem of her shift fall the tremor passed. She waited, listening. There were no raised voices coming from the meeting hall. The quake must have been a small one.

Gretchen flushed the commode and sat down again on its ring seat. The tremor should have made her feel more anxious, but for some reason she felt less. Still though she wanted her chip. Her purse hung from a hook beside her, and she dug through it until she found the big white coin stamped "1 Year." She rubbed it between a thumb and forefinger. She'd been clean for one year, two weeks and six days. Naturally she was glad, but some of the people in the support group had been clean for years and still called themselves addicts. Shouldn't there be a point where you no longer had to count time and feel guilty?

The chip fell from her hand. It rolled out the front of the stall and she opened the door and watched it bounce across the grimy tile floor. It almost made it to the sinks on the opposite wall before it tipped and fell.

She went to retrieve the chip, and when she straightened up she saw herself in the long mirror above the lavatory counter. Beyond the streaks and water spots she looked pale and emaciated. Her thin brown hair hung to her shoulders and her shift hid coffee stains in a heavy jungle pattern. In addition to the shift she wore a brown sweater with long sleeves. No matter how badly people thought of her for the way she dressed, they'd think even worse if they saw her arms.

She leaned close to the mirror and turned her head slightly, to study the wrinkles spreading from an eye. They were lengthening across the temple. She was only twenty-six but it wasn't the age, it was the mileage. She heard that a lot in the group meetings. The wrinkles were growing longer and spreading through bifurcation. She chuckled. Bifurcation, a five-dollar word. That's what they'd say if she used it in a meeting, and she'd say that her time at college hadn't been wasted even though she was wasted most of the time. She experimented with weed and wine as a freshman and tried crack as a sophomore. And then heroin. Then she quit going to class.

Her arms and legs began to itch. She went to her purse and got a cigarette. She started to light it but hesitated. It had been three days since she'd added smoking to her list of things to give up. She should have quit long ago. She flushed the cigarette down the commode.

She paced back and forth in front of the lavatory counter and fingered

her chip. Just over a year earlier she'd been arrested in an alley. Luckily for her somebody stole her stash while she was nodded out, so she was only charged with public intoxication and not possession. The court sentenced her to the meetings and routine drug testing.

At first she was angry, and she felt like her head would explode from the lack of drugs, but gradually her thoughts began to settle and clear. And she got to where she liked the structure of the meetings. The routine of being in a certain place at a certain time gave her something to hold onto.

She stopped pacing and turned the water on in a sink. As she watched it swirl down the drain she thought of her mother and how she'd lectured her on the importance of routines just before she disowned her. "The two main purposes of college," she'd said, "are to show young people how to schedule their time and how to come prepared. And obviously, young lady, you failed to learn either lesson." Following the lecture she told Gretchen to get a job and make her own way in the world. She couldn't wait to be rid of her only child's long history of anger and self-abuse. Fortunately her father wasn't so callous. He still kept in touch with an occasional phone call and made a small monthly deposit to her bank account. The money would continue, he said, as long as she didn't do "that other stuff." He couldn't even bring himself to talk about the drugs.

But the people in group didn't mind talking about them. Gretchen turned the water off and rubbed the inside of a forearm. Some of the toothless old junkies at the meetings loved to prattle on about the awful things they used to do. A lot of the talk sounded like boasting rather than remorse, but she tried not to judge. And she tried not to be envious. One of the group members had nearly twelve years sobriety, and another had ten. Cody had one year, five months and four days.

A sense of peace came over her when she thought of Cody. He was studying for a test and couldn't make the meeting that night, but she'd see him tomorrow.

He was only twenty-two and sometimes the difference in their ages made her feel like she was taking advantage of a child. Not that he acted like one. Just the opposite. After he was arrested for public intoxication a third time he took control of his life. He was a high school dropout with no skills, so he enrolled in a trade school to learn heating and air conditioning. "And when I graduate," he liked to say, "the sky's the limit."

He was so optimistic that it was infectious, and Gretchen saw herself smiling in the mirror. Then she saw her wrinkles and the smile died. How could Cody be attracted to her? They'd been dating for three months, but still every time she thought about him she wondered when he would wake

up and see her for what she really was. The lines on her face weren't wrinkles so much as cracks in her character, fissures that ran to a core of corruption. She was unworthy of anything but scorn, and Cody would realize that when she fully opened up to him. She'd told him about the drugs and the things she'd done to earn them in the bathrooms at the clubs, and he accepted that, but she hadn't told him about the two abortions. He was too young to understand what she'd gone through—the hormones, the social pressure, the muddled thinking. She didn't know how to explain all of that to him, but she needed to find a way. He deserved to know.

She went to her purse and got another cigarette. She lit it but only took one drag before she thought what am I doing and flushed it. Then she flushed the whole pack.

Her arms and legs itched again. For a moment she thought she felt another tremor vibrating the floor, but that wasn't it. Something else was going on. Tears welled up from nowhere, filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks. She wanted to cut herself. She dug through her purse and took out the knife. Her fingers closed around its handle so hard she heard a knuckle pop.

But she didn't hear the door to the stall open. The tap on the shoulder startled her and she spun around holding the knife up defensively.

"Bless me," Sushee said. She was Gretchen's sponsor, a huge sweet-natured black woman. "Put that away, girl." Gretchen returned the knife to her purse and Sushee said, "It looks like you're havin' a bad time." Gretchen nodded as she wiped away tears with the back of a wrist. Sushee reached out and patted a shoulder. "Well, I heard you flush the john two times and figured you was either in distress or workin' for Taco Bell."

"What? I don't understand."

Sushee pointed to a wall of the stall, to some graffiti that said "Flush twice. It's a long way to Taco Bell," and she laughed her deep, rich laugh.

Gretchen couldn't even summon a smile. Her arms itched and the spaces between her toes throbbed. That's where she used to shoot up, between her toes. In the right light she could still see some of the track marks. But that was an old secret, kept with the abortions and the club parties and the other dark things attached to her old life. There were a thousand dark secrets, so many that she was surprised she had room for a new one. A terrible one.

"Come on, hon," Sushee said, turning away. "Let's get back to the meeting."

Gretchen grabbed her purse and followed.

Deezak awoke on the stone floor of the union hall. He was stretched out on his back and looking up at the three vast mosaics that leaned in to one another above. Their red, black and gold tiles depicted battle scenes from the past down low, and it was said that they showed the future up where they were eternally shrouded in smoke.

A voice spoke through the earphones that pinched his head. The priests put the phones on you when you were brought into the hall to lie enthralled. The voice said, "And the same nanotechnology that's being injected into humans will be used to control plant cells. It will alter the process of photosynthesis. Plants will be programmed to produce other things besides oxygen and sucrose. Cyanide, for example."

Deezak ran his hands over his body but could feel no injuries from the blossom fight. He was stiff though. He turned his head with difficulty and saw the massive pyre of burning bodies in the middle of the floor. Countless others like him were laid out around it. Priests moved here and there, tending to the warriors who were communing with their humans. Deezak's was a female. She was a nervous thing but asleep at the moment.

He closed his eyes and hoped to sleep as well, but he knew he wouldn't with the voice in his ears. He wasn't sure but he thought it was the same lecture he'd heard the last time he was in the hall.

"...and few will ever be aware of the cellular manipulation. The primary function of human government now is to deny the existence of advanced technologies that are being used to depopulate the world. Even doctors are kept ignorant, so that they'll be unable to treat the new medical problems arising from the use of the technologies. People must be eliminated. Computers can now outperform them intellectually, and the number of humans must be reduced to prevent the possibility of rebellion."

Deezak couldn't imagine the human he currently inhabited, the one called Gretchen, rebelling. She was stupid and weak. The scars on her arms told him that others of his kind had been inside her, nibbling at her petty pains and pushing her to self-mutilate so that they could feed more deeply. He'd do the same even though it was against union rules. He'd seen her dirty little secret—the track marks between her toes—and maybe he'd drive her back to drugs to renew the pain they cause. Plus there was her other secret, the new one. He didn't know yet how he would exploit it but he would. Humans often thought of warriors as demons, and he would make her think that she was demon possessed.

A chorus of raw-throated battle cries erupted in the earphones. Deezak gripped the hilt of his sword, but then a voice bellowed, "Drink Xarnok's Ferm, if you can handle it!" He'd forgotten about the annoying

commercials.

He relaxed and reached out to his human, but she was still asleep. He slept too, a drowsy half-sleep. The lecture talked about the stars so that's what he half-dreamed of. He'd heard stories about space travel ever since he hatched from his clutch. His ancestors used to fight with others of their kind between star systems, but then their ship was shot down over earth. Humans witnessed the battle and recorded what they saw on clay tablets. Some of the tablets still existed but were locked away in museums. The arrival of Deezak's race on earth had become the stuff of legends and folk tales.

The warriors' ship was destroyed, but they knew that their enemies would continue to look for them, so they erected an interdimensional veil as cover. It hid them from those above and also from their new neighbors, the humans. But humans were inquisitive, and eventually they developed ways to see through the veil. The warriors were impressed by their cleverness and came up with a plan to put it to use. They knew they'd never be able to replace the ship they'd lost, but the humans—with their fresh ideas, some genetic enhancements and time to experiment—the humans might be able to devise some other form of space travel. So the warriors made the enhancements and then settled in for a long wait.

Boredom became a problem. To amuse themselves they fought, and when killing one another grew tiresome they began to explore beyond the veil. That turned ugly and the elders established rules for contact with humans. One of the rules was that warriors could no longer pass through the veil in their own bodies; they could only enter the human world by coupling with a human's consciousness.

Out of that grew the painstaking system and the union. And a return of boredom, until the Cern rush. Deezak stirred in his shallow half-sleep, remembering how he'd been cheated. The humans built a machine called a supercollider. It was located in Cern, Switzerland, and when it was first turned on it created a vast, temporary rent in the interdimensional veil. The elders allowed a horde of warriors to pass through the rent and take up residence in human bodies. Deezak couldn't go because he was doing a painstaking job at the time, a hemorrhoid job. He was still mad at the elders for not notifying all warriors in advance about the Cern opening. The powerful were told, and they'd chosen friends and family to cross over. And now the chosen ones were having fun wreaking havoc on human society. While Deezak scavenged for toothache and buttache work, many of those who crossed over were rioting and looting and killing. Others had turned their commandeered humans into prostitutes. Even those who'd landed in

the bodies of judges were having fun, adding to the world's mayhem by releasing violent criminals from prison as fast as they could.

At first this mayhem meant a lot of additional painstaking work for the warriors who'd been left behind. Anxiety and mental distress jobs were everywhere, but then people became accustomed to the distress. Cruelty and criminality came to be expected, and as often as not now the lack of bad news caused mental anguish. Humans had been conditioned to expect the worst.

Deezak heard something and opened his eyes to see priests throw a couple of bodies onto the pyre. The flames rose higher, and the mosaics on the walls seemed to move. One of them showed his ancestors fighting beside their fallen ship. They wore red suits and their horned helmets shot golden lightning into the sky. The glittering bolts disappeared in the smoke that was cupped above.

The lecturing voice had been silent for a few ticks, but it resumed and said, "The humans' leaders plan to fan out across the galaxy. They've already built spacecraft for that purpose, but before they use them they want to achieve immortality. And they believe they're on the verge of doing so by transferring their consciousness into machines. We are their partners in this enterprise. They know that none of their advances would have been possible without our help, so they want to repay us by letting us travel with them. That's the reason for the Cern project. The humans intend to let vast numbers of us through the veil so that we can help them flood the universe with immortal consciousness. And you will all be part of the flood, warriors. Those who miss the first launch will follow in the second, or the third or others. And together we will rise in waves to once again traverse the spaceways."

Heroic music had begun near the end of the pep talk. Deezak assumed it was meant to generate an emotional response, and it did, with its deep, dark chords swelling to a full-throated battle cry. He felt pride in his race's achievements, in their struggles to... "Drink Xarnok's Ferm, if you can handle it!"

"Ssssszzz!" Deezak hissed. He scraped the earphones off his head and started to rise, but then he settled back and thought about the pep talk. In the saloons where he drank, he and others often wondered if the stuff about the later waves was a lie. Why would the warriors who'd escaped give a damn about those who hadn't crossed over? They wouldn't. The wave talk was probably meant to get the stay-behinds to behave.

Deezak felt the quills on the back of his neck push against the floor. He wanted to lash out but had to restrain himself in the presence of the

priests. But he could vent his anger on his human, and he willed her to wake as he was enveloped in hate scent.

Gretchen lurched out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom. The apartment was small so it wasn't far. She slapped the light on, fell to her knees at the commode and dry heaved. She wanted heroin. The skin between her toes tingled, begging for the touch of the needle.

She thought back over her life as a junkie and wondered how many times she'd skinned her knees puking into commodes. Dozens? Hundreds? It was like something didn't want her to be happy, as if some force of nature or supernatural force kept pushing her down.

She went back to her bed and sat on the edge of it, in the light from the bathroom. She thought about calling Sushee but it was too early.

Her stomach growled. She went to the kitchenette but didn't see anything in the fridge that appealed to her. Her stomach churned into a knot. It had been acting funny ever since the meeting the day before. Maybe it was morning sickness. That would account for the urge to vomit. She'd had morning sickness during one of her other pregnancies, and this time... Cody. She'd known she was pregnant for three days but still hadn't told him. What would he say?

She grabbed a butcher knife from a drawer and returned to the bedroom, to the edge of the bed. She sat dragging the back of the knife's blade across the inside of a forearm. The bumping of the blade over the ridges of the scars felt good. It scratched an itch, and as she scratched she thought how easy it would be to flip the blade. A quick cut, then peace. For a few moments at least. She remembered the times she'd cut herself, the feeling, like lancing a boil to relieve the pressure. Or like what barbers used to do with bloodletting. That must have made a difference or people wouldn't have done it. She dragged the blade up and down her arm and thought of barbers stropping straight razors. What did they do with the blood they drained? She pictured buckets of it slopped to hogs, horns of it raised in red-skied rituals.

Her phone buzzed on the bedside table and snapped her back from whatever dark place she'd gone to. It was probably Sushee calling. She had a knack for knowing when Gretchen needed an intervention.

She laid the knife on the table and looked at the phone. It was Cody, which surprised her. He normally didn't call so early. She put him on the speaker and left the phone where it was.

"Hi," he said softly.

Gretchen smiled.

"Hi."

"Did I wake you up?"

"No. Are you studying for your test?"

"Yeah, and I think I'm ready. I hope so."

"You are. They won't ask you anything that you haven't studied, so if you think you don't know something, well, you do. Just dig through your memory until you find it."

She knew she was mothering him, but it made her feel good to give calming advice that calmed her in the giving. Mothering. The word reminded her of the baby inside her. Her arms itched and she rubbed the scars. Did she have scars inside from where they cut up the other babies? She started to tell Cody about the abortions but choked back the urge so she wouldn't distract him before his test. She imagined a scalpel cutting up her baby, her new one. It wasn't like it was a big deal. She'd done it before. It wasn't a big deal.

"What's wrong, Gretch?" She'd made a sound in her throat while Cody was talking about school. It was a small sound but he heard. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She sniffled and felt a tear run down a cheek.

"But it sounds like you're crying. What's wrong?"

"There's...something I need to tell you, but it can wait."

"No. Tell me now. You're scaring me."

"Well, I... I... All right. I should have told you before. It's bad, Cody. I hope you'll under..." He wouldn't understand. How could he? But he needed to know. "I've had two abortions."

The words sounded awful. In the silence after speaking they hung like body parts from the lives that Gretchen had denied. She picked up the knife from the bedside table. Blood pounded through her head and she wanted to scream, but then Cody said, "I love you, Gretch. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Her pulse eased down. She took a deep breath and said, "Love me? Do you really?" He said yes and then something else that she didn't hear because the pounding returned. Her head filled with it and she felt the churning in her belly. She held the knife so the blade was touching her stomach and pointing in. Some force urged her to push but she fought it and then she heard herself say, "The thing is, I have to do it again. I have to get another abortion."

She didn't know how long she sat there, tensed, ears pounding, but then she blurted, "It's yours!" remembering the other times, the two guys looking trapped when she told them, stammering as they tried to think of a way out.

"Of course it's mine," Cody said softly. "You must've got pregnant the second time we slept together. Remember? I told you I felt a spark."

Gretchen heard herself screech, "You're the only one I'm sleeping with!" It seemed that a hand was clutching her throat and milking her for hysterical words. "You have to help me! The other guys never..." She choked. The others disappeared once they learned about the pregnancies.

"Of course I'll help you," Cody soothed. "I'll always help you."

Why was he being so nice to her, after all the bad things she'd done, the person she was? She blinked and realized the knife and the hand that held it to her belly were wet with tears.

"What do you mean, you'll always help me?"

"I mean I'll always be there for you, and the baby. That's what a husband does."

She was stunned. Her hand fell to her lap.

"You mean you... You want us to get..."

She couldn't finish, afraid to put hope into words. Cody finished.

"I want us to get married, Gretch. More than anything in the world."

Deezak Vir rose from the depths of his communing with words sounding in his head. Marriage, family... Something shifted inside him. He sat up and rubbed his stomach. The shift came again and he realized it was the lump that his human carried within her. The feeling of it still weighed heavy in his gut, but it was no longer cold. It was warming under the caress of the woman's thoughts. "Acceptance," she whispered, "family," and then she pictured herself holding a baby. The warmth exploded into a blaze. Fire shot through Deezak's veins. He supposed it was what humans called love, and to his surprise it felt good.

He turned his face to a passing priest, who stopped and flicked his tongue. "You're possessed," he hissed. Deezak didn't see the blade that cut his throat.

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Chinkapin Park (A Dan Smoot Story)

"He seems peaceful enough," Jan said.

She was talking about the old man we'd picked up. We brought him to my house and he was in the back yard. Jan and I were at the sliding glass door looking out at him.

He was running a hand over one of the limestone blocks I'd scattered among the acre or so of oaks. The blocks are called butter sticks because that's what they look like. They're about five feet long and two feet high and wide. I'd put them in the yard for decoration and to serve as benches.

"I don't want to call the law yet," I said to Jan. "I'll try to talk to him again."

"He won't talk. You saw his eyes. He has Alzheimer's."

We'd found him walking along a shoulder of the county road my house is on. It was a beautiful spring day and he was kicking through knee-high weeds and wildflowers. He looked as out of place as he could be. In a land of jeans and cowboy hats he was dressed in tan slacks and a long-sleeved paisley shirt. I slowed my truck and asked if he needed a ride, but he didn't answer. He just turned his vacant eyes toward us and stumbled a bit as he continued forward. So I pulled ahead, parked and got out to stop him. I checked for I.D. but he didn't have a wallet or a phone. Jan suggested we take him with us and decide what to do after lunch.

He was the first one out of the truck when I parked in front of the house. He headed to the back yard while Jan and I went inside and to the door.

"He won't talk," Jan said again, then she turned and went off to work her magic in the kitchen. "I imagine he's dehydrated," she called out over her shoulder.

I grabbed a bottle of water and stepped outside. The world was cloud-spotted blue overhead and bright green underfoot. I'd mowed the yard a couple days before and the smell of freshly cut grass still lingered.

The old man didn't seem to notice me as I approached. He'd settled onto one of the blocks and was blinking at the wild growth of mesquite and cactus that borders the yard on two sides. I stood a few feet away and studied him. He had a slim build and looked to be about eighty. His thin gray hair was neatly trimmed, which showed that somebody was taking care of him. I moved in close and bent down to look at his Alzheimer's eyes. To my surprise they were alert and fixed on mine.

"This is like a park," he said.

I jumped back, startled.

"What kind of trees are these?"

"They're, uh, Chinkapin oaks."

"They're young. Did you give them names when you planted them?"

"As a matter of fact..." I started to tell how I named them after old girlfriends, but I stopped myself when I thought of the FedEx delivery man.

He overheard me reminiscing about romance once, while I was watering Karen, and he still asks if I've had any good woodies lately.

"We thought you had Alzheimer's," I said, changing the subject.

"The dementia comes and goes, and it's not Alzheimer's. It's a prion disease caused by crystals from the Covid shots they gave the old guy. The disease is everywhere now but the news media won't report on it."

"Did you just refer to yourself as 'the old guy'?"

"Yes I did, Ed."

"How do you know my name?"

"Because you and I have met before."

"Really? I don't remember."

"The last time I saw you we talked about the Fabian Society."

"The Fabians? We never... Wait a minute. Are you Mr. Smoot?"

He nodded.

Dan Smoot had been a conservative political commentator during the Cold War. I have several bound volumes of his newsletters from the 1960s. He'd operated out of Fort Worth but I met him in my house, twice, as a disembodied spirit.

"So you're a ghost with a body now?"

"I'm not sure. I woke up in Mr. Fairchild this morning, in a nursing home, and after breakfast I decided to take him out for a walk. He's stiff and I wanted to loosen him up. And I wanted to see you. So I hitched a couple of rides between demential episodes, and then you found me."

He stood up and stretched. His joints popped while the shadow of a small cloud slid across the yard. He walked to one of the oaks. "Amazing," he said, reaching up to touch a budding leaf. "God's handiwork." He looked at his bony hands. "I never thought I'd be inside a body again."

"But I thought you could see the future. You could when we talked before, so why didn't you see this coming?"

"I did, but it was just one of a thousand futures."

"I don't understand."

"God allows us to make choices, and each choice creates branching possibilities. I saw this future but didn't expect to experience it."

"Well, it's good to visit with you again. The last time we talked you convinced me to continue writing political stories. I think I've produced some good ones since then."

"I think so too. I still check on you from time to time, to make sure you're posting your pieces online. That's especially important right now. Webscraping programs are gathering data that will be used to shape

Artificial Intelligence, and the developers want AI to have a leftist slant. So they're banning conservatives from the internet."

There was movement at the back of the house. Jan waved through the door and held up five fingers. I waved back and she walked away.

"Five minutes to lunch," I said. "I'm sorry to rush you, Mr. Smoot, but why did you want to see me?"

"So I can tell you that something's coming. Something big. I wanted to let you know so you can write about it."

His voice had grown a little raspy. I gave him the bottle of water I'd brought with me and he drank. Then I asked what big thing was coming.

"Well, actually there are two things. Branching possibilities. And I want you to know about both."

A butterfly landed on one of his hands. He studied it until it fluttered away, and then he let out a heavy sigh. "The most fundamental American right is the right to be left alone, but that will soon be a thing of the past."

He walked to a limestone block and sat. I followed and waited for him to continue, but he just stared at the ground. I wondered if he'd slipped back into dementia.

"Are you still there, Mr. Smoot?"

"Yes. I'm just organizing my thoughts." He sighed again and looked up at me. "America has always been a problem for globalist politicians. They can't take over the world with us in the way, so they've replaced our government with a system they can control. Corporations and unelected bureaucracies now run the country. They've been busy too. At the moment they're rushing foreign troops across Biden's open border. Soon those troops will be in position to attack. I can't say exactly when the attack will occur, but the day will begin like any other. Once the country has settled down to a morning of business as usual, gunmen will open fire from coast to coast. Their primary targets will be schools and transportation hubs. Other troops will poison air circulation systems and detonate radioactive dirty bombs. Thousands will die. Most of the nation's power grid will be knocked out too, along with the telecommunications networks. The only contact the average American will have with the rest of the world will be emergency radio saying to stay home until the authorities can restore order. Then after a while you'll be told that the terrorists were able to work undetected because the government couldn't monitor their spending. The fix for the problem will be a digital currency to replace cash. Americans will embrace the new monetary system and from then on you'll be required to have a GPS tracking device on you whenever you leave home. If you refuse to carry one you'll be

locked out of your bank account and your property will be seized. You'll die broke and alone because no one will help you, for fear of sharing your fate."

I said, "Damn," but Smoot didn't seem to hear. His gaze had drifted to the mesquite brush in the distance. He said, "The U.S. Constitution is the flowering of more than two thousand years of western political progress. A string of democracies and republics leads from ancient Greece to America. The earlier systems tipped and fell like dominos, and now it's our turn. The biggest and strongest has been left for last. It will be a great tragedy when we fall, a tragedy for both the country and the world." A shadow from a passing cloud blocked the sun. The yard darkened slightly and Smoot said, "Demonic forces are about to topple civilization, and our descendants will never know the blessings of freedom."

I blinked, and the old man was back at the tree.

A butterfly landed on one of his hands. He studied it until it fluttered away, and then he let out a heavy sigh. "The most fundamental American right is the right to be left alone, but that will soon be a thing of the past."

He walked to a limestone block and sat. I followed and waited for him to continue, but he just stared at the ground. I wondered if he'd slipped back into dementia.

"Are you still there, Mr. Smoot?"

"Yes. Just organizing my thoughts, Ed. And I regret to report that the globalists are going to wreck the world's economy." He looked at me and shrugged. "It's too late to stop it. Humanity will soon pitch headlong into a bloody downward spiral, but the good news is that the bad times won't last forever."

"They won't?"

"No. The U.S. Constitution will come to the rescue."

"You've always been a big supporter of the Constitution."

"Of course. It was a gift from God. Jesus wants us to follow Him, but we must make a conscious decision to follow. So by giving us the Constitution God made sure we'd have a country where we could make that decision in peace. We were doing fairly well too, as a Christian nation, until the globalists hijacked our infrastructure and dragged us into World War One. Since then we've been used to overthrow foreign governments, install dictators, assassinate, bankrupt and plunder."

"But you think we can break free of them? The globalists?"

"Absolutely. First though America will have to admit that it's become a collectivist cesspool. That will be made painfully clear during the coming collapse, when critics of mob rule are put to the sword."

"So how will we bounce back?"

"By remembering that the Constitution is based on Christian respect for individual rights. A respect which, ironically enough, makes for the strongest collective of all. An army of thugs is no match for an army of true believers. And they'll rise up by the millions, the true believers. When America finally grows tired of being held captive by godless bullies, there will be a recommitment to Jesus Christ and a return to Constitutional law."

I thought of the people I saw everywhere, people with dull eyes glued to glowing palms. They craved diversion rather than salvation. I doubted that the country could save itself.

My thoughts must have shown on my face. Smoot said, "Have faith. The United States will recommit to Christ, and the second American Revolution will liberate the world."

Jan and I ate lunch on the back porch. We watched the old man move among the oaks and stones, and I thought about the two possibilities for the future. Smoot wanted me to write about them, but would it do any good? From what I could see America was a nation of people living separated from God and sleepwalking to the eternal separation that is hell. Could anything I say change that? Should I even bother to try? I had to make a decision.

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