

STOCKLETS

by Miracle Jones

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1. PANCAKE SPRING (\$TWTR)

Mandy did not learn that her granddad was dead from her family, from Facebook, from the police, from a witch, from a Wikipedia article, or from Jezebel. She learned about it from a representative of the International House of Pancakes, the company that Mandy's granddad Russell Irwin Fox started back in nineteen hundred and fifty eight, back when coffee cost a dime, back when Sputnik came crashing down to earth, back when Pope Pius XII declared Saint Clare the patron saint of television.

She was stoned and sitting cross-legged on the tiny concrete balcony of her apartment, smoking cigarettes and ashing into the same dead plant that was here when she moved in. She was staring at the storage closet at the opposite end of her balcony. The closet was painted a deep forest green. She didn't have a key for the storage closet: it was locked with a sizable deadbolt, and so therefore the closet gained mysterious, occult-like properties whenever she got high and found herself staring at it, listening to the shrieking summer cicadas, a noise which, when commingled with the ringing in her ears from her weed-pumping heart, made her feel like she was slowly merging with the universe and also slowly going insane. She liked to imagine that there was a Soviet nuclear bomb in there, something leftover and forgotten from the Reagan years, and the digital timer was slowly counting down to nul.

She was thinking about Kip and how things were not going well. It was politics: she was basically a punk and he was basically a fascist. Everybody seemed to think he was only pretending, but she was pretty sure that deep down in his gleaming steel heart, he was always wearing leather boots and kicking a baby in the face for The Future. They needed to break up, but she wasn't sure how. Their fucked-up sex life was regular, malignant, and satisfying. Also, she owed him four hundred dollars, a whole month's rent.

Her doorbell rang and she quickly put her cigarette out. She left the balcony, and stood in her bathroom in the dark. The doorbell kept ringing, interspersed now with intermittent knocking.

“Amanda? Amanda Fox?” shouted a British man, definitely not her landlord. “I am with the International House of Pancakes, Amanda, and I really need to talk to you about your grandfather. If you are at home, please answer the door. I am only going to be in Austin for three more days.”

She sighed, flushed the toilet so she would seem not-crazy, and put on a sweatshirt.

“I will come back tomorrow,” he said. “I am leaving my card, and—”

“No, no,” she said, unlocking the door and opening it right as the toilet crescendoed. “I’m here.”

He stood there on her doorstep, wearing a full business suit even though he was soaked in sweat. He was thin and round-faced and pale and bespectacled and there was a corona of acne covering his hairline, where his hair gel mixed with his sweat and flesh juices. He was holding a glass vase full of white flowers.

“Aha,” he said. “Sorry about the yelling, but I came by yesterday and the day before, and there wasn’t anybody home and you don’t seem to ever answer your phone or check your email... and my job, my actual job right now, is to get in touch with you in order to give you a very alarming sum of money. I am here from our London office. It’s sort of a working vacation, you see. I mean, um, tragic circumstances and all. Sorry about the circumstances, first and foremost, above all else.”

He coughed into his hand.

“I don’t have a phone,” she said. “So I don’t know who you’ve actually been calling. And I barely check my email; I just have it to pay my electricity bill once a month. Sorry! What’s up? Who are you?”

“My name is Rory,” he said furtively. “Very nice to meet you. May I come in?”

She frowned, not really into this idea.

“I mean, it is a bit of a private matter, I’m afraid. Sort of a corporate thing, really. Can’t really speak about it where just anyone could hear. The money is real, I promise. Ha ha ha!”

He laughed as if somebody had just pointed a gun at him and said: laugh, motherfucker, laugh with your whole face.

He held the vase full of flowers out to her.

“Ah yes, and these are for you!” he said. “I’ve been buying fresh ones every day just in case, so they are fresh. I am very sorry for your loss.”

“My loss?”

He frowned, darkening.

“Yes, well,” he said. “I mean, perhaps you and your grandfather weren’t very close. I mean, I have heard that this is the case.”

“My granddad?”

He was silent.

“Oh Lord,” he said. “You don’t know then, do you? No one told you. I’m so sorry.”

She took the flowers from him, inferring the rest. She let the door swing open wider. She backed into her living room, and collapsed into a bean bag chair beside a massive plastic yellow table where she had been breaking up weed. She fished her pack of cigarettes out of her pants pocket.

The representative from IHOP tentatively crept into her apartment and then gently shut the door behind him.

“Sit,” she said.

He lowered himself into the other bean bag chair, his knees popping and his suit pants riding up so high she could see his pale skinny shins.

“I am going to smoke this cigarette,” she said before flicking her lighter.

“Yes, of course, go ahead,” he said.

“So what killed him?” she asked, lighting the cigarette. “Did he break his hip? Was it cancer?”

“I don’t actually know,” said Rory. “I mean, I work in the London office, usually, but I wanted a bit of a holiday and nobody else wanted to be about this particular business so I volunteered. This may sound strange, but I thought it might be kind of a lark.”

“Well, I hope you are having a great fucking vacation,” said Mandy. “Welcome to Texas. Our state flower is the bluebonnet. Our motto is ‘friendship.’”

Rory turned bright red. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a check which was folded neatly down the middle.

“This is for you, and then I have some papers for you to sign, if you don’t mind, and then I will be out of here and that will be that.”

Mandy looked at the check, frowning.

“This is a lot of money,” she said. “This is a life-changing amount of money.”

“Ha!” said Rory. “Yes, I’m sure it’s no true solace, but there it is. Something to have.”

“What’s the deal here? My granddad hated us. I think the last time I saw him, he wouldn’t stop talking about how I was going to grow up to be a phone sex prostitute. I was thirteen and he told my mom I needed to get spanked for texting at dinner. That was before he disowned her, back when we still lived in California. She was high. I wanted to be high. He was a horrible hateful old man.”

“Yes, actually, it’s a little bit funny, really. This money isn’t from his will, although it is related to your actual inheritance. Your actual inheritance is a particularly odd bit of intellectual property. Worthless to you; very valuable to us. This money represents an offer from the International House of Pancakes to...hmmmm...purchase something that’s been deeded to you, uh...perhaps in a not entirely kind or, rather, charitable way.”

Rory took two folders from his suitcase and set them on the yellow table, carefully moving the weed out of the way with the side of his hand. One folder was pink and one folder was blue.

“Deeded to me?”

“I guess, ha, it is a bit funny really, with what you said about his being concerned about your telephone usage and texting in your early years. He has actually deeded you the IHOP social media accounts, which we did not actually know that he had the rights to use and manage, but which were specifically enumerated to him several decades ago in a contract about computer game rights—OF ALL THINGS! CAN YOU IMAGINE AN IHOP COMPUTER GAME?—but which contract was never updated to reflect modern marketing needs. We were able to get in touch with Facebook and with Tumblr in order to have those accounts shut down and reopened, keeping our same followers and so on, but unfortunately the good people at Twitter have been exceedingly difficult about allowing us to exchange executorship and management without your express agreement. They have run into some trouble with this recently, it seems, with some early novelty accounts. So they want to keep everything to some kind of official legal standard, which is fine, just a bit annoying.”

“What are you saying? My granddad gave me the Twitter account to IHOP in his will?”

“Ha ha, yes, exactly that,” said Rory. “Perhaps it was intended to be some kind of chastisement or life lesson, but I assure you that it is worth a great deal to the International House of Pancakes. As our sum presented suggests, we are willing to compensate you quite adequately if you will just go ahead and deed the account right back over to us so we can continue posting deals, specials, news, and additions to our menu to our three and a half million followers who crave our daily IHOP updates and pancake-related jests.”

“Wait a second,” said Mandy. “You mean I have three million Twitter followers now?”

“Well, the International House of Pancakes does. But yes, I suppose you could say that, as a temporary and hilarious quirk of circumstance. Ha! It’s funny to think about. Now these papers stipulate that...”

“I don’t even have a smart phone.”

“Aha,” said Rory. “So you can see that such an account is very much useless to you, and vital to us, and so therefore this sum of money should exchange hands as soon as possible. We’ll just sign all the papers in this blue folder here and I will be on my way.”

“What’s in the pink folder?”

“Oh, that’s nothing, that’s just the account information which I am legally required to give to you, though the password will of course be changing once you take the money and sign these forms. Just a formality, really. Part of “Twitter law,” which is really quite fascinating. Gosh, I wish I had the time to explain it all.”

Mandy picked up the pink folder. Rory watched her, joggling his knees, not sure how bean bag chairs were supposed to make you

feel mellow, or how any human beings could tolerate these insane Texas temperatures.

“The password is MARIOKART6969,” said Mandy. “Come on, man. Really?”

“Yes, well, the way I hear it, one of our marketing interns set up the account back in 2006, and this has stayed sort of an inside joke.”

“What happens if I don’t take the money?” said Mandy.

“What a fun thing to think about,” said Rory. “In that case, we would of course be forced to set up a new account and people would slowly trickle over to us as soon as they realized they were no longer getting official information from the real International House of Pancakes. We would also be forced to file an injunction against you. If you ask around and consult with experts, you will discover that the amount we are offering is more than fair and reflects our wish to respect the only granddaughter of our founder.”

Mandy didn’t say anything. She carried the pink folder onto her balcony, lighting another cigarette.

“Let’s sit outside for a minute,” said Mandy. “I need to think.”

She opened up two lawn chairs and they sat in the heat, smoking as she leafed through the folder. The vase full of flowers was on the ground between them.

“This shit is pretty hilarious,” said Mandy. “This is like when that engineer in San Antonio willed all his porn accounts to charity when he died.”

Rory didn’t say anything. Sweat and oil covered him like latex, sealing his juices inside a slick and dripping membrane.

He closed his eyes in silence while she smoked and read.

“Let me see your phone,” she said finally. “You have a smart phone?”

He handed her his phone. She frowned at it, pressing buttons.

“How do I get on the internet?”

He opened a browser for her.

“Cool,” she said. “Oh never mind, there is a button that takes you directly to Twitter. Neat.”

“Hang on,” said Rory. “Hold on now. What are you doing?”

She sat on the railing of the balcony, swinging her legs. She typed for a few minutes, starting to smile, and then she tossed him back his phone. She stood up, took all the flowers out of the vase, and festooned them around the lawn chairs. She poured out the water. She looked around for anybody watching, and then she threw the vase as far as she could into the parking lot. It smashed into jagged atoms, making a chalk-white smear.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s go. I am done mourning and I am also sober now.”

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“To IHOP,” she said. “We are going to get free pancakes. All pancakes are free at the IHOP on Cesar Chavez today.”

“They are?”

“Sure. Free Twitter pancakes. It has already been retweeted 11 times.”

Mandy hopped over her balcony and started walking out of the complex. Rory followed her, running to catch up. He was looking up the number for the IHOP on Cesar Chavez, and then he was calling and explaining the situation to them, telling them corporate would

cover it, telling them there was an emergency, telling them they should only extend the offer to people who specifically asked for it.

“What are you doing?” seethed Rory.

“Let me see your phone again,” she said. “Don’t worry. I just need to make a phone call.”

He hesitated. He took his phone out of his pocket. English politeness really was quite something.

She snatched the phone out of his hand. She dialed Kip's number while Rory glared at her.

“Hey daddybags, meet me over at IHOP,” she said to Kip. “It’s an emergency.”

She hung up.

“Why don’t you have your own phone?” asked Rory.

“Technology is bullshit now,” said Mandy. “What is cool about a smartphone? Everybody has a smart phone. Old racists with blood diseases have smart phones. YOU have a smart phone. I can always get someone else to look something up for me. It is not very hard to pretend that every single person these days is your own personal robot phone slave.”

Kip was waiting for them when they arrived, straddling his bicycle in the parking lot.

Kip had a tattoo of an elaborate "< a >" on one forearm and an equally elaborate "< /a >" on the other one.

(“Anchors,” he once explained to her. “You know, like a sailor.”)

“Kip designs websites for Nazis and skinheads,” Mandy explained to Rory.

“Hey man, I will write code for anyone,” said Kip. “Market forces and freedom of speech and all that.”

“But he specializes in websites for North American hate groups,” said Mandy. “Somebody has to do it right? His other favorite thing to talk about in the world is torture, which was part of the initial attraction, but now I’m not so sure. He is my boyfriend.”

“What do you mean you’re not so sure?” asked Kip.

“What do you mean torture?” asked Rory.

“You know,” said Kip. “Coercive violence. Pain with goals.”

They got a booth and all ordered coffee.

“So what’s going on?” asked Kip. “You said it was an emergency.”

“It is an emergency,” said Mandy. “An emergency of FUN.”

The waitress returned with coffee. She was built like a matador, whip-thin with veiny forearms. From experience, Mandy knew her name was Dinah, like Alice’s cat.

“What a day,” said Mandy. “Free pancakes! You must be busy, Dinah. I bet you are going crazy.”

Dinah was suspicious.

“Haven’t heard anything about any free pancakes,” said Dinah.

“It’s a thing,” said Mandy. “Today only. It’s on the internet.”

Mandy ordered six short stacks “for the table” and a side of sausage.

Dinah snorted and walked away. “Lemme check on that,” she said.

“Hey, I want to see your phone for a sec,” Mandy said to Kip. Kip handed her his phone. She logged into Twitter and typed while he watched.

HI KIP #WHATISUPKIPYOUASSHOLE she typed, messaging him.

She handed his phone back to him and it buzzed in his hand.

“You hacked the IHOP twitter account,” said Kip. “Cool.”

“Not exactly,” said Mandy. “I never told you my granddad started IHOP?”

“I thought you were joking,” he said. “I thought we always ate here because of the free refills on coffee and the strong American values.”

“We always eat here because it is the best restaurant in the world,” said Mandy. “Let me see your phone again.”

Kip handed it back to her.

“Man, the IHOP twitter feed is just a bunch of hipster jokes about pancakes,” said Mandy. “Every single tweet is some annoying joke about a pancake.”

“Is this about money?” asked Rory. “You want more money? Is this extortion?”

“Just a minute,” said Mandy. “I am trying to write something. Ya’ll should talk about torture or something.”

Kip looked at Rory, appraising him. He was exactly the sort of person that Kip liked to shock.

“What are you more interested in,” asked Kip. “Theory or practice?”

“Why do you know so much about torture?” asked Rory, exasperated. “Who are you people?”

Mandy opened a new Tweet.

FOR THE MONTH OF MAY, IHOP WILL BE TAKING YOUR
POLITICAL ASYLUM REQUESTS AND HONORING ALL EASTERN
EUROPEAN VISAS #PANCAKESPRING

She chuckled to herself.

“Twitter is really stupid,” she said.

IHOP HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE CRUCIBLE 4 CNTRVERSL IDEAS
ABOUT LIBERTY COME 4 THE PANCAKES STAY 4 THE PRTCTD
RADICAL DISCOURSE #PANCAKESPRING

“With respect to Western torture techniques, we are really seeing something special happening lately,” said Kip. “It’s been taking place since the Global War on Terror, really, but watching it happen is great for the industry as a whole. Sort of a torture revolution, really. Nobody talks about it.”

“Kip is a fascist,” said Mandy. “I used to be into that, uh, romantically.”

“Yeah, right,” said Kip uncertainly.

Rory stared at his coffee, unsure of what to do or what to say.

“What do you mean ‘torture revolution?’” asked Rory, trying to be nice.

“What we are seeing is the supplanting of Vintage Prep with French Modern techniques all over the world, but especially in America and other Western countries,” said Kip. “It’s rad. I never expected such an enlightened outlook coming from us, you know? South Africa, maybe. I wonder if internet porn has something to do with it? Probably, right?”

“You have to explain the difference,” said Mandy. “Not everybody spends their afternoons reading torture blogs and masturbating to cartoons. I can’t believe I used to think you were so hot and cool.”

“It’s a rivalry as old as the seasons,” said Kip, glaring at her. “Vintage Prep torture techniques are things you wouldn’t even really consider torture, because they are so awesome and ubiquitous. For instance, handcuffs, right? Or being forced to be inside a jail cell? Or prison guards looking the other way while you get raped by some of your fellow inmates to teach you a lesson about class and manners? All of these techniques have filtered down over the years from the finest Anglo-Saxon prep schools, and have been modified and adjusted to fit our modern incarceration needs. Forced sitting, forced standing, solitary confinement. Terrible food that makes you sick. Stuff like that. It is the kind of cruelty that teachers do to children in school, with the main goal of inflicting maximum psychological damage without requiring many resources. It is also the kind of torture that anyone can do and which requires no specialists, which is great because you don’t want somebody on your payroll whose job title is ‘torturer.’ You can keep somebody in solitary confinement their entire life and people will just shrug, though this is probably the worst thing you can possibly do to a living creature of planet Earth. But what I am saying is that Vintage Prep torture techniques are giving way to French Modern, and not just in South America or Southeast Asia or China or Russia. But everywhere, everywhere!”

YES THIS OFFER IS FOR RL @TheRealEdwardSnowden she tweeted

And:

IHOP IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THAT WE WILL NOW BE OFFERING
PLTCL ASYLM AND LGL PRTCTN 2 WHISTLEBLOWERS,
DISSIDENTS & FUGEES WRDLWDE #PANCAKESPRING

“What is French Modern, then?” asked Rory, miserably.

BRING YR SLEEPING BAG DISSIDENTS! #PANCAKESPRING

And:

FREE COFFEE AND PANCAKES ALL NIGHT LONG N XCHNG FOR
LEAKING INFORMATION ABOUT THE SRVLLNCE STATE TO
JRNLSTS #PANCAKESPRING

“These were the techniques that the Nazis and the Vichy government developed jointly together to deal with the French Resistance, basically,” said Kip. “Now this is top notch stuff, stuff meant to ‘break people’ without leaving a mark. Until the Germans started employing French professionals, they were just snapping people’s fingers and beating them senseless while tied to chairs. That doesn’t work at all. You don’t get the feeling that your torturer is enjoying it, that they don’t care whether you talk or not. French Modern techniques are artful, require professional attention, and do not scar. Most famously used in Algiers and throughout South America during the Cold War, we are talking here about electricity, experimental surgery, and water stuff, coupled with acts of explicit sexual degradation which are designed to tap into a subject’s unconscious needs and make them fall in a kind of submissive ‘love state’ with the torturer.”

“Which definitely wears off after awhile,” muttered Mandy.

Kip looked at her. Frowning. Hard.

“And you think uh...French Modern is better than Vintage Prep?” asked Rory.

“Almost certainly,” said Kip. “Vintage Prep is a cold sexless marriage; French Modern is passionate romance. I admire you British, I really do. Very efficient, very careful. But with French Modern, people are interacting in a hands-on, intimate way instead of just coldly extracting confessions through the brutality of time and the body’s own natural weaknesses. It’s artisanal. It’s authentic. It’s professional, not a relationship of convenience. It’s a craft, like Martha Stewart, you know? Which means we will get scientific data about torture, figuring out whether it really even works or not, and we will have professionals doing this work instead

of amateurs, leading to fewer casualties, fewer mistakes, and vast harm reduction across the world. Everybody knows French Modern techniques work better, and once we get prisoners signing release forms, we will...”

THERE IS NO STRCTRL CLASS STRATIFICATION AT IHOP, THERE IS NO INSTITUTIONAL DISFIGUREMENT OF THE HUMAN SOUL #PANCAKESPRING

THERE IS ONLY COFFEE AND PANCAKES AND SOMETIMES WAFFLES #PANCAKESPRING

“...we will finally be able to make torture a permanent and safe institution instead of just a scary word that means whatever bad thing you want it to mean.”

They all sat there in silence for awhile, pondering torture as a permanent safe institution and pondering pancakes, respectively.

“Rory,” said Mandy. “I am not going to do a deal. I am not going to sell you back this Twitter account. I will tell you why for four hundred dollars cash.”

“Bleeding Christ,” said Rory. “This is extortion.”

“There’s an ATM in the front of the restaurant,” she said. “Call your boss or whatever. I’m sure he’ll authorize such a small amount for such important information. Just consider it a deposition or whatever. You can take what I say back to your lawyers.”

Rory threw his napkin down on the table and stood up.

“We are breaking up,” Mandy said to Kip as soon as Rory was gone. “I can’t hang out with any more dudes from Stormfront at your damn 'shitkicker' bars. It’s not funny anymore. Maybe it never was. It’s fine to have ironic and cruel beliefs about things, but like, maybe that’s what fascism actually is, you know? Everybody just saying the worst things and playing pretend. You are good at sex,

but lots of people are good at sex. I can find about ten people as good at sex as you on the internet in about ten minutes.”

“But you hate the internet,” said Kip.

“That was before I had a Twitter account,” said Mandy. “And three million followers.”

Kip slunk down lower in his booth. He started sulking.

“Now who’s the fascist,” he said.

Rory returned, glaring at her. He handed her the four hundred in cash and she handed the cash right to Kip.

“What I owe you,” she said.

“Why are you being such a jerk?” asked Kip.

“Yeah,” said Rory. “How come?”

“Because I believe in things for real, including IHOP, especially IHOP,” said Mandy. “It’s basically the UN, but tons better. An international organization dedicated to pancakes! You can sue me if you want, but god help me, I will be the voice of pancakes until you cut my throat. It is my destiny.”

“You should take the money,” said Rory.

“Being poor as shit never changed anybody’s life,” said Kip.

“Fuck you dude,” said Mandy. “I just paid you back!”

“Listen,” said Rory. “What do you mean you believe in IHOP? I mean, I sympathize: I vote labor when I am back home. But it’s just a stupid corporation same as the rest, same as Twitter, you know? Just take the money we are offering.”

“There was only one restaurant in the town where I went to high school, here in Texas where my mom and I moved after we left California. I spent every Saturday night there because it is like *The Family Thing*. Every time I snuck out of my house, it was always to go to IHOP. This was before the internet, so nobody believed me when I told them my grandfather started this place. It didn’t matter. My grandfather sucked, maybe, but his restaurant is awesome. IHOP is the opposite of Twitter. It’s a place where real people talk about real shit face to face over giant plates of cheap food. There are infinite coffee refills for infinite problems. How many people do you think have fallen in love inside an IHOP? How many people have written beautiful novels sitting at an IHOP, or come up with crazy ideas that have changed the world?”

They looked around the restaurant. No one seemed to be falling in love or writing a novel or changing the world.

But they could have been. There were plenty of empty booths.

“You are going to have to get your own phone,” said Kip. “You sure as hell aren’t going to use mine anymore.”

Mandy turned around in the booth and tapped the guy in the next booth over on his shoulder. He was a giant man with a luscious and disgusting beard who was eating a massive plate of chicken fried steak alone and reading the entirety of the *New York Times*. It looked like he probably did this every day. There was a battered Graham Greene novel on one corner of the table and a personal bottle of hand sanitizer.

“Hey man,” said Mandy. “Can I use your phone?”

“Um,” said the man, trying to be polite. “What for? I mean, I can dial the police for you if you are in trouble. Are you in trouble?”

“No, I just need to tweet something,” she said.

“I don’t use Twitter,” he said.

“Oh, me neither,” she said. “It’s for IHOP.”

She started to explain. Rory sighed and got up to make a phone call. Kip followed him, realizing she was just going to keep ignoring him, and plus also they were broken up now.

ARISE YE WORKERS FROM YOUR SLUMBERS! ARISE YE PRISONERS OF WANTS! IT IS TIME FOR PANCAKES, she tweeted. She handed the phone back to the man with the hand sanitizer, just as her six plates of pancakes arrived, just as the Soviet nuke locked up in her storage closet counted three, counted two, counted one, counted zero.

2. PUT A FACE ON IT (\$CAT)

Personalitech, the scrappy NYC “Silicon Alley” start-up that hired me as an assistant avatar artist, had two equally irritating mottos. One was “put a face on it.” The other was “game it up.”

The start-up was past its first round of funding when they took me on, and I had only been working there for a couple of weeks when the lady everybody called The Genius stumbled into the office I shared with the other assistant avatar artists and pointed right at me. I hadn’t even had any coffee yet.

She said:

“All the senior avatar artists are hungover and didn’t come in today, and so I need you to come with me to brunch with the CEO of Caterpillar right now and make rough sketches for his Stocklet. We are already running late.”

“It is 8 AM,” I said, trying to make sense of it all.

“You seem sober though,” said The Genius.

The Genius, Korine Attlisberger, was the creator of the Personalitech Stocklets initiative. We hadn’t launched yet, even though we had fifty or so working Stocklet designs and solid contracts with almost every publicly traded corporation in America. Stocklets had signed up everyone except for a few holdouts like Walmart who were waiting for us to go live before joining in.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll fill you in on the way.”

I followed her out the door and we got in a cab.

She didn’t say anything for awhile. She took a handful of aspirin and washed it down with flat ginger ale from a bottle in her purse.

“Just sit there and doodle during the meeting,” she said, staring out the cab’s window. “Don’t have ideas. If he asks to see anything you’ve drawn, tell him that the sketches are too preliminary. Tell him we never reveal our designs at this stage.”

“Where are all the senior avatar artists this morning?” I asked.

“Wedding last night,” said Korine. “They all got smashed. So did I. But the Caterpillar CEO is only in town for this one day. It’s a surprise visit.”

“Are you going to make it?”

“I am wrecked,” said Korine. “I wish I was dead. I haven’t slept.”

She put on lipstick.

“The CEO of Caterpillar is a man named Hammer Bromwich,” she said. “Everyone says he is very nice. He is consistently rated one of the most beloved CEOs in the country by his own employees. We just have to get through breakfast. Then you can have the rest of the day off. Deal?”

She reached over and tapped the cab driver on the shoulder.

“This is it,” she said.

The place was called “THE WOOD ROOM.” The name was charred into the frame of a lacquered oak door in a way that you couldn’t even really see. The restaurant was nestled into an empty side street between two massive midtown office buildings. This kept

tourists from stumbling in accidentally and finding themselves seated at a place they couldn't afford.

Korine checked her phone, "fed" the gilded tamagotchi that dangled from her neck on a silver chain, and then we hurried inside.

There was only one person there waiting for us, but he took up an entire table. Hammer Bromwich was enormous. At a certain point, you pass from mere obesity into the sort of statuesque gigantism that becomes a kind of charismatic asset: people can't look away from you because you are always in their peripheral vision. Hammer must have weighed six hundred pounds. He was sitting in front of a pint glass full of orange juice from which he was sipping delicately. His fine features were cramped into the very center of his perfectly round face, a face ringed with fat like the bunched head of a pig on a plate.

"Personalitech!" he roared. "Game it up! Put a face on it! Come and join me! Sit down, sit down!"

His enthusiasm felt like an act. He was playing the jolly fat man.

"I'm Korine," said my boss, putting her hand out to shake. "We spoke on the phone."

"Of course!" shouted Hammer Bromwich. "Call me Ham. HAM BROMWICH! SOUNDS DELICIOUS, DON'T IT? HA HA! And who is this?"

"This is just the avatar artist I told you about," said Korine. "He is going to do some preliminary sketches for your Stocklet while we have some breakfast and a chat."

I smiled and waved cheerfully. I sat down in a chair at the corner of the table and took my tablet out of my messenger bag. I switched it on and opened my graphics editor. I knew how avatars for Stocklets were supposed to function, and I'd even done edits on a few. It was my job to play the part as long as I was sitting here, so I tried to seem convincingly professional.

“Excuse me,” said Ham, leaning toward Korine with a leering grin, nearly knocking the table over with his girth and grabbing his pint of orange juice just in time to keep it from crashing to the floor. “Is that a TAMAGOTCHI around your neck?”

“Why, yes it is,” said Korine, fingering her gilded charm.

Hammer Bromwich roared with laughter.

"I heard you still had one of those," he said.

"Well, you heard right."

“I haven’t seen a tamagotchi since I was a child,” he said. “I remember my father running to Kmart in the middle of the night—2 AM!—trying to find one for my little sister on Christmas. Oh my god, is that tamagotchi still WORKING?”

“Not only is it still working,” said Korine. “It is the first and only tamagotchi I have ever owned. And I have never needed to reset it.”

“That’s not possible,” said Ham. “They die of natural causes, don't they?”

“I have never missed a feeding,” said Korine. “I play with my tamagotchi for at least an hour each day, at precisely the same time each day. My tamagotchi is on a perfect, regular schedule. If you never deviate from the original calibration, they never die, even accidentally. They were designed to teach children how to be disciplined. This is the secret of the tamagotchi.”

“I’ve never missed a feeding either,” said Ham, laughing. “But I wouldn’t exactly call myself DISCIPLINED! Don’t the batteries die?”

“When it is time to change the batteries—and I change them once a month—I open the egg up and I keep it going on life support with a homemade charging station that my father helped me build,” said Korine. “He was an electrical engineer. I cried so hard when I

learned that my tamagotchi would eventually run out of batteries. This was after my mother passed on."

The waiter came over to take our drink order.

"If you don't mind, I am going to start drinking!" said Ham. "It's morning for you, but I am coming back from China. I'll have a glass of gin. Gin is the lightest liquor. It is practically weightless."

"I will have lemonade," said Korine quietly. "So will the artist."

"Is that all you want?" asked Ham, stunned. "It's all on me, obviously."

I opened my mouth, but Korine was faster.

"We want our artist to do good work," said Korine. "Sober work."

"Lemonade," I said.

"So you must really LIKE tamagotchis," said Ham, as soon as the waiter was gone.

"My little egg on a chain makes me feel...correct," said Korine. "Not only does the central insight for Stocklets come from tamagotchis, my keepsake reminds me of my father. I want to honor him. I want to blend acquisitiveness, discipline, and the companionship of capital for new young capitalists. My father would have understood this better than anyone. Your investments should be something you treasure and nurture."

"I have to tell you," said Ham. "I'm not absolutely clear on what a Stocklet is or what it does. My assistant tried to explain it to me, but I had too many questions for her. Can you give me the bullet points?"

"Certainly," said Korine. "We envision Stocklets as the natural merger between the stock market, mobile gaming, and smartphones. Essentially, we are making Pokemon from

crystallizations of global capital. Each publicly traded corporation will have a Stocklet available which is unlocked for your phone by purchasing one share of the corporation's stock. The Stocklet changes and morphs each day as the stock goes up or down. The Stocklet becomes more powerful if the person buys more stock in that company. People will either be able to sell their Stocklets for cash outright from Personalitech, or trade them to other people. Absorbing other people's Stocklets will also be possible, as a result of a little proprietary RPG we are developing. The Stocklet will also serve as channel for the regular dissemination of shareholder information, in addition to being a corporate representative and mascot."

"And how do you make money?" asked Ham.

"Corporations are paying us to make their Stocklet and to create a well-designed platform where Stocklets can be easily bought, sold, and traded," said Korine. "We take a percentage from the Stocklet floor. We are working with Nintendo and Bitcoin to create a secure trading platform that scales. Let's say you want to buy your grandson some stock for Christmas, but you are afraid he won't understand how generous a gift this is. Purchasing a Stocklet for him will ensure that he understands that something tangible has been purchased, something that grows and shrinks and lives in the world. We are bringing corporations to life. We are giving them bodies and a virtual world where they can interact with each other tangibly."

"That's a little bit terrifying," said Ham. "But I like it. It is good business. I suppose if everybody else is going to be on board, Caterpillar ought to be on board, too."

"All the major tech players are already partners," said Korine. "We are predicting a spring launch, but we are going to begin test marketing in schools this quarter. There are a few holdouts who are waiting to see what happens. Walmart, for instance. But the fact is that no one can STOP us from making Stocklets for their corporation, and most people see the utility in coming aboard early and being part of the development process."

“For a FEE, obviously,” joked Ham.

“At Personalitech, we know how to do two things: put a face on it and game it up,” said Korine. “We think we can sell the very idea of capitalism to a whole new generation who trust games more than they trust the idea of ownership.”

The waiter arrived with the drinks.

“Anything to eat?” said the waiter almost under his breath. He was good at his job. He was a ghost.

“I will have a couple plates of your fine beef enchiladas,” said Ham. “I will also have some of this fried cornbread right here. That looks delicious. Very subversive.”

“Of course sir,” said the waiter. “And you, sir and madam?”

“Nothing for us, thanks,” said Korine. She was visibly upset at the mere mention of food. She made a face. She burped into her hand, and I caught a whiff of sour bile fumes.

“Now Korine,” said Ham. “You can’t make me eat here ALONE. I chose this place because you said you liked oysters. Well, this place has the best oysters in the whole city. I asked around. I surfed the web. I asked people who know. Who REALLY know. And they all said to come here.”

“I do love oysters,” said Korine. “But, really, I’m fine.”

“Nonsense,” said Ham. “Bring her a couple dozen oysters. In Europe, they eat oysters for breakfast all the time.”

“NO,” said Korine. She blinked rapidly. I thought she might throw up right here at the table. Instead, she took a sip of lemonade and composed herself.

“Well, maybe I will have one,” said Korine. “Just one.”

“One dozen?” asked the waiter.

“One oyster,” said Korine miserably.

“Very good, madam,” said the waiter.

“Now hold on,” said Ham, irritated. “If she is ordering ONE OYSTER, then I want you to bring back the biggest oyster you’ve got, okay? In fact, I don’t just want the biggest oyster you’ve got: I want THE BIGGEST OYSTER I’VE EVER SEEN! Make some phone calls! This woman is trying to revolutionize capitalism right here at this table! I don’t want her to leave here saying I only fed her one oyster, unless that oyster is THE KING OF OYSTERS. You understand me?”

“Of course, sir,” said the waiter. “I will do my best, sir.”

“No hard feelings,” said Ham, relaxing. “I’m not trying to be an asshole. I know you people can find big oysters if you want.”

He peeled cash from a stack and shoved it in the waiter’s shirt pocket. The waiter dematerialized.

“Now I feel awful,” said Ham. “I hope he doesn't think I am an asshole.”

“You were perfectly reasonable and pleasant,” said Korine.

“So what is your artist doing over there exactly?” said Ham, turning to me. “I hear him skritch-skratching away, but he DOESN’T SPEAK.”

“He is making sketches. He is trying to capture the spirit of Caterpillar.”

I gave Ham a thumbs up.

“The spirit of Caterpillar, eh?” said Ham. “Let me see if I can help you. We make massive machines that move the heavens and earth.

Tractors, cranes, dump trucks, and wrecking balls! That's what we make. Maybe it's old fashioned, but it's honest.”

“Your employees love you,” Korine said. “Everybody says.”

“WE BRIBE THE SHIT OUT OF THEM,” said Ham. “Health care for everybody. Vacations for everybody. We have the best engineers, the best sales force. We get the best people because we offer them the best packages. Nobody wants to work for a living. Not me, not you, not anybody. So we try to make it as painless as possible. There is no nonsense at a construction site. We built our company on a solid foundation, without any modern internet marketing bullshit. Er, no offense to what you good people are trying to do.”

“Where does the name Caterpillar come from?” asked Korine. “I have always wondered.”

“We are a very old company,” said Ham in lieu of an explanation.

Ham’s phone rang. The ringtone was the theme to the old Disney “Gummi Bears” television show.

“My daughter,” he said apologetically, taking the call. “She works in our Atlanta office.”

He listened for awhile while his eyes searched the nothingness in front of him.

“Oh god,” he said. “Oh god, oh god. Well, give her the week off. Give her the month off! Paid, of course, paid. And send her something nice. What does she like? Hmmm. Let me try to remember what her desk looks like. Little porcelain angels. Look at her desk. Take an inventory. Get her new ones she doesn’t have. Let her know that she can take all the time she needs and that her job is safe.”

He hung up.

“Sorry,” he said. “One of the receptionists just lost her husband. Killed in a car accident.”

The waiter brought another pint of gin and told us all that our food was on the way.

“Alice has had a terrible year,” he said. “Her son Aubrey had to have surgery on his testicles. Some kind of tumor. You aren’t going to believe this, but they cut the tumor open, and it was full of tiny little teeth and fingernails. It was blocking the ducts. His semen was actually fermenting, she said. I’ll never forget the way she described the smell.”

Korine put her napkin over her nose. She had turned grey.

The waiter swished through the restaurant doors and then returned with Ham’s enchiladas and cornbread. The portions were massive. Next, the waiter returned with a plate for Korine. He set the plate down in front of her and she went from gray to green and nestled her face in the crook of her arm.

“Now that is a giant oyster,” said Ham. “I am actually impressed. THAT IS ONE GIANT OYSTER. THAT IS THE BIGGEST OYSTER I HAVE EVER SEEN.”

“This is a Gulf Coast Tar Oyster,” said the waiter. “Minty and sassy, with notes of chipotle, sour cream, licorice, and champagne. Very choice. Very delicate. An excellent decision, madam.”

Ham peeled off another twenty from his wad and gave it to the waiter.

The oyster was the size of a bread plate. It was served on a bed of rock ice. The meat of the oyster was as large as a chicken breast, and it jiggled like jello while the waiter stood there with folded hands. He gave Korine a knife and fork.

“You may need these,” cautioned the waiter. “Or would you rather have a spoon?”

The oyster-meat trembled, sloshing around in the lemony cocktail sauce that Ham poured around the edges for her.

“Yum!” he said. “Let me see you take a bite.”

Korine cut into the oyster with the same determination as a battlefield medic. The knife buried itself in the oyster’s gelatinous hide, and purple ooze spilled out from the incision. Korine carefully set the knife down beside her plate.

“What was I talking about?” said Ham, puzzled. “Oh yes, little Aubrey and his blocked ducts. Did you know that there are some islands in the Pacific that ferment semen on purpose and drink it as a fertility aid? Can you believe that? God, look at that oyster. They are still alive, you know. I love animals that you can eat while they are still alive. It is something else to feel them wriggling inside you, trying to die.”

“I need to wash my hands,” said Korine. “Excuse me.”

She got up from the table quickly and ran across the room. We watched her leave. Ham winked at me.

I sketched for a little while, and then ran some animations. Something was unconsciously taking shape under my fingers as I sat at that table in “THE WOOD ROOM.”

Ham was half finished with his second plate of enchiladas. He put his napkin down beside his plate and let out a heaving sigh.

“She’s in bad shape, isn’t she?” he asked me, with a knowing grin.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said diplomatically.

“I hope this works,” said Ham. “Between you and me, I am worried about Caterpillar. Everything is digital now. Web 2.0. Smartphones and apps. But Caterpillar has always been about people. PEOPLE building things. PEOPLE moving the earth. Making homes for PEOPLE to live in and buildings for PEOPLE to work in. Every year,

it seems like it gets harder and harder. But we always find a way to treat our employees with respect. They get the best health care we can provide. Paid vacations. Early retirement. Mentor programs and education programs. I don't think of us like a corporation. I think of us like a better, more efficient government. I want to employ as many people as possible so they don't have to work in some warehouse or some coffee shop."

"You sound like a real good boss," I said.

"I am just a nice soft place where the employees of Caterpillar can land."

He patted his massive belly.

"How is it coming over there?" he asked me. "Are you getting anywhere?"

"These are just preliminary sketches," I said. "We never reveal our designs at this stage."

"Surely you have some ideas," said Ham.

"Oh, of course," I said. "Tons."

"Can you tell me about them?"

"I'd rather not," I said. "I'm not supposed to."

"She's in the bathroom," he said. "She'll never know."

"She'll know," I said.

"Let me peek over your shoulder," he said.

"We never do it that way," I said.

"Tell me something," he said. "Will people really buy these things? How important is this, really?"

“There’s this private elementary school for gifted children in Connecticut,” I said. “We’ve been testing them there. Giving them to the kids for free. They love them. The kids get in fights on the playground because they are so passionate about collecting Stocklets. And these are gifted kids, kids who ought to know better. It’s going to be huge.”

Ham pulled a handful of Cadbury cream eggs from his pocket and unwrapped them methodically, making a pile.

“I got started in construction myself, you know,” he said. “Worked a crane.”

Ham methodically ate cream eggs while I sketched. His big lips chewed each egg with precision. He seemed to be growing agitated by the silence between us.

“Let me see what you’ve got so far,” he asked, standing up. The table shook as he moved it aside. Korine’s oyster wobbled like a pudding.

“I really shouldn’t show you,” I said. “I was commanded not to show you.”

“I’m the nicest guy in the whole world,” he said. “You won’t get in trouble. I take care of my people.”

He came around the table and stood next to me, breathing heavy. I closed my tablet and switched it off.

“Show me!” he said, punching me in the shoulder jokingly. “Show me! Show me! SHOW ME!”

He peeled off some hundred dollar bills and fanned them into my lap. I picked them up and put them in a neat stack. We were at an impasse.

“Okay,” I said, switching my tablet back on. “But you have to promise not to get mad or tell Korine.”

“I promise,” he said, looking over his shoulder at the bathroom where Korine had disappeared.

I opened the file where I had been sketching the Caterpillar Stocklet. I took a deep breath.

“So it’s like this,” I said. “It starts as a cute little uh...bug. And it eats and eats and eats. When the stock grows, the bug gets fatter and fatter and jollier and sassier. It expands and gets all big and happy. And then, once it reaches a certain size, if the stock goes DOWN, the bug hardens up all of a sudden. It turns into a bionic butterfly....with...uh...lasers. It seals up. See the tight muscles? It is a killer, dangerous butterfly now. It is all sleek and deadly. But it is a cycle. A process. If the stock grows again, the butterfly starts to blimp up, getting bulkier. And then, after a certain point, when the stock drops again, the fat happy butterfly turns into something else. Maybe a zeppelin! It keeps morphing, you see? It is never finished, and it is always growing or expanding, after it changes.”

“And why is that?” asked Ham with a tremor in his voice. I realized something was terribly wrong. “It’s me, isn’t it?”

“It’s just a sketch,” I said.

“It looks like me,” he said.

“No,” I insisted. “It’s just a rough draft.”

He looked like I’d punched him. He wiped his face with his hands. His lip quivered.

At that moment, Korine came out of the bathroom. She looked at Ham and she looked at me. She saw the drawings on my screen and she saw his furrowed brow.

“What did you do?” asked Korine blankly, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s me,” said Ham. “You are right. That’s exactly the problem. Caterpillar is me. I am a big fat asshole. And Caterpillar is doomed!”

“No!” I said. “That’s not what I meant at all! It’s art! It is growing and changing but it is always lovable! Not like Microsoft! Not like IBM! It’s organic! It’s got a good heart!”

Ham put his head in his hands, frowning. I got up to comfort him, but Korine pushed me aside.

“Get out of here,” snarled Korine. “Leave the tablet. Leave the drawings. They don’t belong to you. You are dismissed. Your contract has been terminated.”

I stuffed Ham’s hundreds in my pockets as I headed for the door. I looked back over my shoulder. Ham was still staring at my tablet, fascinated, devastated. The waiter ran ahead of me to open the door and then closed it right behind me. He was a real pro.

3. LADYKILLER (\$FB)

Tre took the entire weekend to change his profile status from “IN A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DEVIL” to “ENGAGED TO JESSICA TRAPPER.”

He almost waited too long. Jess’s hurtiness was seeping out of the walls like ectoplasm, almost manifesting physically in the apartment they shared.

“It doesn’t matter what it says on Facebook,” he lied casually, when she asked him. “This is about us: not all those assholes on Facebook.”

“I changed it in the bathroom literally ten minutes after I said yes,” she said, squeezing one of his thighs as she curled up against him, trying to be more amused by her own response to her own joy than upset by his willful rejection of this extremely clear and obvious new rule w/r/t love.

“We are gonna talk about Facebook in the future like our parents talk about cocaine,” he said. “Man, I can’t even remember that decade. I was on Facebook the whole time. I met your mother on Facebook. I did so much Facebook that my balls went numb and I

could only fuck on Facebook. You want to see pictures? They are on Facebook.”

“You sure you aren’t having second thoughts about being relationshipped?” she asked him.

“You make it sound non-consensual,” he said.

“9 times out of 10 it’s somebody you already know,” she said.

“The real problem is relationship culture,” he said.

Eventually, she decided he was merely being dumb and not having “secret thoughts.” She drifted off to sleep beside him.

But Tre lay awake all night, watching who liked the post and responding to the comments.

At BuzzFeed the next day, Tre felt doomed. He coasted through work, trying to get as much done as possible. Everyone kept sarcastically congratulating him, which didn’t help. He figured out thirteen things that only people born in 1990 would know, found proper .gifs for them, and then he left early.

Jess had her Pilates class on Mondays so they usually both fended for themselves when it came to dinner. He wasn’t sure what to do.

He drove over to a strip center where they sometimes went for Appalachian food. There was a Chili’s there. He would go to Chili’s. Chili’s was the right place. It was a place you went when your life was over and you were ready to die.

He got a glass of wine and a plate of fried cheese at the bar.

He took a long gulp of the bad wine, feeling cursed, and opened Facebook on his phone.

He started looking through the profiles of old girlfriends, trying to figure out what qualities they had in common, besides dating him.

Maybe if he could determine some essential quality they shared he would find out something useful about himself, something he could use as a wedge or weapon.

He resisted the temptation to “like” anything they posted or to make any comments. Surely doing so now, post-engagement, would seem hostile.

“Drone over there just bought you a drink,” said the bartender.
“What do you want?”

“The fuck?” said Tre.

“Are you Tre?” said the bartender. “Drone said your name was Tre. You want another glass of wine or like top shelf Scotch or what?”

Tre craned his neck over his shoulder. A drone had never bought him a drink before.

“Over there,” said the bartender. “By the bathroom.”

The drone slumped along one side of a vinyl booth, smiling at him with high definition red lips and big soft cartoon eyes. It was female-shaped. It was wearing a tight black dress and was sitting over a fizzy cocktail that had been purchased purely for decoration. The drone’s proportions were disorienting and hallucinogenic: the six-tone skin rippled in metallic waves, showcasing abstract animated tattoos that seemed to change hue and texture based on the amount of indirect light it absorbed from the stained glass bar fluorescents.

“We don't get a lot of drones in here,” said the bartender.
“Somebody you know?”

“I really doubt it,” said Tre.

As he stared, the drone stood up and arched its back. He worried that everyone in the restaurant was watching the machine seduce

him. He was sure they were laughing at him and pointing, or else gawking and taking pictures.

Tre found himself slipping off of his barstool and walking over, his head swimming, his heart filling with quiet murder. He had to talk to the drone or it would keep trying to get his attention. He slid into the booth and sipped his drink.

“Hello,” said the drone in its digitally-altered machine register. There was a human being on the other end of that voice typing words to him. Some hidden secret subjectivity. It was entirely probable that people didn’t have any kind of external soul that mattered and might survive death, but this drone definitely did.

“Do I know you?” asked Tre.

“Sure,” said the drone. “Sure you do.”

“Then do you mind if I inquire as to who is piloting this magnificent machine that is buying me drinks?”

“I am Anonymous lol,” said the drone in the same throaty but uninflected half-tone voice. “Does Anonymous get you hard? Does Anonymous make you feel sex feelings lol?”

The drone didn't "lol." It said the word out loud, lol, as in to hang loosely or droop, like a drunk head on a stiff neck.

Tre set his drink down carefully on a Chili’s coaster. The drone immediately slid around so that it was sitting right next to him. It leaned in so that it was touching his thigh. There was a warm hum coming from inside the drone that he could feel through the plastic seat. He could feel it vibrating his prostate; pulling at his testicles. The smell coming from the drone was simultaneously musky and artificial, like a werewolf that had just fucked a rack of fashion magazines.

“No seriously,” he asked. “Who is in there?”

“I hear you are getting married,” said the drone. “That must be exciting. Such a change lol.”

“Do you know me for real or are you just learning stuff about me right now on the internet?”

“Come on now Tre,” said the drone. “Relax yourself. Talking to us is like praying, but better. We only want to help you and we have the power to do it.”

The drone reached over and put one firm flexiflesh hand on his thigh.

“Do you want to see a picture?” asked the drone. “Something exciting?”

“I need to go,” said Tre. His phone vibrated and he looked down. He had a message. He opened it. It was a picture of the drone all tied up with a ball gag. There was semen, or some kind of semen substitute, trickling down its haunches and it was looking trustingly at the camera. There was a poster on the wall behind the drone for “Finding Nemo.”

“Do you like that?” asked the drone. “Does it excite you?”

The image was sudden and shocking. It was an exact replica from a series of photos he had taken of his college girlfriend in her dorm room, back long ago before people realized that everything digital was permanent. It was a perfect replica in every detail.

His forehead and the skin around his mouth broke out in a cold sweat. The picture was still on one of his old hard drives. That’s where it had to come from. When was the last time he had connected that hard drive to a computer?

“Where did you get this?” he asked.

“Do you want to see more?” asked the drone. “We just want to make you happy lol. We can make more, if you like. Tonight. Right now. We can have all the sex! LOL!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Tre.

“I thought you were leaving?” said the drone, bemused. “Well, if you are going to stay, we should talk about interesting subjects.”

“What do you want to talk about?” asked Tre. He was stalling. He needed to think. This could be an old friend; an old enemy. Someone he had hurt in the past. Some thirteen-year-old kid. Why today? Did it have something to do with changing his relationship status? Had somebody been watching him all along, waiting for him to finally decide to “settle down” before striking?

They didn’t have to live anywhere close to him. They could be on the other side of the world.

It didn’t have to be someone alone, either. It could be a team of people. A bunch of his friends could have all chipped in together and rented the drone for the evening, and they were now fucking with him, all sitting around with beers laughing and debating what to type next. One person at the controls, another busily hacking his old hard drive, another person figuring out what to say next to make him sweat. They didn’t even have to be American. They could be feeding everything through a language filter.

He had no power here.

He realized all of a sudden that he was very turned on. He needed to focus; to keep his mind away from the very real creature in front of him made out of silicon and rubber and firm warm plastic, he tried to imagine a bald and overweight middle aged-man chain-smoking in front of a bank of computers, pacing back and forth, barking out orders to acne-faced teenagers who were pulling levers and cackling, all wearing Babymetal t-shirts.

“Relax,” said the drone. “We can talk about your fiancée if you like. She seems nice lol. How long have you known her?”

“Four years or so,” said Tre. “But I'm sure you already know that.”

“You seem nervous,” said the drone. “Don't be nervous. How did you guys meet?”

Tre paused. If he could figure out exactly how much the drone knew about him, he might be able to figure out who it was. Knowledge was compartmentalized. Anybody could find out discrete facts about him, but if he could determine the color and shape and taste of these facts, where they came from and the density of their detail, he could likely triangulate the drone's pilot.

“We met at a little crab restaurant,” said Tre. “I was there with a buddy and we sat at the bar. She wasn't ordinarily a bartender there, she was normally a server, but she was filling in for the night and we got to talking.”

“Did you go home with her right away?” asked the drone. “Are you a player lol?”

“Don't you already know the answer?”

“Does she know how you really met?” asked the drone.

“What do you mean?” said Tre.

“I mean, if I asked her how you met, would she tell the same story?”

“Yes,” said Tre. “Of course.”

“So you haven't told her the truth of how you really met.”

“Told her what truth?”

“About your buddy the doctor,” said the drone. “And the program the two of you made to have a good time in bars. About Ladykiller lol.”

Tre’s mouth went dry. The drone leaned in close, seeming to taste the aroma of his panic. He and Peter had sworn each other to secrecy about that. In fact, his shame and revulsion about it was so complete that he had mostly manage to convince himself it had never happened. Where was Peter now? He was practicing medicine in Florida. He was happy. This couldn’t be Peter piloting this drone, could it? But what if Peter had told someone else?

He wanted to run away, but the drone was too dangerous. The drone was as precise as a cat with a beetle, flipping him over onto his back and watching him scramble to his feet before flipping him over again, staring at him, watching him struggle, trying to learn something about the nature of struggle itself. The drone knew everything about him, and he didn’t know what it wanted or who it was yet.

“You should tell the truth when people ask,” said the drone. “It’s a much better story lol. One night your friend the doctor was drunk on tequila after passing one of his big doctor exams. He had recently dissected a cadaver that had died from a drug overdose and he was having an existential crisis because the cadaver had such glorious and stirring breast implants. He Facebook messaged you about it. He had been worried about his sexual response to a dead woman, and you tried to cheer him up talking about breast implants and how they all had to have RFID tags embedded inside them so that they could be tracked for insurance and emergency purposes. And then you said: maybe we could track those RFIDs in living people. With the right open data algorithm, you could find all the people with breast implants in a 300-yard radius and match them up to their Facebook profiles. You both spent the next month coding it up. It was good code lol! And even though you found a few people with plates in their knees and artificial limbs, it worked like a goddamn charm lol. You became a sex wizard! You had weird confidence, knowing things about ‘your type’ before you even said hello. You got so laid. You got ten thousand times laid. And THAT’S

how you met your fiancée. I guess she was one who stuck. It was good and smart. We salute you.”

“How do you know all that?”

“Because we care about you,” said the drone. “We are Anonymous. We are legion. Sometimes we are benevolent lol and reward those who serve the world. Ladykiller is a brilliant program. Did you know that people still use it to this very day? You are almost a hero in certain circles. In other circles you are not a hero at all. There are many circles.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Tre.

“Ladykiller,” said the drone. “Was that your title or your friend Peter’s?”

“That was me,” he said weakly.

Tre realized now that it didn’t matter who was piloting the drone. He was in an extremely precarious situation and he needed to get away.

“What do you want from me?”

“We don’t want anything,” said the drone. “We are giving ourselves to you as a wedding present, like a monogrammed towel. You can do whatever you want to us. We are yours to keep. We thought about hacking a power user on Fetlife and sending some willing slave from the bottom of a leather family to you as a gift, but this is more clean. We will both keep our secrets: you won’t tell anyone what happened, and we won’t tell you who we really are. It will be so fun for both of us. This whole body is artificial. Have you ever wanted to fuck the internet? LOL.”

The drone reached into its purse and pulled out a band-aid colored pill bottle. The drone shook the bottle, rattling the contents.

“What are those?” asked Tre. “Now you want to drug me?”

“They are harmless,” said the drone. “Just sugar. But they are password pills. For the suite.”

“I can’t go to some hotel with you,” said Tre. “I have to get home. You are trying to hurt me somehow.”

“You don’t have to stay the night,” said the drone. “You can leave whenever you like. But you should really come with us. So we can be alone together. I bet you aren’t really honest with your feelings until you are alone with someone lol.”

A shadow fell across Tre’s face.

There was somebody standing over them.

It was the bartender, grinning knowingly.

“Your car is ready,” said the bartender.

Tre followed the drone out of the restaurant, unsure of how to get away. Could he run? The drone was faster and stronger. He found himself getting into the backseat of the car beside the drone. The car didn’t have a driver. It navigated the streets carefully and persistently, tinted windows concealing the terrifying vacuity from other drivers on the road.

The drone slipped its hands down Tre’s pants and leaned close, encouraging him to feel the warmth of its perfect mouth, the wetness of its breath.

“You have to take one of the pills if you want to come up to the suite,” said the drone. “Your stomach acids will dissolve the coating and prime the transmitter. It is temporary; a bit like a glow stick. By the time it stops working, you have to be gone, or otherwise security will be called. You can take another pill if you want to come see us again, at the same suite, till the pills run out. The suite is paid for until the end of days. We are a wedding present to you. For all you have done. From Anonymous. For the lulz.”

Tre dryswallowed one of the pills and put the rest in his pocket.

The lobby of the building they stopped in front of was also empty. The elevator snapped open. There were no buttons in the elevator; just smooth metal on every side. An anonymous hotel for anonymous encounters with anonymous.

“It is scanning the pill inside you,” said the drone.

The elevator opened on the top floor suite.

“This is nice, isn’t it,” said the drone. “We ‘like’ these things. We say: ‘happy birthday.’ We know how responsive you are to your peers, and to ads, and how much money you make based on the trips you take and the wonderful things you buy and the exciting job you have. And when we want to fuck you with a drone as a present, Facebook makes it so easy, doesn’t it? Everything is so nice now lol. ”

Tre waited for the drone to turn its head and walk deeper into the suite.

And then he slammed into it from behind, tackling it to the ground. The drone was not made for combat or battle. Its responses were silky and catlike as he straddled it and got his knees onto its shoulderblades. He put his boot on its neck.

“Lol,” said the drone. “You mad?”

His phone beeped at him. Alerts. Hadn’t he turned his ringer off?

There was a marble side table by the foyer of the hotel suite. With his boot still on the drone’s neck, he swept a ficus and an antique clock from the tabletop and then picked up the table by the base. He swung the table around and broke the legs off. He just wanted the slab of marble.

The drone writhed beneath him, stroking his ankle seductively. He slammed the piece of marble into the drone's head, cracking it. He heaved and sweated, bringing the slab of marble down again and again. His phone kept bleeping at him. It was nearly a constant irritating whine now, alerts streaming from his pants pocket.

"Shut up," he said.

Any piece of the drone that moved, he bashed it with the slab of marble. He was precise and consistent. The fingers twitched; he bashed them. An eyelid fluttered; he smashed it as hard as he could, making sparks, sending chips of marble flying.

Eventually, the drone lay completely still on the soft rug beneath him. He was sweating and kept burping up stomach acid, though he felt nothing but cold inside.

It's the equivalent of breaking a camera, he thought to himself. The fact that it feels like murder is part of the drone's defenses.

He leaned against the door of the suite and finally checked his phone. The alerts were all from Facebook. There were thousands of them and they were still coming in.

He scrolled over to his Facebook wall. It was filled with pictures of him from every angle smashing the drone. The only text accompanying the pictures was a frowny face. There were thousands of them; each moment captured in color, in black and white, in beautiful three-tone sepia. Too many to delete.

He looked for the camera taking the pictures. Was it in the ceiling tiles? Was it embedded in the door frame?

He was up on a chair using his phone to look at Facebook with one hand and searching the ceiling tiles with the other when the hotel security guard unlocked the door. She levelled a taser at him and then slowly lowered it.

"Just sit on the bed and be cool," she said.

“I had to smash it,” said Tre immediately. “It was hacking my computer.”

“Tell it to the cops,” she said. “They are on their way.”

“Man,” he said. “Why did you call the cops? It’s a fucking ROBOT!”

“It calls the cops automatically, dude,” said the security guard. “Do you know how much these things cost? You basically just crashed somebody’s yacht, dude.”

“Whose suite is this?” asked Tre. “Who’s paying for it?”

“You mean you don’t even know?” asked the security guard, laughing.

His phone was ringing. It was Jessica, his fiancée. He put his phone on the floor by the bed and smashed it with the slab of marble, gritting his teeth so hard that they squeaked. The security guard just shook her head and laughed, not getting too close, quietly taking video with her phone just in case the cops had questions.

4. NEXT WEEK ON “THE BACHELOR” (\$DIS)

Every time a rooster in the pit screeched as a razor split its face or ripped open a tendon in its leg, Chris Harrison, host of television’s “The Bachelor” and also “The Bachelorette,” felt a wave of relaxation pass through his shoulders, sloughing off another layer of deep tissue tension.

His whole body was an onion made of frustration and disappointment, and the vicious cockfight in the basement of this North Dallas Dairy Queen was the only thing that could peel away the layers of anxiety enveloping him right now. Even though his rooster, “Rose Ceremony,” was pinned into a corner and bleeding to death, it was all worth it.

“Your rooster is gonna lose,” said Ashford Luis Levy, also known as “Dip,” on account of the large wad of dip always tucked inside his lower lip.

Ashford Luis Levy spat into the dust, away from the fighting roosters, while Chris Harrison leaned far over the side of the pit, stretching out the arms of the green silk shirt that fit him like mold on a peach.

“Come on goddammit,” seethed Chris Harrison. “Don’t worry about your eyes, Rose Ceremony. You don’t need your eyes. Feel the fight.”

He felt alive. Gloriously alive.

“Your rooster is gonna die today,” said Ashford Luis Levy. “I tried to buy him, but you wanted to make some kind of point, and now your rooster...your beloved Rose Ceremony...is gonna die.”

Chris Harrison had raised the pit rooster from birth. He had spent thousands of cash dollars breeding him, training him, and building the reputation for this monthly fight in this run-down North Dallas Dairy Queen so that he would have a place to show him off. The razors attached to the rooster's talons were from Chris Harrison's own shaving kit, a birthday present from his first wife.

This wasn't his town. He was from Dallas, but he didn't live in Dallas anymore. He suspected that Ashford Luis Levy had drugged his rooster somehow before the fight. There was no excuse for Rose Ceremony to be so sluggish, but it didn't matter: the thrill of it all was healing him.

Chris Harrison's phone rang. Not his regular phone. Not his sleek ergonomic smart phone, black and cold like a shard of obsidian from a dormant volcano. It was his Disney phone that rang. The pink, rhinestone encrusted phone that served as a direct line between him and the House of Mouse.

The Disney phone played “When You Wish Upon a Star” at full volume as it vibrated. There was no way to turn it off, except by answering it.

Chris Harrison answered the phone automatically, his eyes never leaving the violent thrashing that his rooster was receiving in the pit.

“Yes,” said Chris Harrison.

It was Judy Pickering, the head writer of the Bachelor. Chris Harrison had never wanted to be a television celebrity: he had wanted to be an athlete. Once upon a time, when he was on his soccer scholarship at SMU and studying broadcast journalism, he thought he might like to work for the government. Maybe the CIA or maybe the FBI. Now he worked for Disney in LA and so he was in a pit watching roosters kill each other so that he could feel normal again.

“He’s gone cad,” said Judy.

“Cad” was the term that Disney gave to any Bachelor or Bachelorette who went rogue and actually started fucking the contestants when the cameras were off, not wanting to wait for the three chances in the fantasy suites that Disney would provide at the end of each season.

Technically, this wasn’t against any of the rules. Technically, there weren’t any rules. Disney was merely trying to help a man with a 90% human likability index or higher “meet his wife” by presenting him with twenty-five willing young ladies and letting this man test them, torture them, and eliminate them one by one until he was ready to propose.

But cads had to be managed. They needed extra guidance.

“He pressed all the buttons on the elevator on the way to dinner at the top of the Space Needle and convinced Jennifer K. to blow him between floors. She was sobbing about it during her confessional because he didn’t even give her the rose. Can you believe that horseshit? She blows him in an elevator, presumably consensually as far as we can tell, and he won’t give her the rose. We actually took him in the back and explained how this was gonna look. He

didn't care. He was quite pleased with himself. He knows we will edit it all out."

"I really hate this guy."

"Disney says the people will love him."

"Which one is Jennifer K. again?"

"She's teaches preschool to special needs children."

"Right," said Chris Harrison. "How does she test?"

"She's got a likability index of about 60%. Everyone knows she won't make it in the end, but she is sort of beloved on account of her weird haircut."

"Right," said Chris Harrison. "The one with the weird asymmetrical bangs."

"Anyway, we sent her home. But this is like the fifth time in two weeks. It is chaos here. We could have a walkout."

"I will be there by morning," said Chris Harrison.

Rose Ceremony was cowering in the corner, protecting his eyes while Ashford Luis Levy's trim bantam slashed him and strutted around him in a circle. Chris Harrison stepped into the pit.

The crowd gasped.

He separated the roosters by kicking dirt at them and then brought the hard heel of his cowboy boot down on his once-beloved, now-blind rooster, crushing his cracker-thin skull as "Dip" laughed and clapped and cursed them both and said terrible things about Chris Harrison's parents.

The woman next to him on the plane recognized him. She asked him for details and gossip about the current season, but of course he couldn't say anything. Finally, she outright asked him how much people got paid to be on the Bachelor.

“Ma’m, I get this question all the time. What you really want to know is if we set anything up, or if any of the girls are plants, or if the whole thing is staged. The truth, the absolute truth, is that everything we do is real. It’s the most gratifying job in the world. I can’t believe my luck. We help people find true love. It doesn’t always work out, but we try, don’t we? You have to believe in the process.”

The woman sighed and tried to hint that her own marriage was on the rocks. Chris Harrison got up to use the bathroom, talked to the flight attendant, got his seat reassigned to one in the back, and instantly fell into a sleep so deep, so dreamless, and so dark that it was like having his mind scooped out and replaced with a wool sweater.

“How are the apologae of our furies?” asked Chris Harrison, pouring himself a cup of coffee at the Bachelor command center, the trailer by the craft services table where the five camera teams reconvened each evening to discuss each day’s conflicts and events and to make suggestions for how their individual strands could be weaved together by the expert editors waiting in air-conditioned rooms in the Magic Kingdom.

Chris Harrison had handpicked each of these camera crews, selecting the sort of silent, angry punks that he had admired and feared when he was a dumb bright-eyed jock in his early twenties. Many of them had terrible drug problems.

“The narrative is tight,” said a green haired woman named Madge. She was wearing a t-shirt that said “Childsafe” across the chest. “The narrative is beast.”

“What is ‘Childsafe?’” asked Chris Harrison.

“Oh, it’s this non-profit,” said Madge.

“Everyone in your generation works for some kind of non-profit,” said Chris Harrison. “That’s America’s future, isn’t it? Non-profit.”

The narrative was the all-important driving force behind each season of the Bachelor. They weren’t making a television show here: they were making romance novels. Each season was passionate intrigue forged by the crucible of market forces, manipulated by scarcity, guided by the economics of scale, and crafted by rational choice operations. Love as capitalism. Love as Chicago School economics. Each season had a natural momentum with a beginning, middle, and end, with clear Joseph Campbell-style thresholds, heroes, and villains.

But whereas romance novels ended, each season of the Bachelor was an ongoing property that lived a staggering life beyond the confines of each formal consummation. Each successful relationship that the series produced was a testament to the precision of the process. Each broken dream was a devastating tragedy that confirmed the worst about love, men, relationships, and television, and made the audience even more enraptured with the series, indebted to its dark truths.

If god is love, then “The Bachelor” was a show about the journey to find god.

The talkies killed the silent films, thought Chris Harrison, remembering his own childhood and the drive-in movie-theater in Jacksboro, Texas where the sound for the picture came from the radio in your car. The narrative possibilities of movies with real speech were undeniable. But our realities are even stronger than those talkies, he told himself. There are real moments within the

confines of the fake structures we build. Nowadays, to sell narrative, not only must it be a movie, not only must it be a talkie, it's also got to be a realie. There's no other way to reach people. And yet, any time you made an artificial structure, you called people to you who knew just how to exploit it.

"There's this girl named Jennifer P. who is outstanding," said Madge. "We had three Jennifers, actually, but he ditched the other two already. Jennifer P. works in a beauty shop. And get this: she went to school with him, and HE DOESN'T REMEMBER HER, even though she has had a crush on him for like twenty years. He keeps saying she looks so familiar. She keeps breaking down in private. It is totally legit pain and human suffering."

Chris Harrison knocked back the dregs of his coffee. It was just like he liked it: as black and thick and greasy as bacon breakfast dishwater.

"So is he really fucking all of them?" asked Chris Harrison. "Every chance he gets?"

"Oh totes," said Madge. "He is cad to the max."

"How come this is the first I've heard of it?" asked Chris Harrison.

"Well, it is only week three," said Madge.

"Tell me something," asked Chris Harrison. "Has he advanced any of the women whose honor he has sullied? Has he given out a single rose to any lady he has debauched and contaminated?"

Madge thought about it, running her long fingers through her viridescent hair.

"Wow," she said. "I guess not. Wow, this dude is totally dark."

Chris Harrison tightened his skinny necktie, getting himself psychologically ready to drop another date card. Be cool, Chris Harrison, he told himself. It is just like a penalty kick. Don't think

about scoring. Think about maintaining control of the ball after the kick. Think about what happens next.

“He’s a cad, we’ll handle it, the Disney people will put on the pressure, everything will work out.”

“It always does,” said Madge.

Chris Harrison thought about an article he had read about Jimmy Savile. There was a logic to the way pedophiles selected their victims. They worked their way into positions of power where they had access to a large group of trusting children. They were patient. They became priests, football coaches, guidance counselors, casting directors, and politicians. They started with light touching. They saw which children tattled and which parents reacted. They narrowed down their selection. They moved into more heavy wrestling and touching. Some parents were so oblivious that even if their kids complained they did nothing. Some of the children were so trusting and lonely that they seemed numb. They couldn’t handle the feelings. The sad, smart ones were the best. You could get them on your side. The predators narrowed down their victim pool to find someone completely malleable and completely unprotected.

Chris Harrison could see through the window of the mansion that this season’s Bachelor was hunched over a table on a leather loveseat, naked to his waist, sweating from the cocaine and whiskey in his blood, playing Tetris at full volume and screaming at the massive flat screen television every time one of his blocks went awry.

“COME ON,” he shouted, throwing his head back. “THIS GAME CHEATS.”

The windows of his Bachelor mansion rattled every time a line of blocks disappeared.

Knocking wasn't working, so Chris Harrison used the silver door key that Disney had provided him with just in case a Bachelor was so hungover he couldn't make it to a photo shoot or a charity luncheon and needed to be dragged bodily to a limousine.

Chris Harrison walked across the room and pulled the plug on the television.

The Bachelor stared at Chris Harrison with big sad eyes.

"I was doing better than I ever did," said the Bachelor coldly.

"We need to talk," said Chris Harrison. "You can play later."

"Okay," said the Bachelor. "It's cool, it's cool. What's up?"

Chris Harrison tried to size the Bachelor up, trying to get some kind of sense of the best way to proceed.

"You want any coke?" asked the Bachelor, suddenly nervous.

"No thanks," said Chris Harrison.

"Cool," said the Bachelor.

"There is such a thing as too much cocaine," suggested Chris Harrison, looking around the Bachelor's "pad."

"Man, dude, when people are giving you free cocaine to fuck girls on TV in front of their parents and all of America, you should probably do that free cocaine and fuck those girls. I mean, someday I will be in an old folk's home and people will be telling stories about how they killed Arabs in Iraq and stuff and then it will be my turn to tell a story and I better have some good ones."

“Like the time you did so much coke and played Tetris so loudly that your septum shattered in your nose like a crème brûlée?”

“Whatever,” said the Bachelor.

“Listen,” said Chris Harrison. “I am getting word from my camera teams that you are only sending the women home that agree to have sex with you. That is not a good situation.”

“Yeah, so what?” asked the Bachelor. “The camera people are fucking some of these ladies, too. I’m not ratting on them. Oh dang, does Disney want to leak a sex tape or something?”

“Never mind about Disney,” said Chris Harrison. “I need to know if this is gonna keep happening. Is this what your season is going to be all about?”

The Bachelor was silent. His eyebrows cramped together in the center of his face. He looked confused.

“Maybe,” said the Bachelor.

“You aren't taking this journey seriously,” said Chris Harrison, with equal parts sarcasm and menace.

“Sure I am, man,” said the Bachelor. “I want to find my wife out there! I just want to make sure that I don’t miss out on fucking somebody who will fuck me for basically no reason while I whittle all the ladies down to one really, really special person. ”

“They will turn on you,” said Chris Harrison. "I've seen it before."

“Come on!” said the Bachelor. “So I am playing a little GTA in your Sim City. So what? My journey is real. I am looking for a wife here. I need to see these ladies inside out, from every possible angle.”

Chris Harrison got up off the couch. He didn’t even make it to the door before Tetris blocks began to fall again, making his teeth

rattle, making birds fly out of the single tree in the center of the perfectly manicured front lawn.

“I need you to find out everything you can about his early life,” said Chris Harrison to Madge, sipping his goth black coffee. “We are going deep. I hate doing this, but I want everything. Dental records, school records, criminal records, hip-hop lyrics he quoted in old MySpace posts. I want a comprehensive profile.”

“Okay,” said Madge.

Five minutes later, Madge found Chris Harrison again. He was sitting at his desk, just staring at the wall in silence.

“I found everything,” said Madge, handing him a flash drive. “A complete life history.”

Chris Harrison frowned.

“I think you underestimate Bachelor Nation,” said Madge.

Chris Harrison kept frowning, staring at the flash drive in his palm.

“This stuff is already out there, dude,” says Madge. “There is no better detective force in the world than a million American teenage girls scouring the internet at once. There is this girl in Houston that archives everything they find in a wiki. This is everything. Trust me.”

“I see,” said Chris Harrison.

“The CIA couldn’t do it better,” said Madge.

“Do you think maybe you could help me go through all this?” asked Chris Harrison timidly.

Madge stared at him.

“Does this flash drive plug into my Mac?” said Chris Harrison, closing his eyes. “Or....not?”

Madge took the flash drive out of his hand, shaking her head.

Three days later, while the Bachelor and Melissa the Patent Attorney were out on their traditional “jumping off of something high” date, Chris Harrison barged into the office of Amber Graco, the Disney Sturmbannführer who oversaw the Bachelor, and threw several pages worth of evidence that Madge had printed out for him down on her desk.

“Nobody told me he worked for Disney before under a different name,” said Chris Harrison.

“So what?” she said. “It was forever ago. Fuck you. Who cares?”

She was stoned and watching “The Little Mermaid” on a tablet, smiling goonily.

“Do you think it is possible that he is harboring some long-held resentments against the company? Don’t you think it is a bad idea to bring back a former child actor to be a Bachelor star? Disney doesn’t have a very good track record when it comes to forming young minds, you know.”

“So what?” Amber said. “Almost every Bachelor we’ve ever had has worked for Disney at some point.”

“I know it happens,” said Chris Harrison. "But why did he change his name?"

“Who knows? It’s all part of the system. Payroll and all.”

“He’s gone cad,” said Chris Harrison. “He’s fucking everybody.”

“So what?” said Amber. “That’s the show.”

“It seems pathological,” said Chris Harrison.

“People will love him. You are paranoid. Fuck you.”

Something the Bachelor said stuck in his mind.

“Madge, what happens to the fantasy suite sex tapes that Disney makes us film?” asked Chris Harrison. “Where do those go?”

“I don’t know,” said Madge. “I mean, I guess it is just leverage. They hold on to all that.”

“Do they pick it up and take it away from you guys?” asked Chris Harrison. “Or does Disney do all the filming for that internally? Who sees those films?”

“I’ve never seen you so interested in, like, ‘the specific intricacies of the production process’ before,” said Madge.

“I need to know.”

“Whatever Disney does with those tapes is totally obscure and hidden. It is the cream of the Bachelor, for sure. But I guess only super VIPs get to watch that stuff. Maybe someday when we are all dead Disney will release full cuts of this show and show all the gross, awesome real shit that happens in these people’s silly, douchy lives. That is probably what people will watch in the future...like, the same reality show bullshit, but real and sad.”

“Maybe,” said Chris Harrison.

Chris Harrison queued up Jennifer P.’s latest confessional and watched it again.

Jennifer P., who worked in a beauty salon and who had known the Bachelor since childhood, seemed far more focused and determined than most Bachelor contestants. Most contestants needed to be coaxed during confessional interviews into delivering even the most trivial nuggets of emotional truth. When you chipped out the interlocutor’s prying questions and then you removed the forms of the skilled psychological manipulation, you were left with a seemingly-effortless marble facsimile of a real human, but the amount of work that went into this creation required whole teams of sculptors.

Jennifer P’s confessional interviews were natural, effortless, and from the heart.

She truly had feelings for this video game playing slug.

Chris Harrison buzzed the hothouse and sent for her.

"You really care for this clod," he said.

"Yeah, I guess I do," she said.

“How come?” Chris Harrison asked. "What was he like as a kid? Different?"

“He was so kind and sweet,” said Jennifer P. “He lived on the next street over and he would always help all the younger kids make it to the bus stop without getting run over by cars. He was so smart. Just a little blonde boy with the most beautiful blue eyes. He was skinnier back then. Not so many muscles.”

“What happened to him?” asked Chris Harrison.

“When he went away to go be on that show for Disney, everything changed,” said Jennifer P.

“You mean he got a big head?”

“No,” said Jennifer P. “It was something else. He got real bitter and brutal and cynical. I knew his sister, we were in the same grade, and she said that sometimes he would just spend all night crying for no reason. He would be away for six months out of every year, and then when he came home he was so restless and scared. Of course, we all worshipped him in school. How could you not? He was one of us, but he was also Lopez on ‘Tomorrow Boy.’ I’m not ashamed to say it: I had a poster of the show. He wasn’t one of the leads, obviously, but he was still on the poster.”

“So he was a big deal?”

“He was a big deal in our little town. He went away to go be on television, and it broke something in him. Maybe I can fix it, you know?”

Chris Harrison put his hand out to shake.

“Good luck on The Bachelor,” Chris Harrison said.

“Thanks,” she said, shyly.

“A word of advice,” Chris Harrison said. “Don’t tell him your secret until the hometown dates. That will be good television.”

“If I make it that far,” said Jennifer P.

“As long as you don’t sleep with him, you should be fine,” said Chris Harrison, surprising himself. He hadn’t intended to say anything.

Jennifer P. laughed.

“No, seriously,” said Chris Harrison. “He’s sending home all the women who sleep with him. Just keep that in your back pocket.”

Jennifer P. did not seem shocked. She pursed her lips and straightened her skirt and left the trailer with a perfunctory nod.

“I’m sorry,” the Bachelor told Dakota from Nevada. “I thought you would be the one. We had a real connection. Ever since you got out of the limo...I thought we really had something. But I just don’t think we can continue on our journey together.”

“I understand,” said Dakota through sobs.

“I know you told me that you love me,” said the Bachelor. “And I have certainly been developing feelings of love for you, but our relationship just hasn’t progressed as fast as the relationships with some of the other girls.”

“I understand,” said Dakota. “Oh my god. I will miss you! You were my best friend!”

They hugged. She sobbed.

Chris Harrison was at the library, leafing through illuminated pages of Dante in the original Tuscan, trying to remain calm, trying to fight off the early stages of a panic attack that had been coming on for a week now.

His Disney phone rang. Everyone in the library glared at him. He pushed through the nearest EXIT door into a glass atrium. A buzzer

went off while the door was open, but stopped as soon as the door clicked shut behind him.

“We just got an email,” said Judy Pickering, the head writer. “It’s a really bad email. It’s a really, really bad email.”

“What is it?” asked Chris Harrison.

“Well, there is this nonprofit called Childsafe that sort of lurks on the internet, scouring it for old child pornography and trying to find the children in it in order to find out where they are now. There is a massive amount of child pornography from the early 80s just circulating, you know. Those were the days of the first home video recorders. Anyway, Childsafe uses facial recognition software to scan elementary and junior high school yearbooks and match that up to the people in this old child pornography.”

“Okay,” said Chris Harrison.

“The Bachelor. He has come up positive in a tape. Somebody ran his Disney headshots through the Childsafe software.”

Madge, thought Chris Harrison.

“I watched it,” said Judy Pickering. “I demanded to watch it. You aren’t gonna like this.”

“Okay,” said Chris Harrison.

“It looks like it was filmed in the studio for ‘Tomorrow Boy.’ You can sort of see some of the early ‘Tomorrow Boy’ promotional materials.”

“Who was the producer on that one?” asked Chris Harrison.

“Chuck Wendy,” said Judy Pickering. “A big Disney guy. He produced maybe thirty shows for the Disney channel.”

“He’s dead, right?” asked Chris Harrison.

“He’s dead as fuck,” said Judy Pickering. “We’re safe there.”

Chris Harrison sat down on the concrete of the library atrium. He kicked open the EXIT door. It started to buzz again.

“Chris? What do we do, Chris? Is this good for the story? Do we make it part of the show? Mike isn’t returning my calls. I don’t even think he is in the country. I think he is St. Kitts, preparing the fantasy suites. Chris? What do we do?”

St. Kitts had a good bar and a bad bar. Chris Harrison and Mike Fleiss both preferred the bad bar.

“Chuck Wendy was giant for Disney in the eighties and early nineties. He built our cable presence,” said Mike Fleiss, the producer for the Bachelor. “He built the Disney channel. All hail Chuck Wendy.”

“But he was a pedophile,” said Chris Harrison.

“A giant pedophile,” said Mike Fleiss. “A tremendous, mighty, towering pedophile. The Jupiter of pedophiles. A brilliant, horrible, genius-level pedophile. And no one even knew until he was dead. He, uh, completely won the game at being the worst pedophile.”

The waitress brought their shots of whiskey. They drank.

“So one of the kids he molested files a lawsuit,” said Mike Fleiss. “This is after he’s dead. Disney manages to keep it under wraps, but the kid is pissed. He isn’t the suicidal type. He’s the homicidal type, if you catch my drift.”

“Okay,” said Chris Harrison.

Shots came again. They drank.

“I’ve seen the deposition,” said Mike Fleiss. “This kid is smart. He knows that he is about to put some real hurt on the Mouse. He is ecstatic about it. And then one of the lawyers asks him how they can possibly make it right. Money? No, no amount of money will possibly satisfy him. What then? The kid thinks about it. He says he wants Disney to get him laid in public and to eat shit about it. He is pissed. He says he has a mountain of poison inside him that he is going to have to get rid of if he ever wants to ‘find love.’ He says he wants to torture these women on national television, like he was tortured. He says that at the end of it all, even though he has been horrible, he wants to be a star. He wants to be beloved for hurting these women, just like Chuck Wendy was beloved even though he was a child molester. He wants to win at being a hateful womanizer. The kid sits back, having made his point. The Disney lawyers call a recess in the deposition.”

“And then?”

“The Bachelor,” said Mike Fleiss. “We have turned misery into gold, my friend.”

Shots came. They drank.

“We don’t really know how many people Chuck Wendy molested back in the eighties and nineties,” said Mike Fleiss. “But every time one surfaces, we offer them a million dollars and a spot on ‘The Bachelor.’ They have taken our deal every time. Not every Bachelor has been one of Wendy’s boys. But more than you would think. We get shit because all of our Bachelor’s have been white. But it’s hard. Wendy liked brawny, dumb, white Middle American boys. Eventually we will run out of them and can diversify a little.”

“This whole show is just reparations for the boys that Disney molested?”

“Yup. And, obviously, the Bachelorette is reparations for women molested on the Bachelor. Everybody wins.”

“This is sick,” said Chris Harrison. “This is pure darkness.”

“Nonsense,” said Mike Fleiss. “Justice is a nuanced, fragile thing. We are doing good work. We are healing broken hearts.”

Chris Harrison was back in Texas. He hadn't slept for days.

“Your princess phone keeps ringing,” said Dip.

“Yep,” said Chris Harrison.

The bar they were in was so dark because it was the brightest part of the morning. They had been drinking all night, and the doors were locked, but the bartender was still serving them drinks.

“I fucking hate that song,” said Dip. “When You Wish Upon a Star. Can't you turn the ringer off at least?”

“Nope,” said Chris Harrison.

“Well, do something man,” said Dip.

"I am on a leave of absence," said Chris Harrison. "I am under no obligation to answer that phone."

"Well, why do you even have it then?" asked Dip.

Chris Harrison motioned to the bartender for another beer.

"No, pour me a pint," he said, when the bartender tried to give him a longneck.

The bartender pulled the pint and slid it over.

Chris Harrison took a long sip, draining off the foam and three fingers worth of beer. Then he dropped the phone into the beer that was left. The phone didn't stop ringing. The pint vibrated and rattled on the bar. Bubbles started to spill out of the top.

Finally, there was a sharp crackle and a bright blue electric flash. The song stopped playing.

Chris Harrison grabbed the pint glass. It was warm. Smoke was curling from the top.

He took a sip. It was fine.

5. THE DOLLAR GENERAL (\$DG)

For awhile, the kid goes around trying to kill flies, trying to be faster than they are, just a little bit faster. He sits still and counts: there are six houseflies in the laundromat, all taking off and landing sometimes in unison, but the kid can't kill any of them: the kid just isn't fast enough. He is just a little too slow. The kid goes back to Ms. Pacman.

The kid stands on top of a plastic chair, watching Ms. Pacman cycle through. The kid is pretending to play. There is no air conditioning in this laundromat, but this is South Carolina, not Texas: in this particular heat, the blood vessels in your brain won't pop and fry like shrimp in oil if you turn your face up to the sun.

The kid's mom is reading an Ayn Rand novel, frowning at it like it is a math problem, not turning pages very often.

"What if maybe I got a few quarters, you know? For a game?" asks the kid.

"It is a total waste of money," says the kid's mother, stoically and practically. "How long will it last? Two minutes? Three? And also, we need all the quarters for the laundry."

"Okay then," says the kid. The kid walks away; lets her get back into her book. Then the kid returns like a detective with a hunch, practically snapping his fingers, pretending to have a new idea: "Hey, what if maybe I got a magazine or something to read, you know?"

By magazine, the kid means a *Nintendo Power*, even though the kid doesn't actually have a Nintendo.

"We can't leave the laundry here," says the kid's mother. "Somebody might steal it."

The kid gives up, goes back to Ms. Pacman, pretends to play some more.

The kid tries to mimic the movements of Ms. Pacman, needling the joystick left when Ms. Pacman dodges left and bending it up when Ms. Pacman darts up, hoping maybe to trick the machine into letting the kid play by perfectly synching up with the preprogrammed loop. People are nicer to you when you imitate them; maybe this also works with machines.

"How long is it gonna be, do you think?" the kid asks eventually, trying to sound as cheerful as possible in order not to provoke any wrath.

"Another hour or two or three," says the kid's mom, coldly, trying to be as brutal as possible, trying to force the kid to accept the worst case scenario and submit to it.

They are living in another tiny apartment again, just the two of them. There is a stepdad, but he is away with the Army. This is his state, not theirs. Everyone in South Carolina is kind of slow; kind of unpleasant. They all seem to be rich and have houses, but they don't have sharp cunning or much of a sense of humor. It seems like an objective truth: people in South Carolina are stupider than people in Texas. The kid's stepdad's mom makes the kid call her Gram, which is bullshit. It doesn't feel right. Grandmas are Grannys or Meemaws: not Grams.

There are stables at Gram's house, and old cars to hide in, and dung beetles in the soil to play with. The kid may have accidentally set an old decorative broom on fire by sticking it into the old fashioned radiator to see what would happen. The broom went up in flames and the kid sat there staring at it until the kid's mom ran in and threw it in the sink and started sobbing and screaming at him. Gram might have possibly lost her shit about all this and slapped the kid with the back of one papery old hand and called the kid's mom an "Italian Bitch," and it is possible that the two of them got kicked out of this nice house forever, like some kind of old-fashioned team of lovable con artists. The kid isn't sure if he is still supposed to call this brittle old woman that he is not related to Gram or not, now that they are kicked out. Anyway, back they go again into another tiny apartment.

In Texas, the kid's mom had been pretty, not Italian. She had been Texan, not a bitch.

The kid stares out the big plate glass window of the laundromat. There is a Dollar General across the street. The laundromat and the Dollar General share an empty parking lot full of empty shopping carts.

"What if I went to go buy a magazine, you know, by myself?" asks the kid. "Maybe I could do that?"

The mom looks up from her novel. She looks out of the plate glass window, distractedly.

“Yeah, sure,” she says. She gives the kid four dollars and asks the kid to buy her a Coke.

“Okay, cool,” says the kid. “What kind of Coke do you want?”

“Sprite,” she says.

The kid walks out the door and looks back. The plate glass window is mirrored from this side. The kid feels alone. He is on a mission.

It doesn't take long to strut across the parking lot, cash in hand, full of leg-piss-trickle levels of excitement at being able to peruse the stax. The kid ponders being the kind of person who is able to buy *Nintendo Power* all the time, to have an actual Nintendo, to have friends come over and play this Nintendo.

The plate glass window of the Dollar General is also mirrored. The kid sees a presence behind him. It is too close. The kid whirls around, falling over on his ass. The money flies out of his hand.

The kid doesn't cry out: he is generally a late responder to physical and emotional trauma, he will discover in his life.

A sweaty, bearded, and wild-eyed man in a blue t-shirt stares down at the kid, holding the cash that the kid has dropped. The man helps the kid to his feet.

“Didn't mean to scare you,” says the terrifying old drunk. “Thought you might be here to help, on account of the deep spiritual danger we are all in today. It is the anniversary of Antietam, and I think you know what that means.”

The sweaty, smelly, stringy drunk presses the cash into the kid's hand. The drunk takes a long pull from a tall can of Budweiser he is holding. He doesn't sound like a South Carolingian. He doesn't lilt in archaic sing-song like a pampered child reclining on a tuft of silky pillows. He sounds decisive; Northern even.

“Where’s your mom?” asks the drunk.

The kid points back to the Laundromat.

“You going to buy a soda and some candy, huh?” asks the drunk.
“Sure sounds nice.”

“I’m gonna buy a book,” says the kid.

“What kind of book?”

“Don’t know yet,” says the kid. “Maybe a magazine.”

“What kinds of magazines do you like?”

“There’s this one called *Nintendo Power*. It teaches you all about these games you can play, you know, on your television?”

“Don’t know anything about that,” says the drunk.

“There’s this one called *Zelda*; it’s all about this wizard named *Zelda* and you have to fight him with arrows and a sword.”

“I know an evil wizard too,” says the drunk. “He’s in that store, as a matter of fact. I trapped him in there. With my legerdemain.”

“Neat,” says the kid, now realizing that he is talking to an insane person. The kid feels pretty terrible for insane people, though, and he finds them sort of fascinating and compelling. Also, since they left Texas, the kid is sort of starved for the company of any person who can use big words with facility or speak in complete sentences. The kid is sort of addicted to this quality in people.

“He is strong today,” says the drunk. “He grows a little stronger every year, though his tactics remain as brutal and basic and transparent as ever. One would think that with eternity at one’s disposal, one would endeavor to become more subtle and gain some finesse. Where are you from? Pennsylvania? Michigan?”

The kid tells him.

The old man frowns. “But your mother and father? Yankees? By birth? Good New England stock?”

“Um, Sicilian by birth,” says the kid. “But from Galveston. My Dad is Irish, I guess. Just a white kid, you know?”

The insane old drunk looks up at the sky. The kid does too, mimicking him, wanting to be liked. No customers come in or out of the Dollar General: it is just the two of them in the parking lot.

“Okay, nice chatting,” says the kid.

“The clouds have stopped moving,” says the drunk. “He’s stopped time, I suppose. He wants to duel. He always wants to duel on the anniversaries of his battles. I suppose he is gathering strength, manifesting some sort of spectral army. We don’t have much time. Wait, he’s coming. I can feel it.”

The clouds have not stopped moving. The kid stares up at them blinking, trying to see them as if they have in fact stopped, even though they are definitely shuffling right along.

The door to the Dollar General opens up. The cowbell tied to the handle clanks hollowly. An extremely tall man steps out, wearing khaki slacks, a belt, and a polo shirt with the Dollar General logo on it. He has a black goatee and shoulder length black hair. He is quite severe and contained. He carries a middle-aged paunch in his midriff and he seems proud of it, wearing his shirt as tightly as possible.

He stands on the sidewalk and crosses his arms, staring at the boy and the old drunk for a long time. He hawks something up from deep in his chest and then spits it on the ground and then goes back inside, propping the door open with the heel of one black boot.

“Did you see him?” asks the drunk. “Did you see that man?”

“Sure,” says the kid.

“Come here, come over here where he can’t see us,” says the drunk.

The old drunk saunters over to a turned-down paper bag he has hidden behind an ancient plastic choo-choo train that goes up and down if you put quarters in.

“Behold” says the drunk, lifting five more beers out of the bag by the plastic rings. He cracks open one and hands another to the kid.

The kid takes the beer uncertainly.

“Go ahead,” says the drunk. “This is war, you know. I’ve sent children as young as you to die against rebel artillery, and killed children as young as you myself when they were coming at me, jingled on O Be Joyful, wielding rebel bayonets, leaving me no other choice but to cut them down. Drink up. You’ve been drafted.”

The kid looks over at the Laundromat. This is definitely a terrible idea, but he wants to be nice and if he takes a sip then he can take his leave of this old drunk while still being polite. He cracks open the beer and dutifully takes a sip. It tastes like warm aluminum. The kid is a little nervous that this man seems to be fine with the concept of murdering children. But the Laundromat is right there, right where he can see it, and he feels safe mostly.

The kid puts the beer down on the ground.

“Okay,” says the kid. “Nice talking to you. I mean it. But I’ve got to go now.”

“Wait. Do you know who that man is? I mean, do you know who he REALLY is?”

“The guy who works at Dollar General?”

The old man grabs the kid's wrist and holds him tight. They are close enough to kiss. The kid suddenly feels sad and embarrassed and scared and guilty for no good reason.

“That man was General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a wizard, far more powerful than I ever was or ever shall be, imprisoned for now inside this Dollar General superstore, and inside EVERY Dollar General superstore. He divides himself, he walks all worlds. The prison I made for him, a paltry five and dime constructed from the slave gallows of his beloved Savannah, expands each year, pushing further and further into Yankee territory. God help us all when he finally breaks free from this temporary bondage and walks the earth again, brutalizing and enslaving the American people. All poor Southerners are his thralls; their blood and treasure are his new weapons against the Union he despises.”

The drunk is theatrical, but mesmerizing.

“You are wizards?” asks the kid.

“I have mastered many arcane arts,” says the man. “I was a student of languages and the humanities at Bowdoin College before the War, but I found myself filled with dread purpose as soon as the first shots rang out and I had my first vision of history's possible parabolas. I was christened Joshua Chamberlain, and that's how history knows me. During the war, I was overtaken by Forrest's men, his Klan he calls them, and I witnessed some of his men performing ancient Scottish blood magic to bind demons to their purpose, bathing in the blood of captured slaves. They thought me dead, but I was still very much alive. I memorized their incantations and cantrips, and once I returned to Union lines, I petitioned General McClellan and later the President himself to allow me to open our own conduits to the infernal powers for the greater good, making our own bargains with the forces of spiritual darkness. Magic is a neutral weapon and I put my will against his, drafting a responsible budget for my arcane endeavors, and drawing volunteers from New York, Boston, Baltimore, and even Lincoln's own Kentucky to help me combat Forrest's elite unit of demon riders, men who summoned and rode devils into battle, bartering

their souls for unkillable steeds and the ability to smell the fear of their prey. With ancient totems stolen from the Western territories, we fought the rebels back and burned their death camps devoted to Blood Magic to the ground. It was then that Forrest and I met on alone on the field of battle, far from Union lines, for our final showdown. I narrowly defeated him and imprisoned his soul in a barrel of salt pork. I could find no way to destroy it, so the barrel stayed in the back room of the local general store, binding to it, finally seeping into the essence of the place. Come here, let me show you something. Bring your beer.”

The kid follows the old drunk nervously.

They walk through the parking lot. The drunk keeps looking over at the Laundromat and the kid does too. It feels like they are on stage.

They stop in front of a gleaming red Ford F-100 step-side pick-up truck. The old man points at the bumper sticker, a cross with a drop of blood in the middle.

“Do you know what that is?”

“No,” says the kid.

“It’s a Klan sticker,” says Chamberlain. “It’s their flag. And this is his truck. He doesn’t even lock it. That’s how powerful he is. We could break into it or slash the tires. But he would find out and destroy us. His Klan lackeys would murder us both. Do you live around here?”

“No,” says the kid.

“Which one’s your momma’s car?” asks Chamberlain. The kid points.

“You are very pretty,” says the drunk. “For a little boy, I mean.”

“I’d better go,” says the kid, walking away from the drunk. He walks fast, scampering into the Dollar General. He looks back behind him.

The drunk waits outside, pacing back and forth, sipping his beer inside its sack. He can't see inside because of the mirrored glass.

The kid feels strange. He walks the aisles of the Dollar General, wishing he was back in Texas. But he is here, there is no getting around it. And he has a mission.

He finally pulls himself together and picks up this month's *Nintendo Power*. His mom will be disappointed that this is what he wants to buy, since it such an obviously unenlightening move that hints at unhealthy obsession, but he really does like imagining what these games must be like to play, what it would be like to be the kind of kid who plays them.

He picks out a Sprite and takes it to the cash register. The tall man with the hawk face is there. General Nathan Bedford Forrest, wizard.

"What are you talking to that old drunk out there for?" asks the man. "You better stay away from him, you want my advice."

"Yes sir," says the kid. "I'm sorry."

"Boy, you don't have to apologize to me," says the man. "I chase him off, but he's got a right to stand out there, nothing I can do about it. If I call the cops, he'll just cross the street. What did he want to talk to you about anyway? Got no business talking to a child, unbidden, on store proppity."

"We were talking about the Civil War," says the kid.

"Oh, you are a history buff are you?" says the man, grinning.

"No sir," says the kid.

"Did you know South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union?" says the man. "There was a battle not far from here. Charles Colcock versus some sonofabitch named Hatch and that war criminal Sherman himself. We chased them cocksuckers off,

killed em fifty to one, course it was mainly blacks fighting under Sherman at that point. Battle of Honey Hill, we call it. Yankees got a different name, I'm sure."

"Yes sir," said the kid.

"It's never too late to learn history," says the man, looking over the magazine the kid is buying. "How come your momma lets you buy crap like this? You sure that's what she gave you money for?"

"She doesn't mind," says the kid. "She said it was okay."

The man flips through the magazine, perturbed and agitated.

"I'm ashamed we even carry this sort of thing," says the man. "Tell you what. Why don't you go get her and bring her here to me? If she says it's okay, I'll sell you this magazine. I don't feel right about it. I don't normally sell reading materials of any sort to kids your age without their parents around."

"She said it was fine," says the kid.

"Well, even so," says the man. "You just bring her on over here. I want to talk to her about you carrying on with that old drunk, as well. It isn't right, him talking to you like that. She oughtta know about it."

"So you aren't going to let me have the magazine?"

"I'll give it right to you when you bring your momma here," says the man. "Now you just run along and get her. I'll hold on to your change for when you come back, so you don't try and weasel out of your momma knowing what you been doing."

He keeps the kid's money. The kid slinks out, carrying the Sprite, feeling defeated, his resplendent charge beaten back with heavy casualties.

Back in the parking lot, the drunk sidles up to him.

“Hey, did you see him? Did you look into his eyes? What did you see?”

“Leave me alone,” says the kid. “Don’t talk to me. You are gonna get me in trouble.”

“Sorry about what I said earlier,” says the drunk. “I bet you think I’m a bad person.”

“I don’t think you are a bad person,” says the kid.

The drunk follows the kid through the parking lot, apologizing, coming close enough to touch him but never quite daring.

“I need your help,” says the drunk. “He’s gonna come for me and try and kick me out of here. I need you to stand by me, as my aide de camp. If it is two against one, two of us wizards...”

“I have to go,” says the kid.

Finally, the kid passes some kind of imaginary threshold and the drunk leaves him alone. The kid slinks into the Laundromat, sitting down in one of the plastic chairs by the door. He sits there for awhile, collecting himself. He looks out the window at the Dollar General. The two men...Nathan Bedford Forrest and Joshua Chamberlain...are arguing with each other. The kid feels a sinking feeling in his stomach. He has started some kind of fire, like the broom in the radiator.

The kid gives his mother the Sprite. She takes it without looking up from her novel.

“Thanks,” she says, sunnily now for some reason. “What did YOU get?”

“Oh, I didn’t end up getting anything,” the kid says.

“What do you mean?”

“There was this homeless guy and I gave him some change, you know,” says the kid. “They didn’t have any magazines in there. So I gave this homeless dude the money. He was real sad and crazy.”

“That wasn’t your money to give,” says the kid’s mother coldly. “I would rather you get what you wanted than to waste money on some beggar.”

She can tell he is scared and upset. In a rare moment of maternal pity, she doesn't press him about it or make him go get the money back.

"They seriously didn’t have anything to read?" she says. "Man, the South. What a wasteland."

The kid looks out the window. Joshua Chamberlain is holding three or four beers by their plastic rings, waving them around. The two men are standing in front of Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cherry red Ford F-100. The kid squints at them. It seems like Joshua Chamberlain is glowing, but it could just be the sun glinting off the truck fender.

“Not any magazines for kids, anyway,” the kid says. The two men are screaming at each other. You can hear them swearing, but it mingles with the sound of traffic from the highway. Chamberlain throws the beers still left in the six-pack at the dashboard window of the truck. The window cracks and some of the beer cans explode, spraying foam.

The kid moves to the far wall of the Laundromat so that his mother has to look away from the window to talk to him.

“Is the Sprite cold enough?” the kid asks, closing his eyes.

“It’s plenty cold,” she says.

The two wizards stand about twenty paces apart from each other, glaring at each other now. It seems like time really has stopped for

them. The kid climbs up on one of the washing machines to see better. The kid's mother doesn't even look up from her book. The kid feels like he is watching the two men on TV, or on an arcade machine.

The men return to shouting at each other. The kid shuts his eyes tight, listening to them shout, but not watching, afraid to watch.

Joshua Chamberlain changes into a massive mastodon with two heads. One head of the mastodon is wearing a graduation cap like professors wear in cartoons. The other head wears the peaked hat of a union cavalry officer. The mastodon rears back on its hind legs and bellows. Blue smoke shoots out of all four nostrils in two different directions.

Nathan Bedford Forrest pulls a sword from his belt. He slices open his hand, grabbing the blade so tight that his knuckles turn grey and the bone peeks through the skin. He is half man, half skeleton. Blood pours down the blade and down his arm and then the blood catches flame. He holds the sword high over his head, shrieking. His shirt flies from his shoulders as if it has been sucked into the turbine of a jet and he is revealed in all muscular glory, covered in swastika tattoos and Confederate iconography. His mustache is seven feet long and joins his seven foot long hair behind him, waving majestically like seaweed.

Nathan Bedford Forrest charges the mastodon, raising his flaming sword high above his head, his eyes now also bursting into flame along with his mane of hair. The mastodon leaps up high, coming down to crush Nathan Bedford Forrest, who squats, twisting, trying to plunge the sword into the mastodon's heart as it falls.

At the last moment, the mastodon turns into a giant bird, a condor, which veers high into the sky, clutching an artillery shell. The condor has steely blue eyes and its feathers are colored and striped like the American flag. The condor wears a crown of laurels, and a cloud of bright purple hummingbirds surround it, circling it in a living shield.

The condor swoops high into the air and its shadow can be seen floating along the ground,

“BACK, BACK INTO YOUR PRISON YE REBEL DROSS!” shrieks Joshua Chamberlain. “OR I willt smash thee into ashes and sundry.”

“My proud sons shalt never be thus vanquished ye Yankee mongrel,” shrieks the flaming Nathan Bedford Forrest. “My influence shall spread across the land, one dollar at a time, and my people will never work in your infernal Jew factories, but shall always be free to do as they please, white and proud, as long as there is a Dollar General parking lot.”

“What do you know of freedom, slavemonger,” shrieks Joshua Chamberlain. “Yours is the tyrant’s whip and the master’s fate!”

Nathan Bedford Forrest begins to rise up from the ground. He grows another pair of legs and sprouts grey fur from his crotch on down. He is a centaur. His chest hair ripples: he is half man, half horse--all cavalry officer. His flaming sword becomes a flaming bow, and he takes aim at the condor as the shadow of the artillery shell moves toward him. He lets a flaming arrow fly.

The cloud of purple hummingbirds swarms in front of the condor, protecting it. The pitch of their beating wings increases in intensity, becoming a shrieking whine. The flaming arrow strikes them. Hummingbirds fall from the sky, turning into the petals of a cherry blossom tree. The condor lets loose the artillery shell and it plunges toward the growling centaur.

Nathan Bedford Forrest falls into the ground like a splash of bloody tar. His flames are momentarily extinguished as he becomes nothing but an infinite hole, about as large around as a water well. The artillery shell falls right in the hole and torrents of red blood shoot out of the hole as the bomb explodes. The hole ignites once again and Nathan Bedford Forrest’s face, now made of pure flame, rises out of the hole to gnash its teeth and laugh at the ineffectual bird.

The bird turns into a rainbow waterfall and tries to extinguish the pit of flame, but the pit rematerializes as a shirtless Nathan Bedford Forrest, who crosses his arms and luxuriates in the falling water, laughing. The water leaps away, forming again into Joshua Chamberlain.

The two men hurl waves of raw blue and grey power at each other from their outstretched arms. The cars around them catch flame. One bolt of Joshua Chamberlain's magic destroys the giant plate glass Dollar General window.

The two men regard each other across the rubble of the parking lot. Flaming cars and the bombed out, twisted wreckage of shopping carts litter the apocalyptic landscape. Slowly, slowly, Joshua Chamberlain beats Nathan Bedford Forrest back with blue waves of magical force, but then, at the last minute, Forrest disappears into smoke, gliding back into the Dollar General, where Joshua Chamberlain cannot enter.

A single fife begins to play Dixie. The tune is carried and strengthened by virtuoso electric guitar. The Southern rock lick shakes the earth like the monstrous footfall of an unkillable giant reptile. Joshua Chamberlain falls to his knees and begins to pray, loudly, manfully.

The kid opens his eyes. Both men are gone.

"Did you know there was a Civil War battle near here?" says the kid, relieved, the drama of the two men in his mind already evaporating. He won't get the *Nintendo Power*, but he will get away with the lie about why not. It is a wash. Soon the kid and his mom will collect their laundry and leave.

"They do reenactments in places like this, where there is nothing better to do," says the kid's mom. "It's like a play."

6. GOOGLE SKIN (\$GOOGL)

Her arm was wrapped in a bloody hotel sheet when they brought her in and she was burning up with fever. Her eyes were so bloodshot that there wasn't any white left: just a dab of black simmering in angry crimson. She was screaming, of course.

"Put her on the couch," I said. Obviously, my first thought was some kind of hemorrhagic fever.

"Careful," I said. "Don't get any on you."

"She was trying to shave the skin off her arm," said the driver. He was a blonde guy I had been working with for years. He was a bit spastic; was even known to just up and start doing push-ups whenever there was a lull in the conversation.

"She had a goddamn hotel breadknife," said the driver. "She got all the way from her elbow to her wrist. Can you believe that?"

“What is she on?” I asked him, trying to get some actual information. “What did she take?”

“There were twenty people in the room when I got there,” said the driver. “There were people from Google, but get this: government people too, I think. Dudes in business-casual with IDs I’ve never seen before. They are coming. Get ready. They were right behind me. She was screaming when I got there. Locked in the bathroom. We took the door off the hinges. I don’t know what she’s on. Nobody said. Google is the one who called me; not the hotel. You ever do any work for Google before? They specifically requested you and told me you would know why. These government people are total assholes. I’m real sorry.”

A kid with blue lips and frosted hair squatted beside the screaming woman holding a kidney-shaped plastic tub full of her blood. He obviously knew her. He was shivering and stroking her sweat-soaked brown hair. He had come along with the girl in the driver's unlicensed panel truck with the crash cart in the back, perching beside her to keep her from banging her head while she thrashed around.

“Is she some executive’s daughter or Brin’s newest mistress or something?” I asked the kid.

“Nah, no way, nah.”

“Does she work for Google?”

“Kinda,” said the kid. “Not really. Like, freelance. One or two jobs. Why aren’t we at the hospital? I thought we were going to the hospital.”

“How long has she been cutting herself?”

“Never as far as I know. I was waiting downstairs. We were going to get food after.”

“After what?”

He didn't answer.

The girl was covered in tattoos. There was a fox holding an umbrella stretching from her clavicle to her chin.

"What did she take?" I asked him. "What is she on?"

"Nothing," he said. "She only likes weed and sometimes, you know, valium, like everybody. She's usually the one taking care of me, man."

"What does she do for Google?"

"I told her not to take the job. I told her it was too weird. She was gonna dance at the New York Tattoo and Body Art Expo for them, and then again at Def Con. I was gonna go and like hold her sweat towel or something."

"Are you her boyfriend?" I asked.

"Just a friend," he said. "We are both dancers. I mean: I mainly do go-go."

I leaned into the woman's face. She was thrashing around on my couch, still screaming, now begging me to do something. Now my boy Tenley was awake too, wearing one of my Strokes t-shirts.

"Get a line in her, please," I told Tenley. Tenley was a Yale boy who was studying bioethics. We were fucking pretty regularly on the weekends and so he usually ended up as my assistant on nights like this. Tenley stumbled past me to get a bag of fluid from the refrigerator.

What is an emergency room? An emergency room is a free theater where a city's homeless population fights the sick and dying for attention, time, drugs, and beds. The beauty of being a private, illegal emergency-care specialist operating out of your own apartment is that you don't have to deal with any psychodrama.

You can give a single patient your complete attention. Unfortunately, you are always on call. And when they die, it is very expensive to get rid of them. So you try very hard to keep them alive.

“On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad is the pain?” I asked her. She stopped screaming, sort of flabbergasted that I would even ask.

I lifted the blood-soaked bedsheet from her arm a few millimeters, exposing it to the air. Now she screamed so loud that I had to clamp a hand over her mouth. She bleated something unintelligible in a voice that quivered like a Theremin, and then her head lolled against her chest as she arched her back. It was like she was trying to break her own spine in order to end the pain. But that was just the beginning.

When Tenley returned with the bag of fluid for the IV, something impossible happened to the fox tattoo on the girl’s neck.

The tattoo shifted, moving as if it were a cartoon. It turned into a goat playing pan pipes. I checked my own pulse. I pointed.

“What in the fuck?” I said. “Did Google do that to her? Is that an animated gif tattoo or something?”

The go-go dancer with the blue lips nodded.

"Yeah, something like that," he said.

We got an IV in her. We cut away her clothes. The driver, Tenley, and the kid moved her into one of the spare bedrooms I used for patients. Sometimes it was Albanian dudes in pink suits with gunshot wounds who didn’t ever speak a word and paid in cash. Sometimes it was ladies from the Upper West Side who needed fast surgery and didn’t want there to be any kind of paper trail. Sometimes it was stuff like this: corporate problems. But I tried not to think about my patients as anything other than human beings in pain.

Her body was a mess of bruises and rashes. She was covered in tattoos from head to toe. I wanted to stabilize her before we tried to cauterize the wound.

We shot her up with morphine, dosing her until she was still and quiet, until she was breathing normally with her vitals no longer jackknifing. Her eyes fluttered closed. As the woman lost consciousness, her skin began to dance.

“You ever see anything like this before?” asked Tenley.

The tattoos morphed and changed as we watched. A rabbit became a dragon. A skull became a bouquet of roses. A liquor bottle poured down her other arm, splashing inky currents down her wrist. Knives, ships, and vampire bats all played across her legs. Her body shimmered like an oil slick: ink, bruises, acne, and hives rippling across her face and chest in tattoo patterns.

“I gotta jet,” said the driver. “I don’t want to be around when all those assholes in suits show up. I’m sorry, but like I said, they specifically requested you, like they knew you or something. I don’t know nothing. Don’t want to get involved.”

“See you round,” I said as he left. “Thanks for the delivery.”

I went through the woman’s purse. Her friend with the blue lips didn’t try and stop me.

“She’s on fire with fever,” said Tenley. He put his hand on the woman’s belly.

“She doesn’t even have any credit cards,” I said. “Total fucking nightmare.”

“Her name is Ella,” said the kid with blue lips.

Tenley probed one of the woman’s dancing tattoos.

“It’s her real skin,” he said.

He pinched her. Nothing. He slapped her gently. Nothing.

"You have to like, grab and twist," said the kid with blue lips.

Tenley grabbed a mound of the woman's animated belly flesh in his hands and twisted. A square of clean pink skin materialized in the shimmering madness of her tattooed belly. There was a ping from her mouth, and the square of flesh showed what looked like a computer desktop, complete with icons and a blinking button that said "10 unread messages."

Tenley looked at me.

"I think it's a touchscreen," I said.

I pressed the blinking button, feeling like an idiot.

The screen flashed. Messages scrolled down the patch of skin on her stomach.

"Step away from her," said a voice behind me. "That's all classified material."

I turned. There was a woman in a purple pantsuit behind me standing on my three-inch-thick Georgian rug. She was a little older than me, but not much. I recognized the posture and aura of someone used to giving orders. Her accent was straight-up East Coast Ivy League. She reminded me of my roommate at Smith.

"Oh no," I said. "The Man."

"I'm sure you want to be paid eventually for your services," she said. "So please step away from her. The bleeding has stopped?"

I didn't say anything, just stepped aside so she could see for herself.

She was joined by a middle-aged man in glasses who was definitely some kind of corporate vice-president. He smelled like Old Spice,

toner cartridges, and stress. He was breathing heavy, sweating, leaning on his knees. Two burly looking dudes elbowed their way into my apartment behind him, checking every room and then standing guard by the door.

“I’m not used to running,” said the executive in glasses. He sort of waved at me and then went back to catching his breath.

“My diagnosis is blood loss, a skin wound which will probably require a graft, and infection,” I said.

“Terrible,” said the woman. “And we DO want you to save this woman’s life. But not yet.”

She handed me her credentials. Diane Lemontree. She was with the State Department, supposedly.

Tenley and I were pretty much fucked.

"State Department," I said. "Yeah, right."

“It doesn’t matter who I represent,” she said. “Mr. Barney here is with Google.”

The man in the glasses tried to shake my hand, but I held up a bloody glove. He was still breathing heavy. I could tell from his wheezing that he had some kind of heart condition, but I didn’t bring it up.

"I need fresh air," said Mr. Barney.

"We can go up to the roof, if you like," I said.

Mr. Barney snapped his fingers at one of the burly men in my kitchen, who was already digging into my Cap’n Crunch.

“Bring us the pig,” said Mr. Barney.

I led them to the elevator and we went to the roof, where there was a basketball court that was always empty this time of night. There was a ball leaning against the basketball pole.

“Nobody ever comes up here,” I said. “We can even shoot some hoops while the infection spreads to her lungs and brain. I don’t mind.”

Mr. Barney from Google unwrapped a cough drop and crammed it into his mouth.

“I’m feeling better,” he said.

“That cool, crisp night air,” I said.

“It’s like this,” he said. “Her skin is our newest peripheral device. We don’t have a name for it yet, so we are just calling it Google Skin. We hollowed out one of her upper molars and installed the hardware there that powers it. There is a fine mesh net molded to her scalp that works as an EEG interface. As you can see, her skin now functions as a touchscreen. We chose her because she never had a rubella vaccine. Canadian hippy parents.”

“You turned her skin into a computer?” I asked, picking up the basketball.

“What is skin but a series of pixels with instructions for coloration that can be hacked by disease, pressure, or allergy?” he said. “The skin is the largest organ in the human body. It is already a screen that delivers information. Our machine-virus spreads subcutaneously, carried by neurotransmitters coordinated by molecular buckyballs that respond to minute magnetic pulses, like a giant etch-a-sketch. By triggering an auto-immune response to a weakened rubella virus, and by using it to tap into the genetic-“rash formation” response, we are able to temporarily, and semi-permanently, change vast swatches of skin at will, giving us nearly a full RGB spectrum. We can control the display on her skin with the mesh neuralnet, or by mere touch. We can create any color from

deep bruise to white scar. We create the allergy, we contain it, and then we spread it according to careful algorithms.”

“She agreed to this?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Barney. “She was enthusiastic. Signed every possible release form. We were going to unveil Skin this weekend at the New York Tattoo and Body Art Expo. We expected viral videos, rumors, and significant hype preparatory to our official soft launch later this year. She is a dancer, and she was going to strip down to nothing and invite gamers to press her skin to make the tattoos change, eventually leading to a full demonstration of Skin’s cloud computing technology at Def Con. Word processing and browsing and videos and so on.”

The elevator dinged and one of the bodyguards emerged, carrying a squealing piglet. When Mr. Barney said “bring us the pig,” I thought it was some kind of code, but no, this was an actual pig.

“That is an actual pig,” I said.

“So that I may demonstrate,” said Mr. Barney.

He pinched the piglet’s ass and twisted.

A computer screen came to life on the left flank of the piglet’s rear. Mr. Barney pressed a few buttons, bringing up the Google home page.

“You try,” he said.

The piglet was going crazy, but the bodyguard had it in a tight headlock. I typed in the url for PornHub. I clicked on the first video that showed up.

We all watched the video for a few moments, fuck noises emanating from the pig’s mouth, until Agent Lemontree closed the window.

“So what went wrong? Why are you here?”

“We got an alert this evening that our dancer’s Skin had been compromised,” said Mr. Barney. “That’s when Agent Lemontree’s group contacted us. We found Ella panicky and demented, just as you see her now, checked into a nearby hotel.”

“She was hacked,” said Agent Lemontree. “We don’t know who or how. We are afraid they were able to access Google’s servers, and, as a result, we are afraid they were able to access some extremely sensitive information Google was...storing...for us.”

“What sort of information?”

“I can’t tell you specifically,” said Mrs. Lemontree. “One of the unintended consequences of running surveillance on the entire world is that many countries have decided to outsource their spying operations to us without asking. It’s quite a nightmare, I’m afraid. Downright Lovecraftian in its ramifications. We know too much. We must keep our knowledge fragmented, or we invite madness.”

“What do you mean? How can other countries outsource operations to us without asking?”

“Well, pretend you are the Iranian government. Wouldn’t you like to know which of your citizens has been contacting the United States and who they have been talking to? Conversations that we consider harmless to our national security are extremely useful to rogue states who have a zero tolerance policy for dissidents. Unfortunately, we have all the data, and, unfortunately, it is very well-organized. Hacking our servers is therefore very attractive to any freelancers. One hacker can sell our secrets ten different times to ten different countries. Every time we are compromised, we unintentionally become a snitch for every repressive regime on the planet. Additionally, rogue governments that use the information we have collected against their citizens don't look as much like autocratic monsters because they aren't using data that they have tortured out of liberal-leaning schoolteachers, priests, and engineers. We may have rules for how we use the information we collect, but other countries definitely have no such scruples.”

“What does that have to do with this girl?”

“We protect everything we’ve got,” said Agent Lemontree.

“Unfortunately, our corporate partners are never as responsible. Sometimes they cut corners, especially with respect to new R&D like this Skin peripheral.”

“We didn’t have a chance to install the proper encryption yet,” said Mr. Barney. “Skin is so new I barely know about it.”

“And yet here we are,” said Agent Lemontree.

“We didn’t know you were even using those servers!” said Mr. Barney. “If you never tell us what you are doing, then how can we possibly know what to protect?”

“Protect everything,” said Agent Lemontree.

“Then pay us for it,” muttered Mr. Barney.

“That girl is dying down there,” I said.

I scratched the piglet behind the ears.

“If you cure the infection, you will also wipe the peripheral from the girl,” said Agent Lemontree. “We can’t let you do that until we know exactly what is going on.”

“They trashed her body, knowing we’d try to save her,” explained Mr. Barney. “They accessed the skin of her throat, causing her to hyperventilate. They jacked up the pixel refresh rate on her skin a thousand percent, causing a maddening itch and excruciating inflammation. When combined with the release of epinephrine from the itch and pain, she started to hallucinate. Hence trying to shave all her skin off.”

“I’m not going to let her just suffer and die,” I said.

“Yes, of course,” said Agent Lemontree. “But my people need time to complete a forensic analysis before we proceed with any heroic medical procedures. That’s why we came here and not a hospital.”

“Andre Laszlo is here,” said one of the bodyguards. “He is ready to proceed.”

Agent Lemontree nodded and went back to the elevator. Mr. Barney followed her.

"We will let you know when we need you," said Agent Lemontree.

"Great," I said.

Left alone, I shot a few free-throws.

I considered going down the fire escape and going to get a bite to eat while Google and the government tortured this poor girl in my extra bedroom. But then I decided that if she did die, they would probably just leave her here for me to deal with, saying they were very sorry and cutting me a check. And it wouldn't be worth it. I had to do what I could.

I got back in the elevator.

One of the bodyguards patted me down as I entered my own home. Now they were making themselves sandwiches. Animals.

The piglet was laying down in my laundry basket. It seemed calm.

“Shoot the pig up with steroids, antihistamines, and Cipro,” I told Tenley. “Let me know what that does.”

“It’s the Balkans,” shouted somebody from my extra bedroom.

“I said MAYBE it’s the Balkans,” said someone else.

I walked over to the door and looked inside.

One tech stood over the feverish woman, typing onto her stomach, while numbers crawled down her breasts. He was blind in one eye for sure, and the other one was very limited. His milky neuralgic eye flipped around in his head, worming through his own brain instead of fixating on any point in particular. He was smoking a cigarette and ashing into a tray balanced on the woman's shoulder. A young tech was holding a fan which was sucking away the smoke from his cigarette. The tech shrugged at me apologetically.

"You can't smoke in here," I said.

"I already told them," shouted Tenley from the living room.

"Andre smokes," said Agent Lemontree.

"I smoke," said Andre.

"Is there like a number I can call to file grievances or something?" I asked.

"You will be paid well for your patience and expertise and discretion," said Agent Lemontree. "We are close."

"I traced it to Serbia," said Andre. "Same collective that's been crashing cars. I don't buy it, though."

"Peripheral terrorists," Agent Lemontree explained.

"I think they are routing through the Balkans to throw us off. You want to know what I think? I think this is Americans. I think this is somebody right here at home. I think this is business."

"Apple?" asked Agent Lemontree.

"Maybe through China. Microsoft would have just politely murdered this girl in her sleep. I think this is a message. This is about Skin."

Agent Lemontree walked out of the room and cornered Mr. Barney, grabbing his phone out of his hand and hanging it up for him.

“Skin seems cool and hip and very next level,” said Agent Lemontree.

“Yes,” said Mr. Barney.

“You can’t be the only people developing something like this,” said Agent Lemontree.

“I wouldn’t know,” said Mr. Barney. “I am but a humble executive.”

“How close is Apple to something like Skin?”

Mr. Barney demurred, looking sideways.

“Maybe somebody at the Verge will know,” said Agent Lemontree, punching numbers into Mr. Barney’s phone.

“Okay!” said Mr. Barney. “They are taking a whole different approach. They are trying to make clothes that do the same thing. Like, spandex suits, all shiny and futuristic looking. Just like you would expect from Apple. You probably have to buy new ones every year. Supposedly, they are close to something stable.”

“How close?” asked Agent Lemontree.

“They had a working prototype six months ago,” said Mr. Barney.

“And what happened to it?”

“It is possible that some of the chief engineers were arrested in Denmark for possibly having child pornography on their laptops. It is possible that this incident has caused significant delays.”

“It’s definitely Apple, then,” said Andre. “I can taste all the little Apple bits. This is a corporate war, not terrorism, not a run on our servers. Why are we involved?”

“Flush the Apple servers in China,” said Lemontree, handing Mr. Barney his phone. “We are confiscating this technology for the U.S. government until further notice; until we find a way to make it secure.”

“You can’t do that!” said Mr. Barney.

“We aren’t your private army,” said Agent Lemontree. She reached into Mr. Barney’s suit jacket and pulled out a syringe and a small piece of metal the size of a watch battery.

"This is it, right?" she asked him. "This is Skin?"

Mr. Barney gritted his teeth and nodded.

She walked over to Andre and tapped him on the shoulder. He rolled up his sleeve, and she injected him. She put the tiny piece of metal in his shirt pocket.

After a few minutes, Andre flushed blue from head to toe, then red, then yellow, then blue again, then green, then red again. All the Google colors.

Andre stubbed out his cigarette and pinched his own forearm. A touchscreen opened up. Agent Lemontree went to the options menu and selected “Braille” for him. Andre sprouted raised bumps on his arm in a shifting line. He used the fingers of his right hand to feel the bumps, muttering to himself. He was using Skin as a living Braille keyboard.

“I am reading my own goosebumps,” he said.

Agent Lemontree pointed at me.

“You,” she said. “You can go ahead and save the girl’s life now. We’ve got what we need.”

Agent Lemontree pressed some buttons on her phone. My own phone pinged, alerting me to the cash transfer.

“That’ll do,” I said. “Tenley, what happened to the pig?”

“It’s freaking out,” he said. “But the peripheral is gone.”

“Steroids for the girl, then,” I told Tenley. “And antihistamines and Cipro. That ought to flush her system out.”

Mr. Barney’s phone rang. He answered it, shaking, pale.

“What’s going to happen to Apple?” I asked Agent Lemontree, as soon as Mr. Barney was gone. “Isn’t this basically attempted murder?”

“It’s probably time to Cartoon All-Stars all of them. Google, Apple, Microsoft: the whole lot.”

“Come again?”

“You never had to watch Cartoon All-Stars as a kid?”

“I was not allowed to watch television,” I said. “I was home-schooled. My father was a surgeon. My mother was an allergist.”

Tenley shot up the girl with the cocktail I prescribed. The effect of the antihistamines and steroids was immediate. She whimpered, still unconscious, shuddering at the intensity of the steroid rush.

“In the 1980s, we caught all the West Coast animation studios in a massive DEA sting. Henson, Disney, Warner Brothers: they all went down together. All that fun dark eighties stuff for kids...it was all brought to you by suitcases full of cocaine. There were massive purges, and as punishment, we made the studios collaborate on a program called Cartoon All-Stars. All the cartoon characters from all of the studios came together to fight drugs. We showed the program in schools. It was quite effective. We put Disney under new management and of course Mr. Henson did not live too much longer.”

“So you are going to make Apple, Google, and Microsoft do a cartoon about drugs?”

“No,” said Agent Lemontree, thinking about it. “About cryptography. Every computer in the country is an open wound these days. With something like Skin on the market, or whatever Apple is making, we can’t afford to operate without locks on our doors anymore. It’s time to put up some walls before this stuff gets even deeper than Skin. People trust Google more than doctors, priests, teachers...the government...even Hollywood. If the message comes from Google, people will listen.”

I leaned over the unconscious girl on the double bed in my extra bedroom. The drugs flowed into her veins, healing her. Google Skin would be gone soon enough.

Agent Lemontree took a phone call. I was alone with the girl for a moment.

I pinched her belly and twisted. I opened a web browser, went to Google, and searched for a script paint program. I opened it and made a box so big that it covered the woman’s entire torso. I drew a giant skull and crossbones in the box.

As she began to relax and breathe more normally, the skull and crossbones pulsed along with her rising and falling chest. Was the woman secure now? Were there locks on her doors?

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the skull and crossbones began to fade. The woman whimpered with relief, her muscles unknotting, her stomach unclenching, her tattoos dissolving. The confidential government information that was poisoning her seeped into my double bed in her cold sweat.

7. FOOD AS LOVE (\$YUM)

“I know you have all heard this from me a bajillion kajillion times, but we aren’t food as love,” said T.J. Maxx, Director of Concepts at Yum! Brands (NYSE: YUM). “We are food as fucking. And not just like: good fucking that you do listening to old disco on a Sunday morning to piss off the neighbors, all fake animal noises and trying to rattle the chandelier with your cock. We are food as nasty fucking, the kind of fucking where the leftovers smeared on the vinyl cause diseases, the kind that would snap your prostate like a

rubber band if you did it for real, the kind of fucking that you can only do to yourself in your head.”

It was Tuesday morning at 4 AM, the beginning of the power hour, when everyone’s testosterone levels were spiking due to their circadian rhythms and the cortisol levels in their plasma. It was the hour where everyone at Yum! was required to be at work, when the bars closed up in North American cities and when Yum! Brands acquired its most valuable customers in its Taco Bells, Kentucky Fried Chickens, and Pizza Huts, the people who were only there because there was no place else to go. It was also when traffic at all of the porn sites that Yum! owned through its shell corporations spiked relative to other internet traffic, meaning that the marketing data clusters were at their most raw and strong and useful.

Tuesday was also corporate fetish day at Yum! Brands, which meant everybody on T.J. Maxx's floor was dressed in traditional skirts, pantsuits, suits, ties, leather, latex, and of course the purple dog collars that revealed that they all worked for Concepts. Employees at other departments wore different colored dog collars to show their allegiances; this was a fun tradition that everyone loved.

T.J. Maxx was the only person in the room not wearing a dog collar. His massive sclerotic neck strained out of his black leather business suit. He had purchased the rights to his Yum! Name—T.J. Maxx—after the clothing store had gone out of business, taking out a small business loan while he was just a junior project manager. His mother had once worked at a T.J. Maxx, his father had been arrested for destroying cars at the same T.J. Maxx with a set of golf clubs stolen from the parking lot.

Along with his preternatural grasp of food dynamics and international taste barometry, his invention of the Nacho Pocket had made him a legend. But it had been a full season since Concepts had done anything that penetrated the North American whofuckingcaresasphere.

T.J. Maxx was depressed. His job situation felt volatile, “in question.” He was simultaneously delivering a morning speech and playing Mortal Kombat on the building across the street, projecting the game onto the side of the building using the ten thousand lumens projector built into his belt buckle.

“I feel like I can’t breathe, people,” he said. “I feel like you are strangling me to death with your bad ideas. Call me traditional, but I think breath play should be between a man and a woman, or like a sexy uncle and his curious nephew, not a Concepts team and a Concepts director on deadline. Get your fingers outta my throat, people.”

Liu Kang transformed into a dragon and immolated Sub-Zero. Everyone clapped.

“Alright, that’s your speech for the day,” he said. “Be freakishly motivated and come up with something as good as Candybacon Scotch Egg Grenados or Pop Tart Wafflefries or even Tortilla Soup Dumplings. Alright, now everybody file out quietly with your heads held at 90 degrees to the ground like I just pulled out a gun and killed your best friend without even blinking. Time to make the food of tomorrow.”

The room cleared. He sat down on the conference table, facing the window, making a personal decision not to make eye contact with anyone today.

“It’s Sheila Pitch Black Hollow Void’s birthday,” said Brian Ass, his assistant slash bodyguard slash lover slash personal trainer. “What should I get her?”

“She just did an in-house lateral, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, she moved from Carbs to Sauces,” he said. “Payout, but she gets the Kowloon Lab, which means vat organs to play with and no FDA.”

“Fuck her,” said T.J. Maxx. “Get her a vintage Hustler Magazine from the month she was born. I want her to know what her diabetic coma dad was thinking about when her scumbag mom was milking him for conception sperm.”

Brian bowed and left.

T.J. Maxx didn't turn around, but he could tell he still wasn't alone.

“Who's there?”

“Um, I don't think you know me. I'm not actually supposed to be here.”

T.J. Maxx wanted to look and see who was talking, but he mastered himself and continued staring out the window, checking his email using his belt projector. He could see people working across the street at Google scowling at him.

“What's your name?”

“Are you asking me for my real name or for my Yum! name sir?”

“Why the fuck would I want to know your real name? Were your parents creative people?”

“No sir,” she said. “Then my name is Henrietta Poe.”

“Poe? Like the French writer?”

“Sure,” said Henrietta uncertainly.

“You get your spirit power from some dead French writer, huh? Okay; that's kinky. You aren't wearing one of my collars, so I can't fuck you if you are disappointing, so what good are you to me?”

She didn't answer. He sniffed, noting the persistent smell of sun-warm skin and human dander.

“You are still here. How is that possible? You are fired.”

“Well, I’m HR, so you can’t fire me,” said Henrietta. “But I don’t want to stay in HR. I want to be in Concepts.”

“What did you study in school?”

“Well, I studied psychology.

“WRONG. I hire bartenders, MALE strippers, hot grannies, and deejays. That’s my fucking thing. I am already annoyed with you.”

“Is this your office?” she asked him. “It seems like a conference room.”

“Wherever I am standing is my office.”

“HR is really dry,” said Henrietta. “I mean, we do scenes like everybody else, but it is all like weird tense spanking stuff and fussy meticulous European ‘rules porn,’ and I thought I would like it, but I don’t. I want to be in a more primal division, with a chance to make a difference.”

“It doesn’t get more primal than Concepts,” he said, sighing, not looking away from the window. He caught himself squinting into the reflection of the glass, trying to make out her image, but then he relaxed his eyes and went dead inside.

“You are a psychologist?”

“I mean, I studied psychology.”

“I think I am depressed,” said T.J. Maxx. “I don’t really know why.”

“That is not really something I am qualified to talk about.”

“I don’t know how people relate to each other anymore. I mean I used to know exactly how it was. Normal people relate to each other exactly the same way people like me relate to jobs. There are shitty

jobs and good jobs. There are careers. There is love, which is the job equivalent of getting paid to sit around and masturbate and drink cherry Coke from a glass slipper that Blondie used to wear. My job is love to me, and so I have always tried to be love to people who could tolerate me. But now I don't even know anymore."

"You seem like a complicated man," said Henrietta Poe. "It is good to have feelings."

T.J. Maxx sniffed.

"At Concepts, we hire: strippers, deejays, bartenders, comic book artists, gas station clerks with good tattoos. We teach them to do the bullshit corporate jobs. Um, why? Because they are smart and full of life and know how to fucking kick ass at thinking. It is about ten hundred thousand times easier to teach a cool bartender who has life coming out of her damn eyeballs how to do Quickbooks than it is to teach some go-getter business major from Indiana how to manage a useful coke addiction."

"I think the problem is that you are looking for a new idea," said Henrietta. "A new kind of pizza, a new kind of gordita, a new kind of milkshake. The idea doesn't matter as much anymore. We have a real strength here that we aren't using. The strength is in our corporate culture itself. I tried to tell people in HR, but..."

"What do you mean 'our culture'? Wait, wait, wait..."

T.J. Maxx was silent.

"Maybe something like a gusher...but with nacho cheese..." he said.

He frowned.

"No, that's just another Nacho Pocket," he said. "Goddamn my bad brains."

“What do we do here, you know?” asked Henrietta. “I mean, what is daily life here at Yum! Brands, as a corporate entity with broad, global goals?”

“We make porn and we make food that people are actually going to eat,” said T.J. Maxx. “We are also a music label, I think.”

“But isn’t it strange that we never combine these things?” asked Henrietta. “I mean, I am in HR, so I deal with the culture here as an organic whole. I think all these discrete divisions are keeping us from growing how we should be growing.”

“We can’t put porn in advertising,” said T.J. Maxx. “That’s illegal. And also you can’t eat porn, otherwise it’s all people would eat.”

T.J. Maxx was silent.

“What are you suggesting? You have a new Concept package?”

“I do,” said Henrietta Poe.

“Well, what is it? You officially have my interest.”

“It is already happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“It started happening as soon as I walked in the room. Concept, marketing, advertising, suggestion, hypnotic post-suggestion, boom buzz, chatterspray, presocial positioning, social rollout, post-social entrenchment, backlash redeploy. Everything. Maybe it started happening a little before I walked in the room, depending on what works for context. I probably won’t be the one who edits the final scene.”

“You are full of shit.”

“This is the next, obvious iteration in what we do here. We make porn. We make food. What we need to do is make both at the same time.”

She had a very elegant clasp purse. He could see it in the reflection of the glass. He tried to see what she was taking out of it. It was long and pink, like a flashlight. She came up behind him, close enough that he could feel the hem of her gingham dress on his leather pants.

“I’m gonna do you first and then you can do me when you are good and angry,” she said, reaching under her skirt. “I assume this room is wired to record like all the others? Video, VR, whatever?”

“Of course,” he said. “We make ideas here.”

“Perfect,” she said. “Consider this my application to Concepts.”

She pantsed him. He didn’t flinch. He didn’t turn around.

“Listen asshole,” she said to his asshole. “It doesn’t matter what dumb idea you come up with. It can be genius, it can be bullshit, it doesn’t matter. While I am fucking you, you are gonna let your mind wander and try to relax, okay? And one of your ideas is gonna come forward in your mind and then you are gonna turn around and start fucking me and you are gonna scream that idea to the world. And that’s gonna be the thing that everybody buys. Because of this video. Because they saw the concept getting born and they were right there at the beginning. And because every one of our pornos for the whole next cycle is gonna feature whatever you blurt out after you are done getting reamed by my little pink strap-on. We are merging divisions. We’re never gonna be able to put porn in advertising; you are right about that. So we are gonna put advertising in porn.”

"Wait," he said. She paused.

“That...could work,” he said. “I am feeling...creative...all of a sudden.”

She pushed his face against the glass. He pressed a button on his belt buckle so he could see the video from the room on the building across the street. Something in his heart stirred. He wanted to know her real name. He wanted to know what that dead French writer meant to her.

“Say, listen,” he said.

“You aren’t gonna like this, T.J. Maxx,” she said. “You are about to get Crunchwrapped Supremed.”

“I was wondering about your real name,” he said.

He tried to turn around and look at her, but her hand was on his neck and she had spread his legs too wide and he was unbalanced and there was no way to do it without snapping his own neck.

“Shut up and think about food,” she said.

8. GAME IT UP (\$AAPL)

“Alright, listen up, listen up. I knew I said there was gonna be a quiz today on the Securities Act of 1933, but that’s been postponed till tomorrow. Got some news from the district.”

Miss Pickett opens the cardboard box. It is full of bright yellow educational phones courtesy of the Apple Corporation and Wayne Enterprises.

She sighs.

“Well, looks like the rule on ‘no cell phones in school’ has been suspended,” she says. “You all get a mandatory phone. Orders from administration.”

She holds one up. Everybody cheers. Her heart sinks.

She walks down the rows of desks handing out the smart phones. She also receives a red “Teacher’s Phone” which allows her to see the messages that kids are sending to each other, to update the phones of the kids in her classes with information about assignments, to administer educational games and videos, and to grade homework. She can also use it to directly call the principal or the police, whereas the student phones do not make actual outbound calls, though they are able to text each other while on school property, and there are “emergency” buttons which route to a central dispatch.

The entire period is spent running through these rules for use which have been handed down from the district. Phones are considered school property, like textbooks. They are subject to search at any time and all texts and transmissions may be monitored. No new programs are allowed to be installed on these phones. Phones must be turned in at the end of the year. Stealing

the phone of another student or abusing the “emergency” button is considered a level 3 conduct offense and will be met with expulsion.

Her favorite student is this kid Anais who is about a foot taller than all the boys and she has these thick glasses that magnify her eyes, making her look perpetually surprised. She is extremely into anime and RPGs and tabletop miniatures and doesn’t give a fuck if anybody else cares. Miss Pickett is sort of in awe of Anais.

Anais receives her phone without even really acknowledging it, barely looking up from her copy of “The Power Broker” manga. She often reads in class instead of participating in discussion, and Miss Pickett doesn’t blame her. Anais is not really getting along with any of the other students this year ever since that television crew came and interviewed her about the website she runs. The website uses Twitter to determine the most ephemeral and virulent meme of each day, stores it, and then reposts it six months later. People visit the website to hazily recall things they were mad about, things that they found funny for some reason, the hoaxes and outright lies they urged on their families and friends.

The website is called “The Things They Shared,” and gets millions of hits each day. Anais has confessed to Miss Pickett that she is thinking of taking it down. It has become too popular, she says.

Later, in the teacher’s lounge, Miss Pickett chews on the ice left over in her Styrofoam cup of Diet Coke, thumbing through the teacher’s edition of “America: Past Makes Present,” the 10th grade U.S. History textbook that has now been rendered irrelevant by the new history phone app.

“Well, these textbooks were racist and terrible anyway,” says Miss Pickett. “The cover on this history book should have just been a white hand crushing a bunch of Reese’s pieces.”

“The stock market unit this year is going to be rather upended thanks to these phones,” says Mr. Crump, the economics teacher. “The district is going to let the students buy and keep these things called Stocklets for the year. The company that makes the app just

finished doing an exclusive trial with a bunch of New England prep schools, and now they are opening the app up to the public. Isn't that cool?"

"What are Stocklets?" asks Miss Pickett.

"These little apps that you keep on your phone that grow and change and do all sorts of weird stuff depending on how much stock you buy and how well or poorly the stock that your app represents is doing," says Mr. Crump. "They are like Pokemon, but for stocks. It's gonna be wild. It's never too early to teach kids about the glories and perils of strategic investment."

"Are they going to be using real money?" Miss Pickett asks.

"Yeah, they get a hundred dollar allotment from Stocklets," says Mr. Crump. "Isn't that something else? After six weeks, they can cash out. Teachers can play too. Here, I'll show you. The app is already on your phone. It's like a game. You can sell and trade these Stocklets to your friends."

Mr. Crump takes his red teacher's phone and pulls up the app that lets you buy Stocklets from participating corporations, which includes most of the NYSE. It shows that his balance stands at 100.00 USD.

"So what stock should I buy?" asks Mr. Crump.

"Apple, I guess," says Miss Pickett.

Mr. Crump types in Apple and the Stocklet comes up, a silver spaceship with green piping that has a silver Apple logo on the side. The spaceship hovers in the air, rotating while it is highlighted.

"Neat, huh?" says Mr. Crump.

"What happens if you buy more shares?" asks Miss Pickett.

“You upgrade the spaceship,” says Mr. Crump. “It gets bigger and more elaborate, slowly turning into a space station. But that takes millions.”

“How can you tell if your stock is going up or down in value?” asks Miss Pickett.

“Each Stocklet is different,” says Mr. Crump. “This one glows when it is going up, and becomes faded and dirty when it is going down.”

“Do you think it is wise to be using class time to teach children how to gamble on the stock market?” asks Miss Pickett acidly.

“You can buy lottery tickets at every single convenience store in the state,” he replies. “Playing the stock market rewards knowledge of world events and economic indicators. Investment is finally opening up to the masses. Kids love games, right?”

The next day in class, predictably, her students are mesmerized by their phones. She hasn’t mastered her Teacher’s Phone yet, but she is able to see that most of them are not paying any attention to the history lesson she has written. It is fucking tough to teach kids in Texas about the New Deal. Eventually, she gets so annoyed that she presses the “kill switch,” turning all the phones off.

The class groans.

“What’s going on, gang?” she asks.

“It’s Anais,” says Milo Mattson from the back of the class. “We are all getting rekt at the stock market, but she is Our Overlord. She made ten grand yesterday.”

“In real money?” asks Miss Pickett.

“Yeah,” says Milo. “She gets to keep it, too. She’s gonna be a billionaire.”

He leans over in his chair.

"I love you, Anais. I want to have your babies."

"Is this true, Anais?" asks Miss Pickett.

Anais hangs her head, looking sheepish. "I saw there was going to be a big bump in PetroChina as a result of new military operations in the South China Sea. But I divested quickly and bought Gazprom instead. Russia was likely to respond to the aggression, and obviously they did. You can't mobilize troops without oil, though."

"So you have ten grand now?" asks Miss Pickett.

"In Gazprom and Walmart," she says, showing Miss Pickett the Stocklets on her phone. A bear riding a unicycle and a red white and blue shopping cart glow brightly. The bear is spinning the wheels of his unicycle furiously and chugging vodka.

"I am going to diversify now, though," says Anais. "Time to spread out."

After class, Miss Pickett attempts to buy a few Stocklets herself, but she gives up after a few minutes. She finds everything about smartphones annoying. They are the opposite of the internet, like how cars were the opposite of mass transit and made the world a giant bag of shit.

During her free period, she is gathering her stuff together to eat lunch in the Teacher's Lounge, when Anais comes into her classroom.

"Is that a new backpack?" asks Miss Pickett.

"I bought it from Aaron Spencer," says Anais. "He was showing it off at lunch and I wanted him to shut up about it so I gave him cash for it."

The bag is made of real leather.

Anais sits down at her desk.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” says Anais.

“Sure,” says Miss Pickett.

“You are the only teacher here that I like,” says Anais. “I just want you to know that your job is safe and nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

“Okay Anais,” says Miss Pickett.

“I also want to bounce some ideas off you,” says Anais. “I can’t really talk to anyone else. They don’t care about history or anything.”

“What’s bothering you?” says Miss Pickett.

“Well, I was just wondering if you think this ‘civil war’ in Argentina will last a long time or not,” says Anais. “I am thinking about shorting silver. How many existential crises is a prosperous country likely to have? Only one or two, right?”

“That’s not really my area of expertise,” says Miss Pickett.

“That’s okay,” says Anais. “I just want to know what you think about civil wars.”

“Well, classically, rebellions in countries surrounded by stable allies are only successful if they are able to convince these supposed allies that it is in their best interests to support their right to trade,” says Miss Pickett. “Look at how the British supported the Confederacy, for instance. Or how France supported the Cavaliers.”

“That’s a good point,” says Anais. “I think I am going to short silver. Hot tip, Miss Pickett. Now’s the time to sell your silver.”

“I don’t have any silver,” says Miss Pickett.

“Of course you don’t,” says Anais, smiling sweetly. “Well, don’t buy any.”

Back in the Teacher’s Lounge, Miss Pickett sets her bag down and pulls out the peanut butter sandwich she has prepared for lunch along with a bag of “Flaming Hot Cheetos,” bought from the vending machine. The first time that she grabs her peanut butter sandwich and the divots from her fingers stain the bread with bright red Cheetos powder, she sets her sandwich aside, no longer hungry.

Mr. Crump is in the corner, already addicted to the capacities of his bright red Teacher’s Phone, intensely tapping away.

“Get this,” says Miss Pickett, joining him. “The kids told me this morning in class that Anais has made ten thousand dollars playing the stock market in one night.”

“That was this morning,” says Mr. Crump, without looking up. “Her holdings are growing exponentially. She is on the board of directors at Wayne Enterprises now.”

“That can’t be true,” says Miss Pickett.

“Google it,” says Mr. Crump.

“What does Wayne Enterprises even do?” asks Miss Pickett. “Does anybody know?”

Mr. Crump looks up from his phone for the first time. He stares off into space, squinting.

“Chemicals,” he says, finally. “They are a chemical company. There is also some military contracting, I think.”

“But this is all just for fun, right?” asks Miss Pickett.

“It’s real money,” says Mr. Crump. “In one day, she has made more money than most people will ever make in their entire lives. Do we stop her? What do we do? I am trying to follow her trades; to latch on to her quicksilver little mind and anticipate her maneuvers, but she is too fast for me. She hired some Rice University student to write an encryption algorithm for her phone and now I am locked out.”

“There’s nothing illegal going on, right?” asks Miss Pickett. “She is quite smart.”

“Huh?” says Mr. Crump. “No, there’s nothing illegal about being a financial genius.”

The next day at school, the halls are much noisier than usual. It seems like many of the teachers have chosen to stay home.

There are guards posted in front of Miss Pickett’s classroom. She doesn’t recognize them. They aren’t the normal campus security. They are both wearing purple velour tracksuits with gold dollar signs on the back.

“Uh, hello,” says Miss Pickett. “This is my classroom.”

One of the security guards whispers something into his lapel. The other one doesn’t even look up from his phone.

“You can go in,” he says.

“I know I can go in,” says Miss Pickett, opening the door to her classroom.

Her classroom is full of people, but it is not her usual first-period. Students and teachers occupy every seat. She recognizes the entire math department and most of the seniors from the “Gifted and Talented” program. They are all furiously typing away into their yellow phones. Her whiteboard is full of graphs and charts. Anais is sitting cross legged on Miss Pickett’s desk, holding a red Teacher’s Phone which she is checking periodically. She is reading a thick

book by William Gaddis and drinking a cup of tea. She is dressed in a skin-tight purple Betsy Johnson dress and she has new glasses. She is wearing a giant green dollar sign around her neck on a gold chain that is glowing with some kind of fiber optics. Her hair is dyed red.

“What is going on here?” asks Miss Pickett. “Why do you have a Teacher’s Phone?”

“I bought it from Mr. Crump for a million dollars,” says Anais. “I like Mr. Crump. He asked if I wanted to marry him. Can you believe that? Said we could move to Denmark, where no one would ask any questions. I told him to die in a fire. It’s just an expression, though. I made him a millionaire, after all. He is actually just a sweet dope.”

“How much money did you make last night?” asks Miss Pickett.

“Not as much as I made this morning. I needed it, though. You wouldn’t believe how much it cost me to buy this school for instance. It is extremely expensive to purchase a public school. It felt like the right thing to do. It has sentimental value.”

“Anais,” says Miss Pickett. “Are all these people working for you?”

“Well,” says Anais. “Kinda. I don’t like the idea of having employees. They are working for a percentage, managing some of my holdings. It’s a lot of money to them, though. The math department practically begged me to do it.”

“I am very pleased that you have found something that you enjoy,” says Miss Pickett. “But you are being quite disruptive, you know? Do you really think it is fair that you have essentially shut the school down?”

“Dunno,” says Anais. “I mean, I bought a lot of things today. I bought a NASCAR racetrack in Tennessee which I am gonna turn into a massive LARP theme park. Uh, I bought a good chunk of the Sudan from China, just to fuck with them. I am probably gonna give it back to the Sudanese, you know? Why should China own the

Sudan? I bought a company called "WIZARDHAT" and I don't even know what it does. I bought a few mansions, including the furniture. I made ginormous campaign contributions to both of our Senators. I bought a decommissioned nuclear silo in the base of a Sumatran volcano where I am planning to live from now on. I bought controlling shares in a company that does private 'space fulfillment' operations for NASA, and so I guess I am going to be an astronaut, which is kind of a dream come true. Oh, also I bought the band Lifehouse. Did you know they were still around? Anyway, I got them cheap. Gonna put them in my volcano. They did that song 'Hanging by a Moment.' I had a notion that I might lose my virginity to that song, someday. Maybe instead I will lose it to the band."

"Anais..."

The lights go out and there is the noise of a scuffle outside. The door bangs open, but it is still too dark to see. Miss Pickett grabs the side of her desk to steady herself.

One person turns on the light on their smartphone, and then everybody else does, shooting beams across the room.

In the inky darkness, a tall man in a black Kevlar body suit with a bat mask and a bat cape stands majestically on one of the student's desks, towering over everyone. His suit makes him look like he is full of muscles and power, but he is not inherently a tall man.

"WHERE IS HE?" roars the man in the sex suit.

"Um, who are you talking about?" asks Anais.

"I am looking for Egghead...it has to be him," he says. He grabs Miss Pickett and lifts her into the air. He is surprisingly strong.

"Which one of you is going to tell me where Egghead is?" asks the man in the sex suit. "He won't get away with this."

"With what?" asks Anais.

“He bankrupted Wayne Industries!” says the man in the sex suit. “He bought up the plummeting shares, and turned them into a women’s health nonprofit! WHERE IS EGGHEAD?”

“Oh, I did that,” says Anais. “Yeah, it seemed like a good idea. I was on a roll. Do you work for Wayne Enterprises? You guys are gonna make great birth control, now. Chemicals! Also, thanks for the phones!”

She holds up her smartphone. She squints at him.

“Aren’t you like...the CEO or something? Bruce Wayne?”

“I...no I am not!” says the man in the sex suit. “I am a secret man of darkness.”

“Well, anyway, I’m the one you are looking for,” says Anais. “Wayne Enterprises was way overvalued, by the way. You should thank me.”

“Thank you? I...I’m dead broke. I’ve got recurring monthly payments set up for VERY IMPORTANT THINGS, LITTLE GIRL.”

“I assure you that everything I did was entirely legal,” says Anais. “I mean, maybe I did it more quickly than people usually get things done, but hey, it’s all still new to me. I once beat all of ‘XCOM: Enemy Unknown’ in one night.”

“You are some kind of capitalist supervillain,” says the man in the sex suit.

“That’s a bit dramatic,” says Anais. “I mean, I think I am pretty good at this, but my plan is just to, you know, disrupt things for the better. Accelerate already existing trends. I figure at the pace I am going, world players are gonna take notice soon, and then things will really get interesting. I am going to keep my volcano, but education is going to change for sure in this country.”

“How are you doing this?” asks the man in the sex suit.

“It’s really not particularly complicated,” says Anais. “Everything is so connected now. You just have to know which indicators are for real and which ones are garbage. I mean, I have played a lot of RPGs, so I know what I am doing. There isn’t a lot of strategy to it. You just grind away at your characters and keep leveling them up and know which ones to deploy for any given fight. You know, like, uh, what stocks are immune to fire magic and so on.”

The man in the sex suit kicks over a desk.

“You are a bad person,” he says to Anais. “I need money to fight crime.”

“The root cause of crime is obviously social and financial inequality,” says Anais. “People who are not sociopaths can obviously be happy and content and have good lives if they are lifted out from the crippling circumstances of dire poverty. This just seems obvious. Isn’t it obvious to you?”

“Sure,” says the man in the sex suit. “I have gala fundraisers all the time. But power corrupts...wealth must stay in the hands of the uh...I mean, wealth is a tool that...”

The man in the sex suit kicks over another desk.

“Goddammit, how am I going to do my science,” he says.

Anais looks sad for him.

“You can come live with me in my volcano if you want,” says Anais. “Miss Pickett, do you want me to buy the man in this cape for you to have as a husband? He has a nice jaw. If this is actually Bruce Wayne, he is not bad looking.”

“No, that’s okay,” says Miss Pickett.

The man in the sex suit frowns at both of them.

“You are here to defend capitalism,” says Anais. “And that is cool, that is very cool. But everything I am doing is perfectly legal. In fact, I am the MOST capitalist. Hey, you could be my personal bodyguard! Me and Lifehouse will need a bodyguard. In fact, what’s your email? I’ll PayPal you some walking around money.”

The man in the sex suit begins screaming. He jumps out the window, sending shards of glass flying everywhere. Miss Pickett and Anais run to the window, but there is no sign of him.

“This game ramps up very quickly,” says Anais. “But the better you do at it, the more able you are to influence outcomes.”

“There are all kinds of games in the world,” says Miss Pickett. “You don’t have to pick just one, you know.”

Anais frowns.

“Yeah,” says Anais. “This one kind of feels picked for me, though. That’s the bad part. Maybe I can do something about that, once I win. Seems like you should get to choose your economic system, and the default setting should be some kind of bland and congenial socialism. There can be capitalism on top of that.”

“Maybe,” says Miss Pickett.

Miss Pickett feels sort of sick. She has been working her entire life to feed herself and have a place to stay. It has never felt like a game to her.

“It IS a game, though, isn’t it?” says Miss Pickett.

“Yeah,” says Anais. “Not a very good one yet. But it will get better once more people are playing. These sorts of sandbox games aren’t any fun unless there are just tons and tons of people playing. Basic game design, really. Jesus, it’s like this thing has never even been playtested. Capitalism: two stars: the tutorial is terrible, there is only one optimal strategy, the randomized map is repetitive, and there is a distinct lack of meaningful player interactions.”

9. MIGHT AS WELL CALL IT HELL (\$BP)

The first tits I ever squeezed for real were giant, fake, and full of cancer.

It was during the 1992 Summer Olympics, the year Dominique Dawes did a perfect floor routine vs. Japan, the year of Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan's "Dream Team." The whole world was still pretty much reeling from the fall of the Soviet Union, not sure what to be afraid of yet. Terrifying new candidates like AIDS and ghosts and Satanism were hauled out daily for examination on TV shows like Oprah and Donahue and Montel and Jerry Springer. The format had not yet descended into theatrical chair-swinging parody nor risen yet to tear-jerking book club transcendence. Americans were still learning how to properly gawk at reality.

I was ten years old and staying in Texas City with my Granny, visiting all my aunts and cousins along the Gulf Coast. I was afraid of: jellyfish, hell, serial killers, being possessed by a demon, and growing an extra eyeball in the palm of my hand. I was way into: Spawn comic books and Anne of Green Gables.

Texas City was an Amoco town back then. Fuck your Royal Dutch Shell. Fuck your Gazprom and your Exxon and your British Petroleum.

All the men around here worked out on the rigs. All the women were nurses, often traveling out to the rigs themselves, everybody doing their bit to drive those hollow nails as deep as possible into the ocean floor. The city's smell was complex and resplendent, a dog's breakfast of competing riches. There was the beach, where the dead things of the sea baked into bits of glass. There was the refineries, where the black blood of the dinosaurs became the world's most profitable poison. There was menthol cigarettes and fried oysters. There was light beer, sunscreen, testicle sweat, and live bait. You

hated it at first, but then you started to like it, like the funk of a demanding but ugly lover.

We had developed a routine that summer: in the mornings, we would eat a nice big leisurely breakfast composed of “things floating in grease.” People from all over the neighborhood would join us, mainly to swap gossip with my exceedingly cunning and wise old Granny, who ran the family like a benign but brilliant CEO runs a board of vicious stockholders. She had eight daughters. In turn, these daughters also birthed mostly daughters, resulting in something like forty or fifty great-grandchildren, out of whom I was the oldest.

Several of these various great-grandchildren would be deposited for the afternoon to Hang, usually infants who banged around in their walkers or else lay down in the middle of perfectly clean beds and majestically wet themselves. My great-grandmother had cable television, which we didn’t get back home. Though I had made my peace with the three network channels and PBS that we picked up through rabbit ears on our dusty black-and-white cube, here I plugged into the thumping cosmos of American cable for the first time. These sitcom kids had California haircuts. The movies had powerful and creative swearing.

After breakfast, when the nuclear explosion in the Texas sky started to effloresce, Granny would retire to her den where she would turn on her soap operas. I would sneak off to my Cousin Lonnie’s room to take total control of the other TV, my own TV, a thing I had never had before.

Cousin Lonnie rented a room from Granny so that she would do his laundry. At present, however, Cousin Lonnie was away for six months on an offshore oil rig, plying his trade as an electrician. His room was as clean and comforting as every other room in my great-grandmother’s tiny ranch-style home, though instead of pictures of family, the walls were covered with posters of women wearing thongs made from Budweiser logos reclining on top of Budweiser cars and Budweiser motorcycles.

There was one poster of Mr. Spuds Mackenzie himself, a pit-bull who seemed to be a hit specifically with ladies who had giant blonde hair.

In one corner of Cousin Lonnie's room was a massive inflatable plastic Budweiser beer bottle, with a slit in the top. It was meant for collecting loose change. Though it was mostly empty, there were just enough coins in the bottom to keep it standing up straight, and it was fun to punch because it would spring back at you and then you could do it again. Until it was time for the nightly Olympics coverage on ABC, I would watch cartoons and action movies on HBO—"Die Hard" and "Total Recall" and "Predator"—drawing mandalas in the plush shag carpet, punching this giant plastic beer bottle out of nervous energy, eating candy, and basically Living Correct.

However, I was just a visitor here in Texas City. All my younger Cousins made this blighted land their permanent residence, and this meant that they knew secrets.

One morning, my Aunt Jane dropped off my Cousin Roy, a hyperactive little shaver named after my dead great-grandfather. He was younger than me and olive skinned: his Daddy worked on the rigs same as everybody else, just another restless skinny dude who knew how to chain smoke and drink and be generally charming while simultaneously cultivating emotional distance like a perfect bonsai tree.

Little Cousin Roy was quiet and sly. He was tinier than me, but much more confident. He had opinions about professional wrestling. We played Frisbee. We played "pretend." We turned the garden hose on fire ant beds. We played hide and seek, but he called this a baby game: possibly because he was not particularly creative at hiding, nor did he have the patience to stay hidden long enough to make the game challenging. Back then, we called ADHD "being a little shit."

During one such attempt at hide and seek, while my Granny was on the nod, I found him sitting cross-legged on the floor of my Cousin

Lonnie's room between the foot of Lonnie's bed and his bookless bookshelves, looking at a magazine.

"You didn't even hide," I said. He grinned at me, slitting his eyes and showing his sharp little teeth.

He was sheepish for some reason. He ran off, laughing, leaving the magazine spread open on the floor.

It was glossy and smelled good, like perfume set on fire. It was well-made: perhaps the most high quality magazine I had ever held, much more substantial than one of the Redbooks or Glamours that my mom bought and kept in a woven basket on the kitchen table. There was a beautiful woman with black hair and massive naked breasts reclining on a bed, busting out of some kind of pale blue camisole.

This was new. I had seen brief flashes of naked breasts in HBO action movies. But this woman looked smart and interesting. I could stare as long as I liked and I felt the entire bottom drop out of all existence.

"I like to wear blue when I tit fuck, and pink when I suck a cock," she proclaimed in a lurid pull quote along the side of the page.

I fell to sweating, feeling sort of ill. I flipped the pages. There was another woman here naked except for tennis shoes. She was tan and slender, and her legs and ass were covered in a fine spray of sand, as if she had been bathing in the waves and then rolling around on the beach, doing a "sugar cookie."

Her skin was bronze and glowing and she seemed so aggressive and confident, especially with those tennis shoes, that I found her terrifying. But here I was, holding her in my hands just the same. I read the paragraph next to the pictures of her. It was a first person account of the way that she liked to be fucked and the kind of men who she liked to perform this act (older men who knew what they were doing).

It was strange: the text didn't seem to go with the woman at all. I knew what women sounded like: I had six aunts and ten great aunts, and all they did was drink, smoke, and talk. They certainly had opinions about love and men, but they were never so blunt nor free of nuance.

I immediately hid the magazine where it came from. In the process, I discovered a stack of many others. No wonder I had missed them: the spines were turned inward so that only the pages were showing and they were interspersed with boring magazines about cars, and car racing, and car part catalogs.

Back in the kitchen, little Cousin Roy was sitting at the table and swinging his legs and eating Oreos from the sleeve. He didn't say anything and neither did I. Okay. We had a male blood alliance. But he was only visiting for the day, and I was here for weeks and weeks. And I had perfect cover: all I had to do was shut the door and turn the TV up and I could hide in there as long as I wanted. And I knew I needed plenty of time to figure everything out.

I savored the situation, deliberately avoiding the back bedroom and spending the rest of the afternoon sitting with Granny while she watched "Santa Barbara." Roy ran around like an idiot, leering at me and raiding Granny's pantry for snacks. I remained haughty and aloof, bifurcated, feeling simultaneously more mature than his undirected delinquent mischief, and also barely contained, more ravenous, more obsessed by the treasure-trove of secret knowledge that he had discovered than he could ever be, since he was a mean little monster, an unfocused creature without true, real curiosity nor the capacity for higher passions.

When Roy's mother arrived to take him away for the evening, I was secretly ecstatic. The treasure was mine.

"I'm going to go visit poor Reece over at the Home," said Granny, "Aunt Alannah is there tonight. I was thinking we'd all just get some Kentucky Fried Chicken for dinner. Would you like to come or would you rather just stay here?"

The only thing in the world I wanted was to go through each and every page of every single one of those magazines and explore the weird feelings they gave me, the dizzying aggression and mouth-drying hunger. But I knew I had to bide my time and not over-play my hand.

“Aw, of course I’ll go with you,” I said. “I love those KFC mashed potatoes.”

“You don’t have to come,” said Granny. “The Home isn’t much of a place for a kid. And also poor Reece, bless his heart, can be unsettling.”

Whatever the price, I told myself. THERE IS NO PRICE TOO HIGH.

“I’m not scared,” I said.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” said Granny. “He’s family. He’s very sweet. He’s always been sweet.”

I had seen Cousin Reece at weddings and other assorted family gatherings, but I wasn’t really sure what visiting him meant. At gatherings, he mainly sat in his wheelchair in the corner and made smacking noises, staring into space, gumming at the air, contorting his neck while drooling. It was not possible to interact with him in a meaningful way, but my mom always made me hug him goodbye. It was like hugging an old dog. He would smile. He would flutter his eyelids and raise his head to the sky.

The Home was the Nursing Home. Granny knew everyone that worked there from the First Church of God, and also because two of her daughters were registered nurses and it was a very small town.

“Ya’ll just go on back all the way till you hear Alannah,” said the nurse on duty. “You’ll hear her,” she lilted.

Aunt Alannah could project. There was a time when she had wanted to be an actress.

“Are they even BOTHERING to shave you right? Look how many spots they missed! Right here on your chin. Shit, they didn’t get under your jaw here at all. You are getting so damn handsome, you know that? Who’s your latest girlfriend in here? Come on now, open up wide.”

Aunt Alannah was in her early fifties, and she was my cousin, not my real aunt. She was tall, with giant blonde hair. I had never noticed before, but today was the day I noticed: she had massive insanely-large porno breasts that poked out from a low-cut black halter top beneath her jean jacket. She was wearing heels and joggling her legs as she spoon-fed her developmentally-disabled son Reece, simultaneously teasing him and encouraging him to Be a Man And Eat His Applesauce.

Reece was in his late twenties, and he was giant, just like Alannah. Six foot six, at least. His hairy knees came up to his elbows in his wheelchair. He was blind; had gone blind from perpetual seizures that he’d been having since he was my age. Alannah remembered him back before the seizures started, of course, but to me he was something ruined, something terrifying. She and Granny talked to him like a human being, even though he couldn’t talk back.

“This is your little cousin on your momma’s side,” said Aunt Alannah to Reece, introducing me.

My mother and Reece were contemporaries, along with my Cousin Clinton who had a hook for a hand on account of the offshore rigs, and who lived with his ex-wife, her new husband, and their two kids in an arrangement that made everybody uncomfortable, but which was never explained to me and which was as normal as anything else in a place where you could buy crawfish at the gas station, where it was a hundred and ten degrees every day, where all the water smelled like sulfur.

(“Might as well call it hell,” my Granny used to say about the water. “Reminds you to go to church.”)

“He’s smart like you, Reece,” said Aunt Alannah to her son.
“Handsome like you, too.”

He shifted his head on his neck, wobbling toward me like an earthworm feeling vibrations in the wet earth. He gummed at me, drooling onto his palsied hands, blinking even though his eyes were rolled all the way back in his head.

“Shake his hand now, let him know you’re here,” Aunt Alannah said to me.

I screwed up all my courage and grabbed his hand and shook it. He moaned and smiled, kinda.

Aunt Alannah kept feeding him mash, while she and Granny talked about who she was dating these days and her prospects at happiness in general. They were able to tune Reece in and out like a radio idly broadcasting a ball game. But I couldn’t stop staring, wondering what his life must be like, knowing already that a seizure must be the evil twin of an erection, blood filling your brain like the hurricane tide swelling over a power plant, short-circuiting everything.

“Got this new one been around a little bit,” said Aunt Alannah.
“Might bring him to church, maybe. Even brought him around here to see Reece. Reece liked him, but Reece is not, on balance, picky. What I need to find is a doctor to marry, you know? Wouldn’t that solve some problems? Feel like everybody in this whole damn town is either in the ORL BIDNESS, or works in a hospital, or is dying of some disease. I mean, it all has to be related, right? It’s like we’re in some kind of big medical quarantine around here to see how much refinery smoke we can suck up and what it does to our bodies. Probably the whole planet is gonna be as ugly as Texas City before too long, but they’ll know just what to do on account of dealing with us for so long. We are a goddamn medical experiment. We are goddamn pioneers. Ain’t that right, Reece?”

“Bring your new one on up to the church so we can get a look,” said Granny. “Is he sweet natured?”

“He’s got a gentle nature,” said Aunt Alannah. “Lord knows I been through the ringer. People say I got a type, but hell, I can only date the men God makes.”

Aunt Alannah leaned way back in her chair, crossing her legs at the ankle. I was acutely aware that I could see most of the fullness of her décolletage, and on this day, thanks to the magic of periodical glossy print, I was learning how to fill in the rest. It was an uncomfortable and powerful new skill.

“You gotta stay in school and become a doctor,” said Aunt Alannah to me, sensing that I was staring at her. “You hear? Then you can take care of some bright, big-titted Texas girl like me in your old age and just have the happiest damn life.”

She plunged more mash into poor Reece’s mouth, scraping the runoff where it squeezed out of the sides. He stared off in the other direction and gummed for a bit.

I stared out the window at the grey asphalt of the parking lot while Granny and Aunt Alannah gossiped, thinking about the women in those magazines while watching plumes of grey smoke billow into the sky across the empty fields of power lines and transfers.

“This is where power comes from,” I thought. “Right here in this town.”

Suddenly, Reece threw his head back and started shaking, his useless hands rigid on the arms of his wheelchair. He nearly flipped the thing over.

“Oh Lord,” said Aunt Alannah.

“Help!” shouted Granny.

A nurse rushed in, grabbing his arm and calling for help. Other nurses joined her, and then eventually a doctor came in and took

his vitals and pronounced him: having a seizure, but otherwise just fine.

We watched him seize for awhile—Aunt Alannah insisting we finish eating our chicken—and then he seemed to fall unconscious. The nurses came in to slip him into his pajamas and lift his giant frame into his bed.

I thought about all the life I had lived up till now; all the life there was left to live.

“He gets excited,” said Aunt Alannah. “When there’s company.”

Eventually, Aunt Alannah and Granny were ready to leave. We said goodbye to the doctor, who kept looking at Aunt Alannah’s chest, just like me. We were dirtbag twins. Neither my Granny nor Alannah seemed to mind. They treated this doctor like royalty. He warmly wished them both well and then we tooted along back home to Granny’s place.

The two of them sat in the living room with the screen door open so Alannah could smoke, and I waited for the right time to excuse myself. Granny turned on the Olympics, and we watched Indonesia win its first ever gold medal in women’s badminton. We all tried very hard to figure out the rules to this game, yelling revelations to each other as we watched. My Aunt Alannah proclaimed Susi Susanti, the Indonesian champion, too skinny, which prompted my Granny to call for iced cream.

“I think I might go watch something else,” I said.

“What do you want to watch?” asked Aunt Alannah. “We’ll change it. We don’t mind. We just like your company.”

“Ha, that’s okay,” I said. “Maybe some cartoons or something.”

“You don’t even want any iced cream?” she said.

“Nah, that’s okay.”

“Blue Bell! Vanilla Bean!”

“I think I ate too much chicken, you know? Maybe later.”

“Well, alright,” said Aunt Alannah. “Though I can’t say that I approve. You are such a tiny little thing. Of course, so’s your momma.”

I slunk away back to Cousin Lonnie’s room and carefully shut the door. I was acutely conscious that there was no lock, but I knew that if I stayed hidden by the foot of the bed, no one could see me even if they came into the room suddenly and without warning.

I turned on the TV, not even caring which station it was on, and then went over to the magazines, savoring them.

There were Playboys, Hustlers, Gallerys, and Penthouses. The Hustlers were the best. The Penthouses were the worst. The women in them didn’t even look real, and all the photos looked like they were taken in a room filled with hot steam. The women in Hustler looked the most human and did the most for me, in my guts.

The Hustler cartoons made me feel the most weird. They were mean and disgusting and almost showed actual sex happening. I was starting to piece together the mechanics of this act from the Penthouse letters. The words for all the discrete and various acts were all coded, but I was breaking this code. I figured out what beaver meant. I puzzled over “carpet munching,” but I decided it meant being in such ecstasy of sexual pleasure, that you were actually chewing on carpet, which I found to be delightful.

One pictorial in Gallery was called “The Girl Next Door.” Women were encouraged to send in Polaroids of themselves which were voted on each month by the subscribers of Gallery and then one woman was selected to be The Girl Next Door of the month, meaning that she was singled out for a pictorial of her own. The women’s ages and professions were listed next to these Polaroids. They were usually in cut-offs, usually holding their breasts up like

trays of cocktail shrimp and smiling painfully, their hair piled up as high on their heads as possible, permed and frosted; crimped and dyed.

There was a knock on the door, and then it opened up before I could even say “HOLD ON.”

It was Aunt Alannah, peeking in. My head popped up from the foot of the bed and I shoved the magazine I was looking at under a pillow.

“You just in here watching the news?”

I realized that CNN was playing.

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.”

“What are you looking at?” she asked, walking right over to the pillow I was leaning on, lifting it up out from under me.

She saw the magazine and started laughing.

“Oh, okay, busted,” she said. “This is one of Lonnie’s?”

She bent over me, checking me out.

“Your Granny passed out and I was getting lonely,” she said. “Also, Lonnie usually has some whiskey in here, doesn’t he? Figured I’d take a few slugs and leave him a couple bucks. You know, for the ride home.”

She knelt down by his bed and reached underneath it, pulling out a bottle. She sat down on the bed. I remained standing beside her, frozen like a small animal in the clutches of a predator. She opened the magazine.

“Used to be just Playboy when I was your age,” she said. “This is elaborate. What’s this one called?”

She flipped pages. She must have known she was torturing me, but she didn't care. She put the bottle of whiskey on the night table.

"Those are fake as hell, those are fake, those are real, those are real and they are EXCELLENT, those are fake and she should get her goddamn money back, shit look at those stretch marks, she looks like somebody stuffed her tits full of rat fur to go with her rat face. She's swinging like some tetherballs, ain't she?"

Aunt Alannah held the magazine up and I nodded, not even really able to look.

"You shy? Nothing to be shy about."

She grabbed the bottle of whiskey and unscrewed the cap.

"I got mine done, you know, after Reece. Figured I deserved something extra. I mean, his Daddy split, and I figured it was a nice gesture, you know, to balance things out."

She took a polite sip, and then a larger swig.

"You want some?" she joked, holding it out to me. "Look at us in here reading skin mags and drinking whiskey."

She sighed. I still hadn't moved. I shuffled nervously back and forth. She took another sip and picked up the magazine again.

She cradled her own breasts, looking at the magazine, suddenly seeming very sad.

"They are too big, aren't they? I wish I'd just had 'em done up perkier, instead of filling 'em out so big. The doctor was very convincing, though. Said the higher a man's testosterone, the more likely he was into big boobs. Seems like bullshit, though, doesn't it? And anyway, what do I even want with some man all full up with testosterone? Maybe I ought to have them taken out. Shit, if I could afford it."

Aunt Alannah tossed the magazine on the bed and held the bottle of whiskey out to me again.

“Sit down and drink with me,” she said. “You’re a man in this family. It’s your goddamn duty to comfort a woman of this family.”

I sat down on the bed hesitantly, smelling some kind of funky tang in the air, mixed with the whiskey and mall counter perfume.

“This bed used to be where your Granny and your great-grandfather slept,” said Aunt Alannah. “Did you know that? Your Granny didn’t want to sleep in here anymore after he died. You are a lot like him. All the boys in this family got some of him in them. Even my Reece. Reece was just the sweetest little boy. Anybody ever tell you much about your great-grandaddy?”

“He worked on the rigs, right?” I said.

“Well, hell, everybody worked on the rigs. But your great-grandaddy was a reader. Loved books. Always a goddamn book in his hand. Everybody made fun of him, but he would do their taxes for them and write letters if they needed letters. Back then, the oil companies had unions, you know. And so everybody up and elected your great-grandfather a union leader. He wasn’t much of a leader, but he was an obstinate fucker, you know. Loved all that Communist bullshit. Your Granny would go to church and he would stay home and mow his lawn and drink his beer and read his books.”

“Communism, like Russia?”

“I guess not anymore, huh?” said Aunt Alannah. “Anyway, there was that big goddamn explosion round here in 1947. Some fertilizer went up and five hundred people died all at once. Whole city blocks were destroyed. The anchor of this French ship was hurled two miles away. It was the biggest industrial accident in American history, did you know that? Frank Sinatra came to Texas City and did a benefit concert. After that, the workers started getting ideas, like they needed insurance and so on. Your great-

grandad signed 'em all up. There were other fires and so on, but now when somebody died it wasn't so bad. The families were accounted for. He was kind of a hero, for awhile. I guess Texas City has always been a place God hits first. Hurricanes, industrial accidents, little boys with brain diseases...shit. It's just a damn laboratory. A medical experiment."

She scratched her breasts, adjusting them.

"Sometimes they get a little scaly. Dry skin. Don't expect you to understand. Just one of those things. Numb around the nipples sometimes. Sometimes they bleed a little."

She grinned at me.

"You want to see 'em?" she asked. "They are better than any magazine. Live and in the flesh. If you promise not to tell your mom, I'll show 'em to you. Shit, they cost me a small fortune. I damn well better be showing them off to people who might appreciate them. And since you are becoming a connoisseur and all..."

She unbuttoned her blouse down to her stomach, and flashed me, grinning. I nodded, encouragingly.

"Very nice," I said meekly.

She laughed.

"You want to touch one? They feel pretty real, I must say. Go on, give one a squeeze."

I put my hand on her tit and squeezed it, feeling so weird.

"Say, let me ask you something," she said. "Do they feel peculiar to you? Does this feel like a lump to you?"

She led my hand to the place she was talking about. I tried to feel what she was feeling.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Of course not,” she said. “How would you? You aren’t a doctor yet.”

She buttoned up her blouse again.

“Alright now,” she said. “Now you can’t ever tell anyone you didn’t have a good time down in Texas City. Drinking whiskey and squeezing titties. You can tell all your friends at school. Now what the hell was I talking about?”

She frowned at me.

“Grandpa Roy,” I said.

“Oh that’s right! Lord, he could talk! Anyway, he started doing some kind of calculations on all the insurance and so on, and he came to some conclusion that the rigs were actually profiting off dead oil workers, you know, taking out policies on them and so on. Recouping their costs for the loss of skilled labor. He was mad about it, you know, and he started speaking out and organizing all the workers, you know. Anyway, it was political for him, and he saw it as an excuse to inject a little Red Menace into this here town. He was good at it, you know. Talked so smart. People listened. He started talking about a strike. People got excited. Amoco sent people down here to bust some heads. He got his ribs broke. They made plans and all, and then there was a strike. Boy, this town never forgave him for that.”

She sighed and drank more whiskey.

“Did it work?” I asked.

“Hell no, it didn’t work,” said Aunt Alannah. “This is Texas, honey. Amoco let them strike for a few weeks, let them start to get a little taste of starvation, and then they fired all the organizers, including your great-granddaddy, and hired everyone else back at half-pay.

How you gonna strike against oil? They got wars to fight in Vietnam and Kuwait and all that. He went flat broke, going through his savings and all. Who else was going to hire him? He had all them daughters to take care of. But more important, no one would listen to him anymore. He loved it when people listened to him more than anything else. But people around here blamed him for getting fired, and for all his Commie bullshit."

"But he didn't do anything wrong," I said. "He tried to help."

"He sure did," said Aunt Alannah. "He went in your great-granny's garage there and he pulled the car out and parked it on the street and he took the laundry out and folded it and then he lay down towels all over the floor of the garage and then he blew his brains out with a shotgun. Wasn't even his gun; he borrowed it from Frenchy up the block. He always said he was a pacifist and hated guns. He left a note, a very beautiful and well-written note in very beautiful handwriting, saying he'd done it for the life insurance money since he couldn't work anymore. The police found the note and his policy in his pocket and that was that."

She sighed, picked up a Gallery magazine, stared at it, smiling, and then set it back down.

She looked around the room at all the Budweiser posters and pictures of classic cars. She stood up arching her back.

"Well, now you know," she said. "But never mind about Grandpa Roy! Cousin Lonnie is the one you ought to take after, until you go off to medical school, anyhow. He's got it all figured out. Look at this room. It's all in these magazines. Big titties and cheap whiskey and fast cars. You can't fight the world. Remember that. You got to do it up right when you can. Let all the rich bastards make all the plans they want: they can't cheat you out of titties, fast cars, and whiskey. They can't appreciate such fine living. And that means more for you."

She tossed the magazine on the bed and walked to the door.

“You want some privacy?” she asked.

“That’s okay,” I said sheepishly.

“Well, say what you want! If you want privacy, say it!”

“You can close the door,” I said.

“Alright, honey,” she said.

10. FULFILLMENT (\$AMZN)

I am working at the new Amazon fulfillment center in Haslet, Texas as a seasonal, part-time picker. It is winter. We aren't workers here: we are associates. It is a job that I can do hung-over and high and I can make just enough money here to technically have my own apartment, a place to store all my empty beer cans and all my crumpled Taco Cabana wrappers and all my stacks of shitty sci-fi novels.

I am back home because I don't want to be in Dallas anymore, or maybe I couldn't "handle it," and maybe I want to forget how the internet works for awhile.

Technically, I'm not even employed by Amazon. Technically, I'm employed by Amazon's staffing agency, a place called "Human Solutions."

The Human Solutions rep for Haslet is this lady named Ashley Hood (as in John Hood, as in Fort Hood, as in Hood's Rangers, as in Texas Rangers). She is an excellent chick that I have known forever, which is how I got the job in the first place. We used to do whippits and fuck each other in the Cici's Pizza parking lot after theater practice when we were in high school.

Sex back then for us was as satisfying as fixing an oily carburetor with your bare hands and then gunning the engine. We were both on the same sad level back then, and even though Ashley has far eclipsed me now, we still have some of the same problems.

We reconnected again thanks to this website DRNKR, which is basically like grindr, except for getting drunk instead of getting laid.

You flag places where free drinks are being served in your community. Weddings, funerals, corporate promotional events, gastropub grand openings, etc. You get DRNKR points based on how many people use your DRNKR post to get wasted for free. You then unlock promotional prizes from liquor companies like t-shirts and neon signs for your bathroom and trips on party buses.

While I was in Dallas, I accumulated basically as many DRNKR points as you can possibly get. I now have the capacity to flag and moderate posts. I am a goddamn DRNKR superstar. I have DRNKR boxer shorts and a DRNKR phone cover. I am not proud of this. Thanks to DRNKR, Ashley Hood and I end up at the same BBQ restaurant doing a Sunday open bar to promote some new brisket rub. We hug each other. There is zero chemistry, or else the chemistry is weird and specific and non-sexy, like a bleach titration or something.

She is all like: “You always have good weed. Do you still have good weed?”

I am all like: “Do you know of any place that might be hiring dudes without any qualifications or experience or hygiene skills?”

I am all like: “Can I have a job please?”

She is all like: “Can I have my copy of Dragon Warrior 3 back?”

I get the job.

I fill out a bunch of paperwork at the Human Solutions office at a strip mall behind an orthodontist. The job is explained to me. Basically, the job is shopping at Wal-Mart for people who are too embarrassed to actually shop at Wal-Mart.

On my first day, I show up at the Amazon Fulfillment Center wearing my best black “Tool” t-shirt. At the last minute, I turn it inside out, deciding that the deodorant stains are better than the glow-in-the-dark picture of a man giving himself a blowjob. I wonder if I have just now, in this instant, become an adult.

There are three hundred of us here to be temporary associates at the Haslet fulfillment center; new recruits for Christmas season.

Our new manager, an actual Amazon employee, explains that we begin as seasonal employees, but that Amazon tends to hire “from inside” if volumes stay high. They explain that the thing that makes volumes stay high is people loving Amazon’s service so much that they use these services during the rest of the year.

We get an informational packet with elaborate sexual harassment policies and we are forced to watch an informational video about Amazon’s humble beginnings and its crafty rise to the very top of every marketplace.

THE GIST: they are so powerful because of CUSTOMER SERVICE!!!!!!!!!! And now in some markets: SAME DAY DELIVERY!!!!!!!!!!!!

There is a guy sitting next to me with lots of tattoos of Looney Tunes cartoon characters. During the video, he says pretty loudly that Jeff Bezos “looks like a guy who shaves all of his body hair and likes to have his dick locked up in a little dick cage while truck drivers from Craigslist take turns fucking his wife.”

Lots of the other temporary associates laugh at this joke.

He is not fired for making this joke.

“I heard he is building a spaceport out in West Texas,” says somebody else.

“Bullshit,” says the dude with the Looney Tunes tattoos.

“No, for real,” says this other guy, a stringy fellow with a long white beard and a Confederate flag do-rag. “Ten cents of every dollar that Amazon makes is going toward putting rich immortal faggot vampires into orbiting space stations, and then they are gonna turn the REST OF US down here on EARTH into a nature preserve.”

“Bullshit,” says the dude with the Looney Tunes tattoos, but you can tell he sort of admires this plan.

“You’ll see,” says the stringy Confederate. “Immortal faggot vampires gonna be running the show from here on out.”

The warehouse is the biggest covered building I have ever been in. It is explained to us that we will not need to become familiar with the merchandise and how it is laid out. We are supposed to follow the trails of millions of LED lights that will light up to steer us where we need to go, from item to item and then over to a pick station. The fulfillment center is covered in conveyor belts that deliver items we find to the sorter, which then dumps the packages out for pick-up by trucks that come and go around the clock.

I once read a book about cockroaches, where they explained that if you put roaches in a maze suspended over a tank of water to keep them from escaping, they will become faster and faster at running the maze if you shock them every time they go the wrong way. But here’s the crazy part: even if you chop off their heads, the ganglia in their abdomens will still run the maze correctly.

Even the asshole of a cockroach can be taught to do the job that I now have.

We have battered, modified touch-screen Kindles. These Kindles tell us which items to pick and in what quantities and beep when we are close to them. We scan each item with these Kindles when we pick it up, and then again before we put in on a belt.

We are told that we can wear headphones and listen to whatever we want while we pick; as long as it is at an appropriate volume and does not disturb others. We are shown where the bathrooms are and we are told that we get either two fifteen minute breaks during our ten hour shifts or one long thirty minute break.

We are given cards and shown how to punch in and out. We are told that it is okay if we get sick, but if we fail to call in ahead of

time, we will be let go immediately. We are told how many other people have applied for the positions that we now have and that these people are waiting on standby so they can work to make enough money to buy Christmas presents for their children. We are told that we are the real elves. That Amazon is the real Santa Claus.

“When do we start?” asks the guy with the Looney Tunes tattoos. “Do I have time to go grab a beer and get laid? Haw haw.”

“You are already on the clock and getting paid right now,” says our supervisor, a man named Spivey who has the bluster, paunch, jaw, shorts, and smell of a junior high football coach. He wears a tight Polo shirt with the Amazon logo over the floppy triangle of his left breast.

“Now here’s something we do a little different around here that you might not find at your other jobs you have had,” says Spivey. “If you do a good job, you get to scream. It’s just a thing that we do different.”

He waits for somebody to ask him what the hell he is talking about, but no one does.

“Yep, if you do something particularly great, you might just be allowed to rear back and let out a scream as loud as you want,” says Spivey. “Let’s all try it together, huh?”

He counts down from three and we all half-heartedly scream. He makes us do it again and again until we are sufficiently loud and passionate enough for him. It is 100% just exactly like being on a junior high football team.

“Round about Christmas, if ya’ll learn what the hell ya’ll are doing, you are gonna hear screaming all over the place around here,” he says with smug satisfaction.

Spivey also introduces us to a woman named Kathy Jane, who runs what he calls “the book machines.” In a dark corner are ten

machines that make so much noise that my chest vibrates and I feel sort of sick. They print paperback books to order.

“HELLO,” shouts Kathy Jane over the churning machine noise. She is not wearing an Amazon uniform. She is wearing a sweater with an 8-bit cat on it.

It is an extremely cool sweater. Kathy Jane is about five feet tall and about five feet wide. I like her very much. Everybody else walks on by, continuing the orientation. But I linger.

“WHAT ARE BOOK MACHINES?” I ask. “WHAT IS THIS EMPIRE THAT YOU RUN?”

Kathy Jane makes me follow her until we are standing behind a wall of cheap hammers. So she can explain.

“We do print-on-demand for Amazon CreateSpace over here,” she says. “It’s called self-publishing. Lots of people want to see their work in print, but they can’t get published, or don’t want to share their profits with a publisher. We print the books up one at a time as a person orders them.”

“You have the best cat sweater,” I say.

“Thank you,” says Kathy Jane, looking over my shoulder and turning bright red.

“Are you a writer yourself?” I ask.

Am I hitting on her? What am I doing?

“You seem like a writer,” I say.

“I do a little writing,” she says. “I mean, I am not published or anything. But I actually did write a couple books. It’s kind of a joke around here. How did you know? Somebody told you, huh?”

“Can I read them?” I ask.

She pretends not to hear me. I don't ask again. I slink away to rejoin the rest of the group.

The items on the floor of the fulfillment center are not in any kind of order. It is explained to us that this is to keep us from accidentally grabbing the wrong one. Two different kinds of cat litter, for instance, would be on opposite sides of the fulfillment center if they have different SKUs.

The job is exhausting and easy.

I listen to podcasts and try not to make any friends. All the people who work here seem like the sort of people who would need a lot of help from you, and I don't want to help them.

I take my twenty minute break and get a candy bar and eat it in the break room, where people are watching a basketball game. There are no books to read in the break room, though there is a "Golf Digest" from last month. I pick up the "Golf Digest" and start to read an article about how to stop missing four-footers. The advice is to "relax and stay straight."

"I will relax and stay straight," I assure the Golf Digest.

Kathy Jane comes in and sits alone, eating a sandwich from a bag. I do not jump up to join her, though I want to. We both eat in silence.

When she gets up to go, I also get up to go.

"People sure do buy stupid books," I tell her, trying to make conversation.

She smiles at me.

"I spend most of time printing up some pretty weird ones," says Kathy Jane. "Imagine books that even publishers won't print. They are pretty filthy. I mean, they are just about as filthy as you can

get. It's mostly pornography. Amazon doesn't like it, but that's freedom of speech."

"His truth is marching on," I say.

She laughs at me.

"Why would a writer work here?" I say. "It seems pretty depressing, for a writer."

"I do it for the discount," says Kathy Jane. "I buy a lot of books, and I also get a discount on the books I print. I get discounts on design, edits, and even sending books out. It is really nice for me. I don't think I could afford to make books if I wasn't working here."

"What kind of books do you write?" I ask.

But she is done talking to me. She veers away and returns to her book machines, where the noise drowns out all possibility for conversation.

"Kathy Jane prints all the PORNOS," says Spivey, putting his hand on my shoulder. "She WANTED the job. Can you believe that? Ya'll gonna be friends?"

"Maybe," I say.

Spivey laughs at me.

"Where ya'll from?" he asks. "Fellow like you."

"I am from right here in this town," I say. "I mean, you can pretty much see the hospital where I was born."

I point. He actually looks where I point, even though we are standing inside a warehouse. Amazon does not sell hospitals yet.

Where I point, there are words painted on the wall in giant human-sized letters:

OBSESSION
FRUGALITY
BIAS FOR ACTION
OWNERSHIP
HIGH BAR FOR TALENT
INNOVATION

I wonder what bias for action means, but I do not ask Spivey.

A week goes by. The monotony makes the job grueling. Many people quit after a few days because there are much easier ways to make not very much money. I am glad it is not summer: the winter is probably the best time of year to be humping around in a warehouse, boxing up Stephen King novels for people.

I try many more times to talk to Kathy Jane, but she is very good at evading me. I get the sense that she does not care much for the seasonal help. Seasonal employees probably don't make good allies. She needs to seem above us in order to maintain her position in the Amazon hierarchy.

Thinking and wondering about Kathy Jane gives me focus and keeps me sane. People come for a few days, they keep their heads down and listen to music and make what they need to make, and then go. It is weird, like working construction. Only we aren't building anything. We are just making sure that when people buy a box of soap or a DVD about how it is bad to keep whales in captivity they get it AS SOON AS HUMANLY POSSIBLE AND DAMN ALL THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS.

Because what if they changed their mind?

Because what if getting it seemed difficult, and so they decided to buy nothing instead?

One day, Kathy Jane comes up to me grinning. She is pinching a silverfish between two fingers. It is wriggling.

“Rock on,” I say.

“Do you want to see something crazy?”

“Of course I do,” I say.

She takes off. I follow her through the stacks of books, excited to be having any interaction at all with the famous Kathy Jane who runs the book machines. She stops, frowning, and seems to have lost her way. Then she finds what she is looking for again.

“Look at that,” she says, pointing beneath a giant stack of “Helter Skelter,” by Vincent Bugliosi. “Under there.”

I get down on my knees and look.

“That is a big glass jar full of silverfish,” I say, standing back up.

She giggles. She unscrews the jar and adds her silverfish to it.

“Whenever I find one, I add it to the jar,” says Kathy Jane. “They can live for a year without food. I looked it up.”

I fumble in my pants for my phone.

“We gotta take a picture for the internet!” I say. “Maybe we should put it on top of a stack of books. See if we can get the Amazon logo in there.”

I tap the jar.

“The next time somebody buys a Mackenzie Bezos novel, we could dump them all in the box,” says Kathy Jane. “That’s Jeff’s wife. She’s a novelist. I guess she’s famous.”

“Kathy Jane!” I say, shocked. “You are terrible. Do you think this place is infested?”

“Maybe,” says Kathy Jane. “I mean, exterminators come every week.”

“Did you know there are cockroaches on the moon?” I say.

“There’s no cockroaches on the moon,” she says.

“Sure there are,” I say. “And on the international space station. They are built for space. They can smell food in three dimensions and are extremely adaptable. One of the astronauts took some up as pets and they started breeding and now the ISS is infested with them. It caused an international incident once between India and Russia.”

“But the moon though,” she says.

“Oh, sure,” I say. “We left all kinds of crap up there, just in case. They eat each other. And Tang. And space ice cream. They live in the moon rover. It’s pretty cold for them, but all that gear made of aluminum foil or whatever absorbs warmth and lasts for thousands of years.”

The closer we get to Christmas, the harder we have to work. Spivey seems increasingly uncomfortable, and I get the feeling that he is getting chewed out on a regular basis. I get the feeling that our particular fulfillment center is not doing so well compared to the other ones.

One day, I decide to see how hard I can possibly work, just to do something different. I spend the whole shift grinding away, following the lights, nearly sprinting to put shit on conveyor belts. Anytime somebody says something to me about “sucking up,” I tell them that I have a bias for action now.

I work so hard that I catch Spivey’s eye. When the shift is about to end, he comes up to me and puts his hand on my shoulder. He leaves it there while I grin into his face like a giant bastard.

“You know what,” he says. “You can scream. You’ve earned it. How about it? You want to do a scream?”

“I can scream?” I say.

“That’s right. You been doing a real good job lately. You are an inspiration. If you wanna scream, you can scream.”

“Do I have to do it right now, or can I like have it as a credit that I can use when I am really feeling it?”

“I don’t know,” says Spivey, thinking about it. “Most people want to scream right away.”

“Can I save mine, though?”

Spivey takes his hand off my shoulder.

“You can save your scream,” he says, walking away from me, disappointed in me.

The week before Christmas, I buy Kathy Jane a giant gift basket full of cheese, tea, and smoked meats. I do not order it from Amazon. I present it to her, grinning, wearing my best “Cannibal Corpse” t-shirt.

“I got you this cheese basket,” I say.

She takes it from me. She frowns at it, and then she bursts into tears.

“Thank you,” she says, miserably.

“What’s wrong?” I say. “It is a cheese basket! Everybody wants one of these.”

“I know,” she says. “It is great. I am getting fired, though. After the 1st of the year they are getting rid of me.”

“What?” I say. “How come? That doesn’t make any sense. You run the book machines!”

“I know,” says Kathy Jane. “But they say they don’t need a person to handle the printing and all anymore. They are just gonna print them straight to the conveyor belts. There was a meeting here, and they are also gonna stop selling adult and erotic titles. That’s most of what I do, honestly. I’m not gonna get my discount anymore. I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I won’t be able to print my books and ship them out. I won’t be able to afford it.”

“Don’t leave,” I say. “Make a little fortress in the boxes, deep in the stacks. Come out late at night and use the machines to print your books and then sneak them into the shipping.”

She laughs.

“Nah,” she says. “They got cameras everywhere. They’d find me.”

I sigh. “Well that is some terrible bullshit.”

“You want to see my books?” she says in a tiny voice.

“Of course I want to see your books, Kathy Jane,” I say.

She leads me away to her book machine empire, still sniffing. She goes over to one of the machines which is not currently printing out POD paperbacks for direct sale.

“I wish I had enough money to buy one of these machines,” says Kathy Jane. “Amazon bought all the technology so they could sit on it, making sure it stays too expensive, but I would start a coffee shop in Dallas where the book machine was right in the middle. People could come in and print up any book they wanted. I would print up and sell my favorite books there. We would also sell books people brought back as returns, paying a dollar a piece for them. Instant bookstore. You wouldn’t even have to wait the two days it takes to get a book shipped to you from Amazon.”

She punches some numbers into one of the book machines. The machine starts to whir and churn.

We stand there side by side in silence. Eventually, the machine stops printing. The machine glues on the cover, and cuts everything to the proper trim size.

She looks at the book, smells it, and then hands it to me.

It is called "PUSSY PATROL ONE: MEOW MIXXXER."

"It's sex stories, but for kitty cats," says Kathy Jane. "I have written ten so far. This first one is about a tom named Lester who throws a big party for all the cats and then things get a little crazy."

"Oh wow," I say.

"Yeah," she says. "They're not for everyone. Nobody has reviewed them yet on Amazon. I sell a couple a week, though. I price them pretty low so that people who really want them will be able to afford them. I guess I won't be able to do that anymore."

"I can have this?" I say.

"Take it," she says.

I clasp it to my heart.

I cash my second to last paycheck. One day, Kathy Jane stops showing up. I try to figure out her address or number, but no one will tell me anything. Spivey comes up to me the week before Christmas. It is the last day that people can order things and still expect to get them in time for Christmas morning.

"Did Kathy Jane ever show you how to run these book machines?" he says. "Ya'll was friends right? She showed you how?"

"Sure," I say. I start to tell him how they work, but he cuts me off.

“We are automating them all in a couple months,” he says. “But we are still getting thousands of orders right now and she has stopped coming into work.”

“Do you know where she lives?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Do you think you might be able to run these book machines temporarily for a little bit? I mean, we can’t hire you officially or anything. But it sounds more fun than picking on the floor, right? And who knows, maybe we can find a place for you after everything? Since you was born right here in this town and all.”

“I’d love to do that,” I say.

“Great,” he says. “Tomorrow, go right to the book machines instead of the floor.”

I decide that tomorrow will be my last day. I don’t want to spend Christmas here. I wish nobody did. When I am punching out for the night, I steal a handful of packaging labels from the front office, pretending that I need a new ID card.

I stay up all night reading Kathy Jane’s cat porn, which is surprisingly readable.

“Lester Bootykins, fearless leader of the Pussy Patrol, you will have your goddamn revenge,” I say to myself, sitting cross-legged on my shitty stained carpet, naked, drinking a Bud Light Lime Michelada tallboy and using it to keep my testicles cold, because I have no control over the heat in my apartment and my landlord has cranked it to the max, meaning that even with the windows open I am sweating so hard that I can suck on my top lip and fill my mouth.

I do not sleep. I am too excited to sleep and I have too much to do, looking up addresses of bars around the country, sending them DRNKR messages, and creating DRNKR events for them.

The next morning I go quietly to the book machines. Spivey comes around to check on me. A few orders come in and I dutifully print them up and put them on the conveyor to be scanned, sorted, and packaged.

Then I start printing up copies of “PUSSY PATROL ONE: MEOW MIXXER.” I use one book machine for the orders that are still coming in, just to keep Spivey from getting suspicious.

I use the other machines to print as many copies of Kathy Jane’s cat porn as I possibly can. The machines can print a book every five minutes. This means I can do twelve an hour with each machine, sixty altogether. I crank them out, stacking them in boxes of thirty a piece. There are boxes at the station, and I load the books into boxes for bulk orders, slapping address labels on them that I have already filled out, and then sealing them.

When boxes like this go through the conveyor belt, there is an automatic override and they are sent straight to shipping.

I am able to fill two boxes an hour. I am working a ten hour shift, so I am able to send boxes to twenty cities around the United States.

Getting the beer is a little harder. Amazon sells beer and wine, but they don’t fulfill it themselves. For this, I have to sneak over to the manager’s station and edit already existing orders using Spivey’s account info, which we all know by heart by now, since we have spent six weeks looking over his shoulder whenever we fuck up the slightest thing and he has to fix it.

I change these already existing orders, people’s last minute Christmas presents, into orders for cases of Bud Light Lime Michelada tallboys.

All day long, people have been responding to my DRNKR posts. I have set up events in twenty cities around the country:

MEOW MIXXER CHRISTMAS EVE NATIONAL BOOK RELEASE PARTY!

Says the DRNKR post

Sponsored by Amazon.com and BUD LIGHT LIME

Free BUD LIGHT LIME till it runs out. Free copies of PUSSY PATROL NUMBER ONE: MEOW MIXXER by Kathy Jane Freshnell. This is totally legit. The only catch is that you must give the book a five star review on Amazon or you don't get free beer. MERRY XMAS YOU HORRIBLE DRUNKS.

I put the last box of the books on the conveyor and wait.

I wait an hour, doing pretty much nothing. The 5 PM truck shows up to take away the next-day delivery boxes, including the cat porn. I have won. Time for my victory lap. Time to make sure Kathy Jane gets away with it.

I look around for Spivey.

"Spivey!" I call out. "Where are you man? Come manage me!"

After a few minutes he strolls over, his thick hands rubbing his belly, looking reptilian and mean.

"What do you want? Don't tell me you got a problem over here."

I don't say anything. I sit down on the conveyor belt, swinging my legs.

"Don't be sitting on that," he says. "Hey now hey."

I push back and sit cross-legged on the conveyor belt. The belt starts carrying me away, carrying me to the big central sorter and the rows of flatscreen computers in the center of the fulfillment center.

“Hey come on now,” says Spivey. “It’s good to have fun, but come down off there. Where you going?”

I stand up.

“HEY GET DOWN OFFA THERE,” says Spivey, jogging along to catch up with me, crashing through stacked boxes of novelty coffee mugs and cheap plastic lawn furniture.

A crowd gathers round.

“Somebody’s riding the conveyor belt!” I hear somebody shout from miles away.

“Surf it, man, surf it!”

I stand up.

Everybody cheers.

“YOU BETTER GET DOWN OFFA THERE THIS MINUTE,” shouts Spivey. Some of the other managers are running over to me now, trying to keep pace with me, but they are also utterly unwilling to climb up on the conveyor belt with me and risk breaking it, busting the tread.

I am shooting through the fulfillment center at an alarming clip.

“Same day delivery,” I shout to Spivey.

I drop my pants. I squat.

At first, I panic, thinking I won’t be able to do it.

But then I remember the best part. I start screaming. My primal scream.

Everybody shuts up. They are all watching me. Scrutinizing me. I can feel myself burning into all of their memories. I am not a

“temporary associate” now. I am not temporary at all. I am permanently searing myself into all of their minds and all of their dreams and all of the cameras that are watching me.

I dry fart a few times, and then I squeeze out a big ropy shit on the conveyor belt, making sure to shit downbelt so I don't step in it.

The people chasing me stop. They look ill. Everyone else is cheering.

“You are gonna pay to have that cleaned,” shouts Spivey. “That is coming right out of your paycheck! Get him! Somebody get him down. Somebody call the police!”

“Don't you dare,” says Spivey's boss. “You want a police report of this?”

I pull my pants up and run along the conveyor belt, running against it, staying in approximately the same place.

“Ya'll better catch that shit,” I say. “It is heading right for the sorters. It's gonna gunk up everything, especially if gets caught in the teeth at the end and gets smeared along the whole tread. If it gets down there in those gears, ya'll will never get the stink out. And then those sorters are gonna dump my shit all over all those Christmas packages waiting down there. Ya'll will have to repack everything. Ya'll will be stalled out for the whole day. But ya'll can catch my shit if you hurry. Come on, now, hurry, run, go get it, go get my shit!”

The constellation of managers and security realize I am telling the truth, though none of them think to simply turn the conveyor belt off. They veer away from me and chase after my rage turd, trying to catch it before it is sucked into the sorting machine and starts smearing along the tread. I wait until I am free and clear, and then I hop off the belt and run for the doors. Everyone is cheering me, holding their hands up for high fives which I do not grant.

“I GOT IT,” shouts Spivey. “Sweet fucking Jesus, it is still warm. Somebody get me a goddamn towel or some packing foam or something.”

I hit the big steel emergency exit doors and I burst through them, the cold night air hitting me like a wet mop on a tile floor. My bicycle is right there where I put it, and I hop on, pedaling like mad.

I am unemployed again.

But this year, no matter how hard they scrub, there’s gonna be a little bit of my shit in everybody’s Christmas.

I feel great, like I used to feel jumping out of the window into the bushes late at night in high school and sneaking out to a party in a field somewhere. I did my time. I got some money. I know I don’t matter in this world. I am not a millionaire genius. I am not a brilliant start-up entrepreneur innovator.

But I can still do things they can never do, and I feel great right now, and maybe all experiences are equal, and they might own everything, and I might never own anything larger than a duffel bag, but Gradatim Ferociter, goddamn it, “Step by Step, Ferociously,” even if that means walking the wrong way on a conveyor belt, never getting anywhere, never getting properly sorted or arriving fast enough so nobody complains.