

# The Fist of a Bum Called god

by Dr DR Glowacki

For the Justins, the Beccas,  
the Mormons, the Mountains,  
the Monks, and me

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“There’s no mystery here. That’s why the door's  
open.”

*-Richard Brautigan*

## Don't ease me in

Charles walked out from inside the bar and sat down on the bench. Without looking at me, he said 'you still have my backpack?'

My hands were still shaking. It was a mixture of drunkenness, and some residual fight or flight that hadn't had the time to express itself. 'There it is,' I gestured weakly, underneath the bench.

He bent down to make sure it was still there, and continued, shaking his head to emphasize how much I'd done him wrong, 'I can't believe you talked to that nut for so long. That boy aint right.'

He looked up at me.

'Goddamn! What the hell happened to you, boy!?' he exclaimed upon seeing my fat lip, the fresh puffy shiner growing around my right eye, and the blood leaking down from my nose toward my lips.

'That guy whacked me. I checked my watch as he got up to leave, and next thing I know, he clobbered me. In cold blood. What was left of my beer went everywhere.' I gestured toward a few forlorn beer suds that were now disintegrating on the pavement.

Charles had looked like he was on the verge of feeling bad for me, but as soon as I told him who it was that was responsible for the state of my face, all traces of pity disappeared, 'Well, that's what you get when you mess around with nuts like that instead of sane folks like me...'

The pain was starting to creep across my face, but hadn't yet really entrenched itself. Its advance was being held at bay because of the amount of accumulated beer inside of me. I carried on with Charles, blood still trickling from my nose into my mouth. 'You know that guy?' I asked.

'I've seen him round here before. I know pretty much everyone that hangs out on this here street. That boy's nuts, and I don't know what to make of the fact you bought *him* a goddamn beer for doing nothing but talking twenty minutes of nonsense to you. Here I am: I've been talking normal to you ever since I first seen you, being real pleasant – making you feel comfortable – like you were an old friend.'

Charles was sitting next to me on a bench with a view of an old, cosy, cobbled street lined with porches and balconies. A pair of breasts and an ass wobbled by as he was speaking to me. His head tracked the jiggles till they were out of sight, but his mouth reliably carried on speaking to me without missing a syllable. He was well practiced, 'I'm sorry you're sitting here with a face looking like that, but I still can't believe you bought that nut a beer.'

'Here I sit, Charles – a bloody mess, my lip and the shiner around my eye getting puffier as we speak. My nose is broken, and you're not even offering me something to clean my face.' I stopped for a moment to let him consider his behavior. Shaking my head at him in disappointment, I asked, 'Are you that desperate for beer?'

I waited for an answer like his mother, letting him think good and hard about whether he was desperate for beer. He was, and he didn't mind if his mother knew or not. It probably ran in the family. He handed me a handkerchief. 'Listen Charles, have a little bit of compassion. That poor nut wasn't much better off than my drunken and broken self. He told me he journeyed for days to get back here so he could revisit the spot of his trauma, only to find it doesn't even exist anymore.' Charles was looking at me, listening, but still sceptical, so I carried on justifying my beer purchase, 'Charles, if you woulda been out here, I woulda bought you a beer too. It's not my fault. It's just the wrong place at the wrong time.' He looked at me, his eyebrows raised. I continued, 'Anyway, what makes you think that he's such a nut?'

Charles took a sip of beer, and looked over at me with confidence and a glint like a lawyer about to put the nail in the coffin. No trace of pity anywhere. That handkerchief was all he could manage. He said to me, 'I'll tell you how I know he's a nut. The first time I saw him, I still remember like it was today. It was early afternoon. He was sitting in a lawn chair under a bus shelter in town. He had a six pack in an old plastic bag, and was drinking beer. No entertainment but traffic and people. It was raining hard, and I was getting soaked, but he'd sprawled himself out so comfortably inside the shelter there was no space for anybody else. I got so tired of being out in the rain with him dry under that bus shelter – with no intention of riding the goddamn bus – that I crammed myself in there too.'

I nodded my head, listening, supposing that Charles had probably gone inside the bus shelter because he was hoping to get a free beer off the guy. I hadn't known Charles for long, but I could tell that he'd do anything to save on beer.

Charles interrupted my thoughts, 'you gonna let me finish?' He was clearly insulted that I had been suspicious of his motives. I nodded, bloody and drunk, in apology. He picked up where he left off, 'Lemme tell you, he'd been in that bus shelter for awhile, and he hadn't seen a bath for a good long time, so it stank. I could barely handle it, but the rain was coming down so hard, I had no choice. When I asked him what he was doing in there, he told me that he was *saving money*. Only a nut would say something like that.'

'He was sitting in a lawn chair under the bus shelter drinking beer... and told you he was saving money?'

'Mmm-Hmm. I remember when I heard him tell me that. I stuck my head outta the shelter and told everyone else standin' in the rain what he said. Nobody had a goddamn clue what I was talking about. They all thought that I was as crazy as him. When I asked him what he meant, he told me that all of the places nearby – the shops, a couple of diners, some store that sold batteries – were trying to take all his savings away from him.'

Charles paused. The pain in my face was beginning to overwhelm even the beers. I was still holding the handkerchief under my nose to soak up the blood, and it muffled my response: 'saving money, eh?'

If that nut hadn't just clocked me in cold blood, then I'd think he was some kind of genius for finding a way of confusing doing something with doing nothing.

Charles looked over at me, 'You better quit doing that.'

I looked over at him, puzzled, 'Doing what?'

‘As long as you’re on my street, then I can hear everything,’ he said. ‘It don’t matter whether you’re thinking to yourself or talking to me. So if you got something to say, you better just come right out with it. Say it to everybody. There’s no secrets on my street.’

I nodded back.

He carried on with his story. ‘That nut was a cashaholic. Always preaching to everybody about how the only way for a man to earn a spot in the hereafter was by saving money and living frugally in the now. The most righteous thing a man could do was go and save at the expensive places. He used to go to the fancy hotels downtown with twelve beers and the lawn chair – sit there the whole night and save hundreds easy. Two hundred for a room for the night, maybe another 100 for the limo ride to the hotel, a tip to the doorman, and another fifty or so for dinner, minus six or so for the money he’d spent on beers – he said that he’d come out ahead by at least three hundred and forty a night. Sometimes more – every time he saw a guy with a female escort, he’d add at least another couple hundred, depending on how good looking she was.’

‘That nut never shut up about saving money. Said it was insulated from everything – market fluctuations, housing crashes, greedy bankers, predatory lending, inflation, credit crunches. He used to go around *hoping* for inflation. Said it would help him save more cause it would drive prices up, and put him on the fast track to righteousness. He’d rave about how he could do it from anywhere, and how flexible the hours were. Restaurants were his favorite, cause then he could save money *and fast* at the same time. The thing to remember, he said, was never to sit outside a place sellin’ cheaper beers than the ones you brought with you. Church was the only place he couldn’t beat, cause they give away free bread and wine at least once a day.’

Charles’ account of the guy’s saving habits was making me regret having bought a beverage for such a hot-tempered nutjob. All my mouth could come out with was, ‘Well, he must be thrilled with the savings after that beer I just bought him...’

Charles nodded, ‘No doubt about it. I just told you how rich he is. And you helped make him even richer.’ He chuckled to himself, ‘And all you got to show for it is a busted face.’ He looked a little closer at my face, ‘That’s one hell of a shiner you got there. With a shiner like that, who needs a streetlamp?’ He paused, looked down at his beer and swirled what remained of it, ‘It’s a cryin’ shame, that guy...’ Charles trailed off.

‘What’s a crying shame?’ I asked, supposing Charles had finally begun to have some pity for me.

‘It’s a shame that with all those savings, all that wealth – that righteous fool bum never got up to something more productive. The most productive thing I ever seen him do was dig a hole where he could bury his cold beers to keep them out of the sun while he was sitting outside saving. Every once in awhile, he’d stick his hand in the dirt and pull out a cold one...’ Charles sighed, ‘all that wasted potential...’

Charles recognized speechlessness when he heard it. He took a sip of his nearly finished beer, and then looked me in the eyes, ‘you still don’t believe me that he’s a nut?’

I believed Charles. I shook my head pathetically. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, Charles had convinced me. ‘That nut said the reason he had to be going was because

he had different cities on different planets within different galaxies to visit.’ Charles did nothing but nod his head solemnly.

As the pain made its way into the crevices of my face, I was descending into drunken delirium, but Charles carried on in the same old tone, ‘Another time I heard him give somebody directions how to get to the park, just at the end of the street,’ he gestured, ‘and I never heard so twisted an answer come outta anyone’s mouth about anything. He was talking at 100 miles an hour, making no sense at all, telling them to go north and then south and then north again and then circle back on themselves so that they could go straight. Those directions woulda sent somebody round the whole city three times just to get next door. What kinda person would send someone so far to get somewhere so close?’

Charles was just about finished, ‘So when I seen you talkin to him, I thought it best to stay clear till he left. But I didn’t know you were out here buying *beers*,’ he said, oozing resentful disbelief. ‘Otherwise I reckon even I woulda been able to put up with that self-righteous nut. I was talkin’ to you for a good hour before he got here, and I can’t get one damn beer off you. But sure enough you go and buy that mother a beer.’

‘Almost makes me wish I was some nutcase that made a pointless journey. Then maybe I’d have a beer by now. I tell you what – a guy with that much savings should be buying *you* a beer! *I’m* the one that needs someone to buy me a beer. I don’t have the luxury of accumulating savings all day long. I gotta sell ice cream to little brats under the hot sun. I’m just barely keeping my head above water.’

I was silent. Despite my drunkenness, throbbing face, fat lip, puffy eye, busted nose, and growing indifference, Charles carried on making me feel like I had to justify why he didn’t have a beverage. I didn’t like it. We sat next to one another on the bench for a few moments, me silent and him sighing as he listened in to my thoughts justifying why I hadn’t bought him a beer.

I turned to him, and asked something I’d been wondering from when we first met, ‘Charles, what the hell you carry around in that backpack?’

‘Endings,’ he responded simply.

‘What the hell you talking about?’

‘Endings, you know...’ he said clearing his throat, ‘I used to carry out around lotsa endings – happily ever after, tragic, unexpected, with a twist, dark, non-satisfying. Whatever kinda ending you could imagine, I woulda had something pretty goddamn close. But it got too awkward lugging those things around, and started giving me back pain. And I got bored as hell waiting for people as they spent hours routing around that bag, looking for the perfect ending... Eventually, I ditched ‘em all except for one. I sold all the rest to a guy just up the road.’ He gestured at a shop up the road. ‘Now *he* deals with all those irritating people. He told me there’s people that been in his shop hunting for endings 20 or 30 years now.’

‘You only got endings? No beginnings?’

‘Well, the only ending I bother with these days finishes where it starts, so it reduces by half the amount of stock that I have to carry. Anyway, I’m usually out here on the street trying to get beers and drinking and watching the ladies and talking to nuts like you anyway. And I’m pretty much always finding myself going through the same stuff – waking up, going to sleep, walking the street, the sun rising and setting, and the moon going round and round the way it did last time. So, believe it or not, one

ending's got all I need. It's comforting, it's exciting, and it's fulla mystery. With my backpack so light these days and all my back pain gone, I got lots more energy for the middle.' He looked around furtively, 'and I don't have to worry so much anymore about some bastard trying to steal my backpack.'

He paused, sighed, and shook his head solemnly, '...If I carried around middles in that backpack, I'd be dead by now. I know a guy who that happened to. He always used to say endings and beginnings weren't very important – that it was the journey that mattered. He was so worried he'd miss out on something, he crammed his bag full of way more middles than he shoulda, and it fell on top of him one day while he was walking down the road. It musta suffocated him straightaway. But that bag was so big and so heavy that nobody bothered to move it, and it was years before anybody found out there was a corpse under there...'

I paused, struggling to take it all in, my delirium becoming overwhelming. 'You got any endings for me?'

'Well, you can help yourself to the one I got in my backpack, or you can go visit the shop where I left all my other ones. But if you spend too long looking for an ending, it probably means you wont have moved a goddamn inch from the beginning, and the ending you thought you might have had will disappear in front of your face.'

The conversation was becoming too much of an effort.

'Charles, you want a beer?' I said.

'Yeah. It's about time you offered, you nut supporter. I'll tell you what, you give me the money and I'll go in there and buy the beers. You take it easy, your face needs a rest. You're not looking so good. Some beers'll do it good. I'll bring you the change.'

'Ok.'

'Keep an eye on my bag while I'm in there, will you?'

I nodded.

I don't know how long he was in there. I weakly nudged his backpack with my foot. A single leaf of paper fell out. On one side of the sheet was written, 'the end,' and on the other side, 'the beginning' – each towing opposite sides of the same line.

'Huh,' I mused.

## What the nut said

Before the nut that cold clocked me showed up, I had been drinking beer and smoking a cigarette, sitting on a bench on a cosy little cobbled street lined with balconies and porches. I'd just met Charles, who sold ice cream at a stand in the square near the river. He was relaxed and friendly, treating me like we'd been old friends even though we'd known each other for no more than a few minutes. Charles made a daily habit of hanging out at any of a number of the establishments lining the street. Mostly he was scoping out females, but he did it with style, in perfect rhythm with the diffuse ambience of everything else: the music pouring out of the bars and clubs, the walkers and runners, the customers to whom he'd served ice cream that day, the arguments and lovers and drunks, and spectators with nothing better to do than write down scenes that they weren't participating in.

Who knows how old Charles was. Maybe 60. He was a heavyset black guy. Not fat, but really thick legs. He always wore a baseball hat, and he had thick-rimmed black glasses. He wore shorts year round, but his thick calves were covered in socks that he wore jacked up to just below his knees. White socks with three red stripes at the top. A tiny bit of knee was just visible between the socks and the shorts.

When I first arrived on this street, I must have walked past Charles 4 or 5 times. He was planted on the bench and immediately spotted me as a newcomer. Eventually, I sat down next to him. When we first met, I thought that he'd introduced himself to me as Walter and didn't figure out that wasn't his name until I'd called him Walter lots and lots of times. When one of his friends walked by and said, 'Hey Charles, how you doing, man?' I sheepishly said, 'So your name's not Walter, huh?'

'Nope,' he said and then chuckled, sipping his beer, 'you finally figured it out. I didn't bother to point it out. I figured we both knew who you were talking to.'

Nobody minded if you drank beers in public on this street, and that's the reason why Charles never ventured far. This small stretch of pavement had entertained him for years. When he got bored of sitting on his favorite bench, he would get up and take in the other scenes that lay behind the doors of the bars and cafes that dotted the street. He was content to wander up and down and up and down, over and over and over again, hour after hour, peering into doors, overhearing conversations, reading thoughts, discerning eyes, interpreting faces, listening to arguments, identifying newcomers, chatting with oldcomers. He was like the curator of the street, and all the while he'd steadily sip on a beer that he held close to his chest. After making the circuit, he'd come back to the bench where this story began.

But for such a relaxed guy, I was surprised by how meticulous he was – borderline spastic – regarding the whereabouts of his backpack.

When I first sat down on the bench where I'd seen Charles, there were four of us. I was sitting in between Charles and another guy. The other guy was wearing dark glasses and drinking out of a big white wine bottle in silence. I made a few attempts to initiate stupid small talk with him, asking him things like, 'What have you got there?' even though it was perfectly clear to me what he had in there. He didn't even turn his

dark glasses toward my direction in acknowledgement. He remained perfectly silent, took a swig of wine, and carried on with the glasses facing toward the opposite street. Eventually, the barmaid came outside and told him that he couldn't drink a big bottle of wine on her bench. He got up silently and sat on the curb, two steps from the bench, and drank his wine there, his dark glasses still reflecting the opposite street, looking neither to the left nor to the right.

Sat on the bench, Charles saw a butt that he liked jiggle by, and he told me that he had to go. 'Can you watch my backpack for me? I'll be right back,' he said.

'Yeah, that's fine, as long as you come back,' I said, taking a slow drag of a cigarette.

He walked off, and as soon as he left, a guy that had been sitting next to him immediately scooted over so that he was sitting right next to me on the bench. On the back of one of his hands, he had a tattoo of a snake swallowing its tail, and on the other, a Star of David.

'Who are you?' he asked me.

I ignored his question, 'Who the hell are *you*?' I said, sipping my beer, looking at his hands, and wondering why he seemed like he'd been waiting for the opportunity to plant his ass right next to mine.

'I'm drunk.' he immediately replied without making eye contact. 'I been drinking beers all day long.' He paused, and then looked me in the eyes, 'but lotsa folks know me as *god*.'

'*god*?' I paused, took a sip, and then began, 'No shit, man.'

He didn't wait a moment to respond, 'you know what, my son? I like you because you call me *man*. When most people hear that I am god, they forget that I am human just like them, focusing entirely on my god-nature. It's refreshing to meet someone like you.'

'Listen, man, I mean, *god*. I have faith.'

I clarified, 'Well, what I mean is that I have no reason to *not* have faith. Why shouldn't you be god? If god were to sit down and tell somebody who he was, they'd be just as likely as I am to suppose he was just another washed-up nut. So I got no way of telling the difference,' I declared with gusto, sipping my beer.

'You have great faith, my son,' god replied.

Curiosity was starting to get the best of me, as would often happen in this tale. 'How often do you take human form and hang around outside bars?' I asked.

'I hang around with man in all variety of locations, mostly in order to amuse myself with my own skill as a creator.'

'You get a little bit bored up there with nothing but infinite perfection, and the angels and dead people singing your praises for eternity, don't you?' I asked.

He nodded his head yes, and I continued, 'Well, I'm sure it's even more boring for them. Anyway, it's probably good for you to come back down and walk among people. It'll ground you, otherwise you'll just have your head in the sky all the time. But you need to be careful, god, cause the last guy that hung around down here for too long didn't even say he was god; he just said he was related, and he ended up hanging on a tree. And not cause he was a tree-climber.'

‘You’re talking about Jesus?’ he asked casually.

I nodded, and he carried on, explaining matter-of-factly his relationship to Jesus, ‘that was one of my other personalities. It rears its head every now and again, but it’s been dormant for years, thank heavens. Jesus let himself be killed out of curiosity, to see what it was like. A week or so agonizing over impending death and 3 hours of physical suffering were about all that he had the appetite for, even though he knew that he would be rising again in a few days.’

‘Really, so Jesus’ time on earth was more like some schizophrenic’s sightseeing trip?’

He looked at me sternly, and declared, ‘god does not die needlessly, my son.’

Silence passed between us for a few moments before he continued, ‘I died for my own sin, which was creating people. Once I took human form, if people didn’t get me first, then eventually old age would have.’

‘Well you certainly confused the hell outta people, I must say.’

‘What do you mean, my son?’

‘Well, from what I’ve heard, god had a habit of saying that no man could ever look upon his face without perishing. But then Jesus visited earth, saying he was god, and looking in everybody’s faces. So of course the people didn’t know what the hell to do. With that much eye contact from god, they were all trying to figure out how come they were still alive. So they concluded that this guy Jesus must not *actually* be god. Meanwhile Jesus pushed it even further – telling people that they would perish if they *didn’t* believe that his face was the face of god. Those poor people were confused so much, so fast, they decided to put an end to all the nonsense once and for all and kill *you* first.’

I glanced over at him and saw that he was still listening, so I finished, ‘You spent so much energy telling people they couldn’t look upon your face without perishing – that you never bothered to find out what would happen if the creation looked at *you*. Turns out it was the same goddamn thing. What more could you expect from your creation? They were created in your image, so they killed you back. It’s kind of tragic. If you weren’t god and I knew that you couldn’t really lose, then I would feel sorry for you.’

god’s eyes were wide open, and he was staring at me, ‘You have great understanding and great faith, my son.’

‘All I need is the faith of a mustard seed, and that’s about all you inspire in me, man. You better be careful what happens when you look upon my face,’ I said, but I could tell he wasn’t afraid.

‘I wish that more of my children respected me enough to call me *man*. I am going to bless you my son. You will have a beautiful wife,’ he blessed, tapping me abruptly on the forehead like he was checking the density of my brain.

‘Thanks god.’ I muttered underneath my breath.

god studied the lines on my face, ‘and I will also bless you with a child,’ he said, touching my shoulder.

‘Hold on, hold on, hold on, man. I didn’t even know if I wanted you to bless me with a wife, but I didn’t protest because you made it a point to guarantee that she’d be beautiful. But I definitely don’t want a child. Do both of us a favor, man, and retract that last blessing.’

‘My son, you cannot change the blessings of god, and you cannot know the mind of god. He blesses whom he pleases *as* he pleases. In fact you should count yourself lucky to have even looked upon my face. Most of the people with whom I speak – they aren’t allowed to see my face – the best they get is my backside, and that’s only if I’m in a good mood.’

‘Listen, man, I want no part in bringing another consciousness into this god-forsaken world without their prior consent. How the hell can I justify that sort of casual reproductivity? I’m not like you, man, creating people for the hell of it, without asking if that’s what they want. You wanna see people dragged down by the agony and uncertainty of creation just like yourself, don’t you? I’ve always suspected that’s what all that *be fruitful and multiply* crap is really about. You’re selfish, god. You only think about yourself.’

god didn’t respond immediately, like he knew as much about himself. But finally he started, ‘you are wise, my son, and since I see that your thought is not for yourself, and that you have studied *my* mistakes, I will unbless you. You shall have a child only if you want one. I will not force my blessing upon you.’

‘Thanks, god, I’m glad that you respect reasonable requests these days – instead of forcing yourself on folks willy–nilly.’

He looked agitated, like he had a secret to confess, ‘my son, you of all men deserve to know the truth about creation, so I shall tell you: I created sex for the pleasure of man. Initially, it had nothing to do with creation. I endowed people with a few extra parts so that they could stave off their boredom in the perfect garden place I made for them. I was so guilt ridden having created people, that I didn’t want to burden them by making them creators, too. But when I saw their ignorant bliss, it made me resent them. Why should the beings that I had created have it better than me? So I changed my mind and made sure that fucking around would be eternally tied to the risk of creation. Never again shall they be separate things. And so far it’s worked well – these days, sex causes all kinds of problems for all kinds of people. Apart from pockets that have resisted...’ he trailed off.

I had to nudge him to get him talking again, ‘what are you talking about – pockets who resisted?’

He slowly came back to life, ‘there’s a group of progressive society types who’ve managed to divorce sexuality from creation. Just like it used to be. And they’re so happy about it, they call themselves *gays*. Their defiance still pisses me off. And so does contraception.’

All I could say was, ‘Not only are you selfish. Sounds like you’re jealous, too.’

He muttered to himself, clearly resigned to their gay insolence over the centuries, ‘and now I’ve got a whole bloody church run by ‘em... My son, I will let you in on a secret. Apart from this time, I’ve only made one other visit to earth since my Jesus personality reared its head, and the gays managed to catch me. They put me behind bars deep deep deep underground in the bowels of their institution. It was centuries before I finally managed to escape. But by that point, they’d sucked so much of the soul right outta me that nobody, including the guards, really cared anymore if I was locked up or not. And thus it came to pass that god slipped like a wisp through the prison bars with a whimper. Not a bang.’

He looked up at me with forlorn eyes, ‘after I escaped, I heard they named that institution after me. That’s how much of the soul they sucked outta me...’ He looked down at the pavement, ‘Go figure...’ and trailed off, mid sentence, distracted by a butt and some boobs wiggling by – the same thing that Charles had wandered off after. He looked up eagerly, like he hadn’t just been commiserating centuries behind bars.

‘You like that, huh, god?’ I observed, acknowledging the change in his demeanour.

god nodded, ‘my son, I created women. Of course I like them. You think I make stuff that I don’t like? I invented you all – man *and* woman. You must understand the depth of my genius. I created man in my spare time, then created woman, said woman was for man, had divine sex with the woman that I created, made a man, and then let myself be born as that man, living vicariously through him in a way that most parents could only dream about. I experienced life as an attractive charismatic popular young man for 33 years, hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors, lived the good life, and then let myself be killed because I was bored and wanted to go back to being god. And unlike most celebrities, I did it all without coming across as cheesy. The very memory of my death still gets lots of unreflexive people excited, and even manages to shut up most of the intelligent ones. People have probably made more pictures of me than anyone else in history, and most of ‘em never even saw my face,’ he proclaimed, and then bellowed, ‘I accomplished a hell of a lot more than you ever will, that’s for sure.’

I tried to rein him in, ‘whoa, whoa, no need to get confrontational here, man. Hell, I’ve been sitting here *talking* to you for the last 10 minutes. I don’t know if you bothered to notice, but everyone else that was sitting out here on the benches vacated awhile ago because they thought you were such a crazy nut. The least you could do is withhold insults.’

god looked around. It was true. Everyone that had been nearby when we started had since abandoned the scene. ‘I’m sorry, my son. I have sinned,’ god confessed to me. He whimpered like a child, ‘you know, my son, I will confess to you the reason for my sins.’ I was surprised; I never expected to have god telling me the error of his ways. He carried on, taking a deep sigh and telling me of his troubles, ‘this has been a very sad visit back to earth for me. The whole reason I came back was to revisit the spot where Jesus, my alter ego, was crucified. I’ve never been back – not even one time after all these years. The one time I tried to come back ended with me locked up for centuries, like I just told you.’

‘Well, I decided it was finally time to give it another go, and revisit the spot of my trauma, once and for all. I had been building it up in my mind, talking about it to all the angels, telling them that I was going back to meditate at the spot up on the hill where me and the two thieves – the holy trinity – were crucified...’

I could sense that his visit hadn’t gone as planned, so I prodded him a little more to spill the beans, ‘What happened, man?’

‘My son, you probably won’t believe it when I tell you.’

‘What?’

‘The spot of my trauma doesn’t exist anymore,’ he said softly.

I wrinkled my eyebrows at him, ‘what are you talking about?’

‘My son, they’ve got a goddamn suburban housing development up on that hill now. And they can’t even find people that want to live in it. They wanted me to book an appointment with a real estate agent to get in there.’ He shook his head in disbelief, ‘my son, what’s this world coming to when a man can’t even return to the spot of his trauma? ... What’s this earth that I made coming to when a man can’t even revisit the spot of his trauma...’ he repeated softly to himself.

I didn’t know what to say. I felt bad for him, so I made the best suggestion I could think of, ‘well, maybe the spot of your other trauma is still there?’

He looked at me quizzically like he didn’t know what I meant, so I clarified, ‘you know – the site of your imprisonment... by the gays?’

He nodded to himself and muttered, ‘Now that’s an idea. I wonder if it *is* still there, if they’d even recognize me these days. I wonder if it’s still named after me...’

He was silent, and he still looked pretty down, so I offered, ‘Can I buy you a beer, man? A little something to un-trouble your mind?’

‘Yeah, that would be nice,’ god whimpered, like a puppy with its majesty between its legs.

‘What kind you want?’

‘I’ll have whatever you’re having.’

I went in and got the beers and came back out. He was still sitting there.

And thus it came to pass that I purchased for god his beverage of choice.

I started with a question that had been burning in my mind while I was waiting on the barman to get the beers, ‘So god, do you wish Jesus flared up more often?’

god’s eyes widened. He put down his beer gently, and said ‘my son, Jesus is an antidote to my infinitely divine loneliness. He’s a lot less bitter and disenchanted than me, and much easier to get along with because, unlike me, he never bothered to burden himself with creating anything. That’s why everyone calls him the child, and me the father.’

god sighed, ‘I like talking to you, my son. Oh you of great faith.’

‘Listen, man, I don’t know if I have so much great faith as I do a good memory.’

To which god said simply, ‘faith is memory.’

god looked at me. The bench and the chairs were still vacant, except for the barmaid who’d come outside for a smoking break. She looked at us both, furrowed her brow a little bit, and that was that.

god looked at me again, ‘my son, I have to be going soon.’

‘you’re going already? you haven’t even finished your beer yet. What do I look like, a drive-through beverage service?’

His tone changed abruptly, and he started talking like he was a businessman: ‘my son, I have several cities on different planets across several different galaxies to visit. And before I set off, I think that I *will* try and pay a visit to my old prison. I am very busy, and it’s very rare that I speak to inferior creatures like you for this length of time. And you should count yourself lucky, because there was a time when people who looked upon my face dropped dead immediately. Right there and then.’

I couldn't believe god was going to make off with half his beverage still remaining, 'OK, go find a new bench on some other planet in some other universe. You might as well take your beer with you. But before you go, lemme ask you one more thing. Who else have you spoken to on this earth, and what did they have to say?'

god looked at me, squinted his eyes a little bit, and I looked back at him. 'Ever since I was very young, my son – younger than you – people told me that I had what it took to be god. Few could match the extraordinary confluence of variables and unique insight that I projected on the stuff around me, and the ease with which I could manipulate reality. It made me very cocky – and they didn't help me much letting me be god without ever having to prove myself even a little bit. All this fame and attention went to my head – I condemned who I pleased, I judged who I liked, and I didn't care how arbitrary my rules were. I was god. I wouldn't speak to anyone whose tongue wasn't saturated with my name. I demanded burnt offerings. I slaughtered whomever I fancied, and if by accident, I slaughtered those whom I did not intend to slaughter, I didn't lose any sleep over it. For no man could know the mind of god, I always used to say.'

He grew quieter and looked down at his feet, 'But as I grew older, my son, I started looking at the expanse of the stuff around me. It got bigger and bigger and bigger, and I felt myself shrinking smaller and smaller and smaller. Pretty soon, I began to feel like my own accumulated experience of the universe was about as tiny as anything could possibly be. I went from feeling like there was nothing apart from *me*, to feeling like *me* was an infinitesimally trivial cross section of what was out there. And all my ignorant conceited behavior as a young man? It had done little more than amplify my eternal divine loneliness. Wasting away in that prison, I grew older and weaker. I ran out of energy to toot my own horn all the time. I couldn't bear it anymore, and I slowly turned into a broken wisp. These days, I'll speak with anyone with a few spare minutes to lend an ear and listen to old god's ramblings. I could care less if they believe in me, agree with me, or even know who I am.'

god paused, took a long deep drink of his beer, and proclaimed, 'That was liberation for me, my son.'

A few moments of silence, and he looked at me, 'My son, I *have* spoken to others.' He took another sip, 'I do it more and more as time passes. The days of me killing, fighting, and wrestling with people are long gone.' I could see that god was losing his train of thought. He stumbled on, 'But that's not the point. The point, my son...' he trailed off, 'the point is one that I can barely remember...'

god was stalled out, trying to remember the point. He finally remembered, 'Ah, yes, my son,' he said, raising his index finger to emphasize it, 'The point is this. You asked me if I remember what I talked about with the others to whom I've spoken. I don't, but if you seek, then you shall find. Knock and the door will be open to you.'

He corrected himself, and put his finger down, 'Well, that's kind of an exaggeration: knock and the door will crack open slightly. My son, if you want to find out what I have said to others, then you'll have to seek for it elsewhere. Cause I'm drunk and sure as hell don't remember.'

He didn't leave immediately, and we were both spinning a little bit from the beers and the gravity of divine pronunciation that had just transpired. He broke the ponderous silence as he continued, 'Before I go, I have one piece of advice for you, if you like.'

'What?'

‘My son, what were you wearing when you were born?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Exactly. So you should take your watch off.’ I looked at him, puzzled. He carried on, ‘you don’t want to die with a watch on your wrist. It’ll drive you nuts, make you nervous. You’re going to be so worried about what comes when, which comes after which. You might develop twitches, always checking to see what time your watch tells you it should be. *For god wears no watches*, my son. One thousand years is as a day, and there is nothing new under the sun so long as the heavens turn. And they don’t make watches that circle around the numbers for that long.’

I looked intently down at my watch. And as I was gazing, gazing, gazing at my watch, I didn’t realize it, but god was in the background winding up. I could just make out what he was muttering to himself, ‘old god might not be what he used to be... I don’t kill ‘em anymore for seein’ my face, but I still gotta make sure they feel *something*...’

Next thing I know, he landed a sharp right hook under my chin, and said, ‘My son, when god’s fist touches your face, it’ll shine as bright as mine used to!’ Then he immediately followed it up with a stiff left jab, planting his fist smack on my probiscus. What was left of my beer fell out of my hands. Something in my face cracked. My nose, I think. I slumped on the bench. My nose was bleeding. My head was spinning.

Staring at my watch, I never saw it coming. He’d cleaned my clock, that’s for sure. Cleaned it good and clean, and as I lost sight of him, I heard in the distance, ‘my son, don’t be surprised if one day you’re gonna have to book an appointment with a real estate agent to visit this goddamn spot too...’

## The council of friends

Right about now, Charles was emerging from the bar, satisfied because he'd finally managed to weasel a beer out of me in my broken state. He came and sat down next to me, carrying two cold beers.

Charles knew all along everything that had transpired between me and god. Nothing that happened on the street was secret to him. 'Well at least I got a beer out of all this mess,' he said matter-of-factly, 'One thing's for sure – it turned out a lot better for me than it did for you.'

I could barely respond. My face was on fire, my brain was drunk, and my lips and cheeks were so swollen I had a lot of trouble opening my mouth. I somehow managed, 'I'm gonna go find that guy.'

'Then what?'

'Then I'm gonna show him *my* face,' I said with a shaky voice.

'Then what?'

'Then I don't know. If he doesn't at least apologize, then I'm gonna give him a taste of his own medicine.'

Charles shook his head, 'Well, before you can show him *anything*, you're gonna need to know which way he went. Sounds to me as if this god floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee. And lemme tell you – you can't show anything to someone that you can't see.'

I nodded at Charles. I had no idea which way god had gone, so I asked, 'You know which way he went?'

'I know which way he was going when he left my street, but after that I got no idea. My world is the street. That's all I know. That's all I need. After that you're on your own.'

'Which way'd he go?'

'That way,' Charles indicated, pointing toward a fig tree that stood in the middle of a small park just at the end of his street.'

I wiped the blood from my nose, looked at him, and held the blood-soaked handkerchief out to give it back to him, but he gestured for me to keep it.

god's two punches had knocked me for a loop, that's for sure. I felt a lot more drunk that could explained by only a few beers. I could barely get off the goddamn bench. When I finally staggered off, I began walking toward the tree, but my delirium was coming hard and fast. Almost as soon as I left Charles' street, I hit the floor hard. Darkness washed over me.

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When I came to, I was laying in a soft bed, swimming in pillows and quilts. My face and jaw were bandaged. They felt a lot better, but I still had a nasty headache that felt like it had managed to seep into the fluid cradling my brain. The room was full of all

kinds of paraphernalia – mandalas, binoculars, star charts, incense, telescopes, crystals, statues, rocks, strands of saffron, icons, pictures of people with lots of hair...

Then I heard a voice from beside the bed, 'I've been wondering when you would come to.' I gingerly turned my swollen head, and there was Ez, my old friend, 'I was delighted to find you in a crumpled heap and then peel you off the pavement last night. If that's what it takes for a much overdue reunion, then I hope it happens more often.' He grinned at me.

Ez and I knew each other from way back because of our mutually beneficial interest in astronomy. We were introduced by a guy with no front teeth who picked watermelons in the summertime on a small plot of land not far from Ez's place – another amateur astronomer.

I looked at Ez, and he smiled gently, 'that's one fat shiner you're carrying around on that pretty face of yours. I haven't seen one like that for a good long while. You could light up a dark room with that sucker. And I think your nose might be broken too.'

I couldn't feel any of the parts of my face – which I put down to the fact that Ez was a procurer of rare astronomical material. He always had different stuff – plants he said grew only on Venus, bags of what he said was comet residue, and even a couple times, I remember he said that he had some ancient meteorite dust – if you wanted a bag of astronomy to further your research, then Ez was a good bet. I knew one guy that obtained a few fragments of meteorites from him, so that he could analyze them for what he said were signatures of life. Whenever Ez was bored, he dug into his bottomless bag of astronomy, grabbed a handful, and tried to find some friends to do research with him. If he couldn't convince anyone, then he would put on an exaggerated moping face like a sad puppy so that you almost tripped over his lower lip. Most of the time he'd end up with a research partner.

Ez was the kinda guy that was always on some new kick. The first time I ever saw him, I was in my kitchen listening to classical music and washing the dishes, staring out my kitchen window. All of the sudden, there goes Ez running down the street with his trousers down. His arms were flailing, his mouth was shouting unintelligible blather, and his penis, testicles, and stomach were bouncing and flailing in the cool autumn night. I later found out that he'd been studying astronomy for the last 36 hours. A friend of mine who'd spoken to him that night told me that he could see the rising planets reflected in Ez's pupils. They were so big, the folds of Ez's brain were just about visible. But my friend was mostly distracted by an enormous bugar perched on Ez's shoulder. When he pointed it out, even Ez was startled by how much light it reflected through those massive pupils and back into his brain.

That was Ez. His astronomy research was always getting him into some new scrape, good or bad. He'd lost as many friends as he'd made because of astronomy.

'Ez, where'd you find me?' I asked.

'I was in town picking up some supplies, and my friend and I went for a walk in the park. You were crumpled up like a rag doll, lighting up the whole park with that shiner, with blood streaming from your nose. You were delirious, muttering to yourself about god and boxing.'

I groaned at the thought, 'That bastard.'

Ez perked up, 'What happened?'

‘I bought a beer for some bum who said he was god. Before he left, he told me to take my watch off. I looked down at my watch, and next thing I know, he cold clocks me.’

Ez sat beside the bed, listening like a human fortress. In my half-delirium, he looked like a medieval king. He had the big regal belly, the kingly headgear, the grandiose mannerisms to suggest no shortage of self-confidence, tights, and a kingly robe. He laughed heartily, ‘Well, join the club. I got laid out by a bum too. A few years back.’ Ez shook his head, and continued, ‘but he didn’t speak with me. I was minding my own business, and next thing I know, I’ve got a fist planted on my jaw, and I hear the guy muttering *how’s this for a divine comedy*. But if you getting decked by a bum is what it takes to get us back together, then I’m all for it. I was wondering what’s happened to you. Where’s your watch now?’

I hadn’t paid much attention to what had become of my watch. ‘That bastard must have taken it off of me after he decked me.’

‘You should be more careful who you buy beers for,’ he said, leaving the room to put some tea on.

When he came back with the tea, he placed it in front of me, and said, ‘Tell me about your research of late, my fellow astronomer.’

This question was the foundation of my friendship with Ez. That’s one of the reasons it was always a pleasure to see him again. We were both curious, and usually managed to give the other something to chew on.

‘Ez, I been investigating the tiniest examples of why stuff does stuff instead of not doing stuff.’

He sat up at attention. I carried on, ‘Zero point energy. It’s the absolute minimum amount of energy that anything can have, and it’s not zero. It makes every goddamn particle in the universe move, vibrate, wiggle, and shake. If you cool something down to absolute zero, which is the absolute coldest anything can be, then zero point energy still manages to keep everything shaking and gyrating.’ I paused to emphasize with eye contact. ‘No matter how cool you are, you can’t get cooler than zero point energy.’

He liked this, looked at me, raised his eyebrows, and said fondly, ‘your travels are not in vain, my friend, but you still haven’t told me why things do stuff. You’ve just found out that tiny stuff does stuff too, and then given it a fancy name.’ He was right.

We both sipped at our tea for awhile. I looked up at him, ‘Ez, I don’t know what I’m gonna do about this whole ordeal,’ I said, gesturing at my bandaged face. Speaking out of my mouth made my face hurt like hell, but I spoke anyway, ‘That bum told me I was lucky to have spoken to him for as long as I did, and that not many others have had the privilege...’

There was silence for awhile. ‘I need to find out if he cold clocks everyone he speaks with. If so, I won’t take it too personally. But he better apologize for what he’s done, or I’ll consider giving him a taste of his own goddamn medicine...’

Ez was sceptical, ‘you’re worrying too much about this bum. He’s just some guy who drinks beers all day long; he’s probably just as drunk when he talks to anyone. A drunk’ll talk to anybody. You’re gonna waste your valuable time trying to hunt down some drunk? You shouldn’t worry about it too much. So what if some old washed-out

white guy with a beard lays you out on the pavement? It's annoying, but you need to either forgive or forget.'

'Old bearded white guy? Ez, the guy that cleaned my clock was a youngish black guy. No older than thirty-five. He had tattoos on each hand – one was a Star of David and the other was a snake swallowing its tail. This wasn't some old Semite.'

Ez looked at me, his eyebrows furrowed, assuming that the same guy who'd punched him musta punched me. 'That's a little bit odd,' he said, and then announced, 'well then, he's a shape shifter – takes the form of a bum no matter what race he chooses.'

This wasn't the response I was expecting, 'Ez, you sure about that? Maybe the guy that punched *you* and the one that punched *me* are two different people?'

'Maybe,' Ez mused. 'Did he say anything to you about how long he's been speaking English in the form of a young black man? Aeons? Centuries? A few decades? A couple months? How long?'

I strained to remember details of our conversation, 'I remember he said he was schizophrenic, and Jesus was a personality that flares up every so often. He also said something about being locked up in prison for centuries. And before he decked me, I remember he said that he was gonna try and visit the old prison.'

Ez listened, and said, 'after that bum clocked me, I did a little bit of enquiring myself... I went around asking people if they'd ever been laid out by a bum, and you'd be shocked how many people said yes. Myself – I was clocked by an old Semitic guy with a beard. Another guy I met said he was clocked by a dark skinned guy that wanders the desert. Some girl I met said that some old man in a red and yellow robe laid her out so flat she could barely think for two years. Another guy I talked to said that he gets laid out unconscious every night by a bum whose face is imprinted on tablets in a bottle he keeps beside his bed. The list goes on and on.'

I shook my head at Ez. Despite his efforts, he could sense that my resolve was firm, and he asked, 'Are you totally sure that some bum punched you in the face? Maybe it was a drunken dream. You know, crazy things happen at night in our brains with everything vibrating and jiggling around.'

He looked at me. I stared at the ceiling. Stuff *was* wiggling and jiggling and bouncing and vibrating all the time. I'd just told him about it. But still, my resolve was firm. I had to find that guy. Ez couldn't understand why, but that's because he was always on some new kick, and never stuck to anything for too long.

'I don't dream Ez... and I'm gonna find that bum. If he's a shape shifter like you say, then the search will be a little bit more difficult, but so be it. You know how it is with me.'

Ez knew how it was when I set my mind to something. But he didn't have the high ground here – cause I'd seen him follow his research down some pretty dead ends more than a few times. He'd always emerge with more questions than answers. I looked at him, recalling the last kick he'd been on, 'You remember the prostrations?'

He nodded.

Ez had made an effort for one year, and then it fizzled. He spent days and days doing prostrations. I didn't even know what a prostration was before he showed me. He got down on all four, touched his forehead to the ground, stuck his butt in the air so that I could get a solid glimpse of two inches of butt crack, and then he got back up again.

He told me that he meant to do about 1000 per day for a good solid month, but that he only used to ever finish about 500. I asked him how many prostrations per hour, but he measured them in minutes. About 3 – 4 per minute, he told me.

He'd usually start in the morning and carry through to lunch.

'Tell me again, Ez, why did you used to do all those prostrations?'

He looked at me, 'Every time I stare the deity in the face, I look back down at earth, get nervous like Peter when he's learning how to stand on the water without training wheels for the first time, and end up throwing punches. I thought prostrations would help cure me.'

'You punched god back after he knocked you for one?'

'god doesn't have the corner of the market on deity,' he said, ignoring my question. 'Anyway, I only ever used those prostrations as a recipe, like getting communion from the priest on a Sunday – doesn't matter if you get it in English or in Latin, you know what the recipe says regardless, and you don't really understand it in either language. With those prostrations, I was so tired out that I didn't have the energy to lift my fist and give that deity a good one. I bet if you set out in search of the guy that knocked you for one, the same'll happen to you – it'll tire you out enough to make you relax. Might be just what you need.'

My tea was cold, I was smiling to myself, and Ez left the room. He said he had to go get something. When he came back, he sat down at the side of the bed. For minutes and minutes, he said nothing to me, and stared at some tattered photographs with eyes open as wide as a four year old. 'My fellow astronomer,' he pronounced, 'you know the extent of my astronomical research. But I've never seen pictures quite like these before. I was given them by some close friends, who told me that they obtained them from some happy magicians that live deep underground.'

He pushed one of the pictures toward me. 'What do you make of these?'

I looked. Against a background of blue, there were a bunch of roughly circular things with smaller concentric, roughly circular patterns inside. I had no idea what the blue was. The goddamn photos gave no sense of scale, so the best I could do was to brainstorm a bunch of things that had circles inside of circles inside of circles... 'I don't know Ez, they could be anything. Islands inside of islands inside of islands? Cross sections of onions? Eyeballs? The ripples that pebbles make when they're dropped in a pool? Circular labyrinths? Fried eggs in a frying pan? Targets? Cross sections of tree trunks? I got no idea...'

Ez shook his head, 'you should trust your intuition. The friend that gave me these photos told me that those are islands. Each island has a lake with an island inside a lake, with an island inside a lake, with an island inside a lake, and so on and on and on. You get the point. He said legend has it that god was imprisoned on one of the islands...' Ez looked at the picture, looked at me. I looked a little bit closer at the photo, and examining the thin concentric circles of water within and around each island. 'Do you know which way that bum went?' Ez asked.

'No. After he clocked me, I lost track of everything.'

Ez shook his head, 'Well, if you're entirely abandoned to finding him, and you really think he's who he said he was, then the best advice I can give you is to head for the

islands – maybe you’ll find the prison I’ve heard about. It’s a better lead than anything you got.’

‘How the hell am I gonna get there?’ I asked Ez.

He thought long and hard, ‘Well, first, you’ll have to get to the coast. Then maybe you can find someone with a boat that can take you out to sea and drop you off...’

‘I’m looking for a bum called god, and the best lead you got to recommend is maritime hitchhiking?’

I was so direct because I knew that Ez was trying to dissuade me. He knew that I knew, and he hesitated, ‘If you want, I can put you in touch with a friend of mine that’s been talking for awhile about heading for the coast. After he gets there, I got no idea which way he plans on going, but you might end up with someone to go with you at least part of the way. That’s better than nothing. And then you can try and find someone with a boat.’

I had no other options. I had no other leads. I could see Ez was genuine, and my head was inches thick in bandages, so this was as good an idea as any, ‘That sounds good.’

‘The guy I know is at the top of the hill by the old courthouse. Says it’s the best vantage point in the town. But I have to warn you, the old courthouse aint what she used to be.’

I hadn’t been back to the old courthouse for a long time. It was a place that I had often visited when I was younger. I used to spend hours up there looking down at the town.

Ez continued, ‘these days, if you’re gonna get up there to visit, you’re gonna need some identification.’

I wrinkled my eyebrows, ‘Identification? What the hell you talking about?’

Ez didn’t explain. He simply said, ‘Don’t worry, I can give you mine.’

I looked at him, ‘Ez, I’m not sure if I could do an impersonation of you.’

‘You’ll have no problem impersonating me so long as you abandon yourself to it. It’ll be the least of your concerns. You got bigger fish to fry.’ His tone changed a little bit more toward the serious, and he asked me, ‘Listen, before you go – there’s something I need to clarify. When you said you don’t dream, were you serious, or were you just making a point?’

I looked up at him, remembering what I’d said earlier. ‘I dream nothing every night.’

‘Shit,’ he said, and then he walked out of the room. Again.

He was gone for what seemed like ages. I had so many bandages wrapped around my head and brain and ears, I couldn’t hear much. But I could hear something – couldn’t quite tell what. Eventually Ez emerged, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, holding the identification in his hand. He handed it to me, and said, ‘All that stuff that you just heard, that was me telling my ladyfriend that you’re not a dreamer. She’s agreed to see you if you like. But she doesn’t make bedside visits. If you want to see her, you have to go in and see her yourself. She doesn’t care if your head is wrapped in bandages. But she said that you better not wear your shoes in there.’

My feet were fine. It was only my face that hurt, ‘Let’s go,’ I said to Ez.

He opened a closet, and shuffled and ruffled and scuffled around looking and digging for something. He came back with a rolled up red carpet, ‘Follow me,’ he said. He

bent down and rolled the carpet out in front of us. We followed it. It rolled and rolled until it could roll no further, barred by a closed door. Ez handed me a set of dark sunglasses. 'Put these on. You'll need them.' I put them on. He opened the door. The roll continued rolling on ahead of us, until it was completely unrolled right in front of her. When I looked up, I could barely take it all in.

## Making my way to the hilltop

She was enormous. She was massive. She had dimensions of skin curled up in the folds of her fat body that were so vast, no man nor woman had explored their entire surface area. She was a horizontal goliath, stationary like the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies. Her girth was so wide she could have contained every beast imaginable two by two. And she wasn't pretty, but she was bright. She was really fucking bright. Even with those sunglasses on, I couldn't see a thing, and had to shield my eyes with my hand. I would have been blinded if it weren't for those dark sunglasses Ez had handed me. I glanced over at him. He was standing there with his hands in his pockets, not wearing any sunglasses. I guess he was used to the brightness.

She looked at me, her effortless voice enshrouding me like the sea of her vast flesh must've done to Ez a few moments ago. Her deep voice was like a chorus of angels, infusing my eyes and ears and mouth: 'my lover tells me that you do not dream dreams at night. Is this true? Do you dream dreams at night?'

Her brilliance made my eyes hurt, so I looked down at the floor. I stuttered, 'Well, I never *think* that I dream. Everyone tells me even when I don't think I dream, that I actually *do*. But that always seems stupid to me. Because if *I* can never remember the dreams, then as far as *I'm* concerned, I don't dream. I don't think that what I do when I'm not aware of it counts.'

Her voice reverberated back at me in the tiny room, 'Do you sleep?'

'Yeah, I sleep.'

'Do you sleep *well*?'

'Yeah, I sleep well. I sleep quite soundly with nothing to be aware of, and I never once worry to myself that I'm not dreaming. It's very easy to sleep with nothing to be aware of.'

'You never remember *any* dreams, or just rarely?'

'Just very rarely. Sometimes I do. Every 6 – 8 weeks or so I'll remember one dream.'

'Hmmm.' She observed thoughtfully, 'I think that you should probably start remembering your dreams. You might have a hard time finding that bum again if you don't dream.'

I nodded my head at the soft certainty of her words, but some frustration was brewing in me at the fact that she hadn't yet mentioned my broken face. I saw that she sensed my growing turmoil. She was waiting for me to come out and say it, so I pointed at my head and erupted, 'Have you seen my face?'

She shook her head, smiling, 'How can I? It's all wrapped in bandages.'

She caught me off guard, and it deflated me, 'the reason my face is wrapped up is because I *did actually* have my clock cleaned by a bum called god, and now it's a bloody mess. It wasn't a dream. Why else would my face be wrapped up in all this?'

She ignored my question, ‘You don’t believe in angels, do you?’ She cocked her enormous head ever so slightly and sighed like I was the millionth unbeliever. Her entire body heaved. ‘Well, they *do* exist.’

I nodded, mesmerized by her heaving width, and she continued, ‘Whether you believe it or not, just try – *try* asking them every night before you go to bed to help you remember your dreams.’ She looked me in the eyes and matter-of-factly shrugged her massive flowing shoulders, ‘you have nothing to lose. And it doesn’t take very long.’

I nodded, nodded, nodded, but I snapped out of it for a second to request further clarification, ‘Remembering my dreams isn’t going to compromise deep sleep, is it? Cause if it is, then maybe it’s not such a –?’

She cut me off, ‘don’t worry. You’ll sleep fine. The harder you sleep, the easier it is to dream. And vice versa. She smiled at me. It seemed like she’d finished all she had to say.

‘OK. I’m going to try it. What the hell.’

She looked at me, ‘Now. Is there anything else that you want to ask me?’

I looked at her earnestly, and said nervously, ‘Yes, there’s one more thing. Do you know how this is all gonna end? Am I gonna find that drunk that cleaned my clock, or not? A simple yes or no will do.’

Her lips were pursed, and whole body started shaking, its entire mass wobbling and vibrating. She was trying to contain herself. Her shuddering broke into a deep resonant laugh. ‘That’s the funniest thing anyone’s ever asked me...’

Her laughter subsided, but she was still beaming, ‘I can’t answer questions like that. And if I did, then you would question the answers anyway.’

I stared back at her, slightly panicked, and she could sense it, ‘I simply don’t have the skill to answer questions like that. I seriously *can’t*. Even if I tried, I wouldn’t be able to. You’d have as good a chance of making a prediction if you flipped a coin.’

She stared at me with her hands folded serenely on her lap, and I explained myself to her, ‘There was another woman that I knew who was able to discern the future as clear as thick metal lampposts in the distance on a sunny day. And on more than a few occasions, she was able to nail down some pretty concrete details. Granted, what she foresaw was never *that* far off, but she got a few nonetheless.’

‘Well, then, you should ask *her* how it’ll end.’ She covered her mouth with her hand as some residual giggles struggled out. ‘She’s got a whole different kind of seeing and reading than I have.’ She grinned at me, ‘do you have anything else that you want to ask me?’

‘Do you know what happened to my watch? Cause I can’t seem to find it.’

‘If you’re going to go and find god, it’s probably best that you don’t have a watch. It’ll just make you paranoid, for god wears no watches, and if he saw you with one, he might clean your clock again. But no, I haven’t seen it.’

Ez came up to me from the corner where he had been standing, took me by the arm, and guided me back over the red carpet toward the door. It was time to go. Just as we were about to step out of the door, she projected her bellowing voice at me one last time. I turned to listen, ‘Two last things – First, be sure not to take your dreams too personally. Lots of people dream them. It’s no big deal. And second, if you have

abandoned yourself to the quest of showing this bum your mangled face, then be sure not to show it to anybody else before you show it to him first. No matter how sweaty, itchy, or stinky it gets under all that headgear. And don't change the bandages before you see him either. Otherwise he won't get the full effect.' I nodded, and we stepped through the door.

I could still hear her giggling, absolutely tickled by that question about the ending. Ez led me to the front door of the house and handed me the security clearance, 'Ok, we will see each other soon my friend, and we'll meditate on why we remember to bother.' He took my hand, and said, 'Your face hiding underneath all those bandages is driving me crazy – I can't tell what you're thinking.' He stuck his face right up to mine, peering from very close range right into my eyes, which were all that the bandages let him see. I looked him back. His pupils were normal sized; I couldn't make out his brain through his eyes. He continued, 'If you *do* decide to go through with your plan to find that drunken bum, the best advice I can give you is to take my identification and go find my friend up at the courthouse. You'll recognize him.'

I set out from Ez's. Once I found that old bum, I was going to show him *my* face. And see if he apologized. If not, he better watch himself. To get cold clocked in the face by anybody is a hard thing to forget. But to have it done to you in cold blood, without an explanation, done by a guy for whom you just bought a beverage – that sort of unsolicited aggression would not stand. At least not as long as my bloody face was in bandages.

It was mid-afternoon when I set out from Ez's place. He lived way on the outskirts. The courthouse was quite a ways away, and to get there, I had to journey through the awkward part of town, where the countryside began making its uneasy transition to urban.

I walked for miles and miles. The sun was beating down, my pace was brisk, and my face was getting sweaty underneath all those bandages. I passed underneath a bridge holding up a road, and noticed a dark tunnel which opened like a black hole onto the sidewalk. I could only see in a few steps, and then it was blackness. I could hear the echo of trickling water coming from inside. I could also hear some faint speech reverberating off the walls toward me. I stopped for a moment, listening closer... yep, there was definitely someone in there. I listened closer, just about able to distinguish words against the kerplunking drops of water and the occasional sound of a car passing overhead...

'...How long I been sittin' here... how long I been sittin' here... How long you been sittin' here? he said. I'll tell you how long I been here. Not very long. It's wet down here. Real wet. I used to sit up on the top of this here bridge a'fore movin' on down here.'

'Up-on-top I sat for 40 years... 40 years... You hear that, you sonofabitch? 40 years.'

'You hear me?'

'Born homeless on that bridge up there, my mama was homeless on that bridge up there, my daddy homeless on that bridge, and they aint raised me with nothin' but ambitions a-stayin' homeless on that there bridge.'

'40 years' I said.

'And all 40 of 'em, I been sittin' and beggin' and talkin'

‘And sometimes I get a guy walks by me, he reaches in his pocket, gives me somethin’

‘Or maybe steada givin’ me somethin’ he buys me somethin’ for stavin’ off my stomach rumblin’

‘And we share a couple words...’

‘Human to human. Bum to citizen. Citizen to bum.’

‘Yessir. godblessyousir I say. That’s what I say. godblessyousir, even if he do nothin’ but say good mornin’, then I say goodmorninsir, godblessyousir.’

‘I ‘member times I be talkin’ to no one but me for a whole day and that man comes by says good evenin’. I say yessir godblessyousir, good eveninsir, and he says you keep yourself well, and I say yessir, I got no means, I got no house, I’m hungry, godblessyousir.’

‘Even if that man don’t buy me nothin’ I still got someone to talk to ‘steada me.’

‘When that man interrupts me talkin’ to me, he don’t even have to buy me *nothin’*. Fact, sometimes all I’m lookin fore’s someone t’interrupt me. Lotsa times I don’t want nothin’ but someone who kin interrupt me from nothin’. Don’t even have to buy me nothin’

‘But now, people got these things they yappin’ on all the time, no biggern’ a wristwatch almost.’

‘And they talkin’ on em when they walkin’ round, when they sittin’ waitin’ for the bus, when they comin’ out the store.’

‘They all be talkin’ to someone I can’t see. Someone who aint there.’

‘I remember, I first seen ‘em comin’ down the road, I thought theys talkin’ to me, I thought they’s callin’ on me from a long long distance. I start to look, I’m all ready, sayin’ yessir, godblessyousir, mornin’ to you sir, and they just keep on talkin’ and walkin’ right by me not even lookin’ at me one time, like I’m not even existin’. 40 years I been here, sittin’, yessir, goodmorninsir, goodeveninsir, thankyousir, godblessyousir. And now I aint even got a head turned to look at me no more, what with everyone talkin’ to someone that aint nowhere to be seen, like they done gone crazy.’

‘so I just sit talkin’ to me with no one interuptin’ me from me no more.’

‘now people got these tiny little speakers they stick ‘em way down deep in their ears so deep theyz almost touchin’ their brains, and I reckon they be manufacturin’ sounds different from the sounds surroundin’ ‘em.’

‘No more citizen to bum, bum to citizen, no more goodmorninsir, thankyousir, godblessyousir. Now us bums’re sittin’ in the silence of nobody but our own selves.’

‘Every bum to himself. Every citizen to himself. Bum got no one. Citizen got no one. *That’s* why I done moved down here, where it’s wet and dark and these here concrete surroundins make my voice sound biggernit is.’

‘BIGGER, bigger, bigger, bigger, bigger...’

‘MAKIN’, makin’, makin’, makin’, makin’...’

‘ME, me, me, me, me...’

‘TALKIN’, talkin’, talkin’, talkin’, talkin’...

‘T’ME, t’me, t’me, t’me, t’me...

‘SOUND, sound, sound, sound, sound...’

‘LIKE, like, like, like, like...’

‘LOTSA, lotsa, lotsa, lotsa, lotsa...’

‘PEOPLE, people, people, people, people...’

‘TALKIN’, talkin’, talkin’, talkin’, talkin’...

Then silence, no more echoes from the tunnel. Poor guy, I thought, as I walked off. He was so alienated in that dark tunnel, he wasn’t just *talking to* his echo; he was talking *to* his echo *about* talking to his echo. Goddamn. What else can you say? It was better than your run-of-the-mill alienated guy, spending his days wasting away behind a cubicle helping the rich stay rich, but it was damper and darker in the tunnel.

I walked for what seemed like miles more, the echoes of the tunnel guy vibrating through my brain. I found myself startled by a massive glossy photo of a woman, looking directly into my eyes, as she had so many targets before me. Some words underneath her head read: ‘Do you crave surround sound?’ I walked on for a few more minutes, and came upon another billboard with the same woman. This time she was asking, ‘Do you want to switch off everything else and swim in a sea of sound?’

Three more minutes of walking. There she was again – the same lady – just about to throw some headphones into a trash heap, asking, ‘Are you tired of being dissatisfied by headphones?’

All I could hear was the pitter patter of my feet down the pavement, and they lead me past her again: ‘Do you want surround sound so *real* you forget the surroundings?’

Weird questions for billboards, I thought above the pitter patter of my feet. What’s next from this chick? Sure enough, there was another one. She had a wide grin on that big head, ‘True Sound will make you wonder if you’re listening to people singing or hearing voices in your head.’

I was glad that *I* didn’t have somebody else’s voice in my head right now.

Pitter patter Pitter patter Pitter patter on and on and on. My head was sweating from all the fabric it was wrapped in. My puffy lip and eye were thirsty for some whiskey to dissolve the pain, and I wasn’t far from the liquor store. Which meant the courthouse wasn’t far either.

In the distance, I could see a guy outside the liquor store going back and forth, trying to attract the attention of passers-by. He was shouting and waving his arms. People ignored him. Jesus’ name was being tossed around. There weren’t many options for evasive action. The streets were closed in tight with houses, and flooded with passing cars. If my face was gonna get that liquid pain reliever, then I was on a crash course to interact with this one... Oh, well. I didn’t have a phone, I didn’t have earphones, I had no tools to help me ignore him. Here we go, citizen to bum. Bum to citizen. My only hope was that my voice would be so muffled coming out of those bandages that he’d lose interest quick.

As I had foreseen, even with a bandage concealing all my face but my eyes, his eyes crossed mine a few steps from the liquor store door.

He said, 'Brother, can I get some spare change?'

I replied, 'I'll buy you some food or something, but I'm not going to give you any money.'

His demeanor turned somber, and the mood became serious. He looked at me with pleading eyes, and said, 'Listen brother, I'm going to be honest with you. I just want a fifth of the hard stuff. I'm not gonna sit here and try to pretend that I want anything else.' He talked to me like my head wasn't wrapped up like a mummy.

All I could think of was the last time I mixed a bum with alcohol. Playing it safe, I said, 'I cant buy you hard stuff, man. Not for the homeless. If you were out here wearing a suit and holding credentials, maybe I would consider it.'

His contorted his eyebrows in confusion, and asked, 'Why not? You're gonna buy liquor for yourself to eat. Why can't I eat liquor too? People on different planets need different foods.' He scolded me, 'I need to ease the pain in my head, just like you,' he pointed at my bandaged head.

I was in the presence of a powerful mind, teetering on the edge of having been outwitted. I remembered a Jew who told me that that buying strong stuff for the homeless might contribute to public nuisance. A home to go along with the strong stuff makes for less of a nuisance, the Jew said.

Luckily, this bum wasn't asking me for a home to go along with the strong stuff. He just wanted a bottle. To ease the nuisance in his head. Perfectly reasonable.

'What kind of strong stuff do you want?' I asked him.

'A fifth of Vladimir. Or a litre if you can,' He said with thankful eyes.

I went in to buy two fifths of Vladimir – one for him and one for me – and brought them back out.

'Thanks brother. god bless you.'

As I was walking away, he repeated, 'Jesus gonna bless you, brother.'

I nodded back at him, delighted that this one turned out better than the last one. Any more blows and my head woulda turned into mush. Wouldn't be many more chapters to recount in this story, that's for sure. Blessed in the name of Jesus was much better than having my clock cleaned again by some self-righteous wandering schizo with a Jesus alter ego.

## She aint what she used to be

Ez's identification was still hanging around my neck. The old courthouse wasn't far off now. It was perched on a small hill that rose above the center of town. I had always liked that hill; it wasn't very big, but from up there, you could see all of town and the valley in which it was nestled. When I was younger, I used to go up there by myself after dark. Surrounded by nothing but the quiet night time, with the limits of town more visible than they were anywhere else, and closer to the stars than I could manage down below, it's where I first started dabbling in astronomy.

I hadn't been back to the old courthouse for years. Recent rumors and chattering that I'd been hearing said it wasn't what it used to be. Now it was full of commotion. I didn't exactly know what kind of commotion because none of the rumors were ever elaborated on, but it seemed there was a lot more going on up there these days than there used to be, when there was nothing besides me and stars and the limits of town. I had my doubts about whether or not I'd be able to locate Ez's friend up there, but I hoped that I'd at least get a close-up glimpse of all the commotion I'd been hearing about.

Ez had been typically obscure on details. Apart from the identification, he'd muttered something about how I might not get in if I wasn't there before sundown. Sundown wasn't far off when I reached the base of the hill. I started my ascent.

With every step up that hill, I had a growing sense of an inevitable and fragile chaos. When I was younger, part of the fun of ascending up the hill was the fact that I could approach the old courthouse from whichever direction I wanted. But now the whole goddamn hill was criss-crossed with razor wire fences. The razor wire sinisterly shepherded me up a narrow pathway and emptied me out onto a concrete parking lot at the top of the hill. Nothing used to be paved up here.

The parking lot was packed with vehicles. Most of them looked like they doubled as living quarters, and it was clear that the people inhabiting them had been here for awhile. I walked along the edge of the parking lot, glimpsing the odd shadow of activity among the vehicles. As I moved closer to the courthouse, the sense of unrest grew. There was a crowd up near the front door.

The front of the courthouse used to be nothing but a heavy old wooden door under an overhang supported by four columns. From my vantage point, I could make out some guys who were wearing black and milling about amongst the columns, carrying submachine guns. The whole courthouse was ringed by exactly the same sort of razor wire fencing that had guided me up the hill. It separated what seemed to be an anxious and unruly crowd from the black uniforms, who were pacing around trying to look casual as they toted their submachine guns. There were two small square concrete buildings – neither of which I could remember – appended to either side of the courthouse. They looked like control rooms. Uniformed people wearing communication antennae were busily going back and forth between the different rooms like insects. The sun had just sunk below the horizon, and all I could manage was to mutter, 'what the hell is going on up here?'

A guy standing nearby with lots of missing teeth noticed my muttering. 'I aint seen the likes of you round 'ere before,' he said.

'Well, I don't remember you either,' I said.

Gesturing at my bandaged head, he asked me with a toothless voice, 'what the hell you got wrapped up in there? You one-a-them?' he said, gesturing toward the black uniforms. Apart from their eyes, their heads were concealed by black balaclavas. The white bandage around my head was unambiguously distinct from the black which enshrouded the faces of the submachine gun toters, but this guy didn't seem to make the distinction.

'I got my clock cleaned by some self-righteous bum called god. Is that what happened to those guys?' I asked.

He laughed nervously, unsure what I meant, and said, 'They's hidin' their kissers so that if one of 'em starts killin', we wont know who ta blame cause they'll all look the same.' He paused, looked me up and down, and then stepped closer, peering right into my pupils like he was doing an eye examination. After a few moments staring in, he said, 'did the guy that decked you have his face wrapped up like a spaceman too?'

I shook my bandaged head no.

'You been up 'ere before?' he asked me.

'Yeah... lots of times, but not for awhile. She aint what she used to be.'

'Yer proly wonderin' what in gods names goin' on up here then.'

I nodded, 'You know what all this is about?'

He looked at me, offered up a not-quite-totally-toothless-yet smile, lit a cigarette, and offered me one. He smoked his cigarette by jamming it in the empty space left by where one of his front teeth used to be, still wearing the same disoriented grin. Grinning the whole time, showing off his remaining teeth, he inhaled a few times, and then started talking. The cigarette bobbed up and down with every syllable, 'the imperial democracy – *inhale* – they done 'cided this here site warrants their protectin' in order that they kin go round maintainin' the rule-a-law. They been sayin' that up here's indispen'sble to the functionin' of democratic values fer all the towns up'n down the whole goddamn valley. So they done introduced guards fer protectin' – *inhale* – anda station fer listenin' to what people're sayin'. That's what those two little buildin's over there's fer.'

So the imperial democracy had finally made its way to our town. I'd heard rumors that they were gradually working their way down the valley, enforcing democracy for each town on down the line. But it always seemed very far away and unreal, so I tended to regard it as more or less fantasmic conspiratorial nonsense. But the guy on the other end of that cigarette didn't necessarily inspire too much confidence.

Whatever the hell was going on up here, the old romantic homeplace – the playground of my youth – the old quiet spot where I spent hours alone with the stars – was paved over, crisscrossed with razor wire, and full of black uniforms. The sun was sinking below the horizon, and I was pretty sure that time was wearing thin. But with no watch, I had no way to be certain. I put my head down and pushed forward through the crowd, eventually making my way to the razor wire perimeter that separated the crowd from the courthouse.

The black uniforms paid me no mind. They were chatting and laughing with the other submachine gun-toting tools, wiling away the hours, desecrating the most beautiful spot in my memories.

With my bandaged head pressed up against the fence, I got a closer look at them. Most of their energy they spent on muscles and not much else. I could hear a woman in the crowd behind me yelling, ‘Hey, you big stud hunks, those’re some helluva submachine guns y’all’re totin’!’ Another guy called out, ‘when you guys gonna let us see your guns up close!’

The complements the crowd was lobbing didn’t inflict much physical harm, but they still seemed to make the black uniforms pretty uncomfortable. From a distance, when I’d seen each of them strolling around and cradling enough firepower to eliminate the crowd in about 10 seconds, they’d looked pretty confident and nonchalant,. But from up close, I saw their anxiety growing faster the thicker the complements came in. They were becoming more and more restless, and their pacing was increasingly erratic.

Those submachine guns were no laughing matter. They filled up gas tanks, heated houses, put food on tables, paid for mortgages, and most importantly – preserved democracy. Those were some serious tools. Nothing funny about them.

I spotted one of the black uniforms walking around with a clipboard, so I stuck Ez’s security clearance through the fence, shouting to find out who I had to talk to about getting in there. The guy with the clipboard was a woman. I could tell by the voice. She walked over to me, checked the clearance, checked the clipboard, and said, ‘yeah, you’re the last one on the list. But it’s one minute past. We stopped admitting people a minute ago.’

That stupid bum had taken my watch after he decked me. Without a watch, how was I supposed to know what time sundown was at? I looked at her and pleaded: ‘one minute. Come on.’ Her response was odd. Immediately when she looked out from beneath her black balaclava at my bandaged face, she cast her eyes down – even going so far as to shield her eyes with her hands. Even though there was no sun in the sky.

With her downcast eyes gazing at her weapon, she said, ‘A rule is a rule. Without them, we’d have chaos – our natural inclination. You know that. Look around you,’ she gestured without making eye contact with me.

I stuck my bandaged head closer to her, and she backed away ever so slightly, shielding her eyes again. ‘Look at what?’ I was thinking with my head pressed up against the fence. At the machine guns? At the control rooms and the razor wire fences? At a bunch of black masks cradling machine guns like they were newborns? At the toothless barefoot crowd that couldn’t help but shout their adoration at the shiny lethal machinery on the other side? There was a big vitriolic polemic brewing inside me, but I could tell it wasn’t worth it. This poor soul would travel life in her sterile little submachine gun-toting reality, never suspecting that those in the upper echelons, whose butt she would lick if they commanded her to, couldn’t give a fucking toss about the rules that they set for her. Enforcing democracy might not be a laughing matter in her tiny little reality tunnel, but that’s cause she wasn’t in on the joke. The bigwigs would gladly string together dinky little realities like hers on a garland to wear around their necks. They joked all day long about it, drinking

martinis, shooting animals like they were humans, and violating humans like they were animals.

All this commotion had me urgently wondering what the hell was going on inside the old courthouse, and I wanted to get in there. So instead of letting fly with my thoughts, I stuck my head right into the fence so that the bandage was pressing through as much as I could manage. Then I did my best impression of entirely impotent, reassuringly feeble, and only *just* audible: ‘all these *unruly* people kept pushing me back so that I couldn’t get up here. That’s why I’m one minute late. Please let me in.’

She lapped it up, like the mush-for-brains, firepower-cradled-in-her-arms, deferential robot that she was. She still didn’t look at me, checked her watch again, and opened a small gate in the fence. I walked through, and she led me over to some other black uniforms. As soon as I passed through the fence, the crowd outside started making all kinds of noises – I heard cows mooing, sheep bleating, horses neighing, elephants trumpeting, donkeys braying, dogs barking, cats meowing, ducks quacking, birds chirping, mice squeaking. The only farm animal I couldn’t decipher out of that symphonic zoo was a pig.

‘What’s your name?’ a black uniform asked me. A gang of black uniforms had encircled me, and were making movements to restrain me, even though I was standing still and needed no restraining. But as they got closer, they stepped back, shielded their eyes, and looked down at their submachine guns. I was still encircled, but not physically restrained.

‘It’s here on the security clearance: Ez.’ I held it up at them.

They didn’t look at the clearance and they didn’t like my answer, ‘we don’t know where you come from, but most people round here have two names. Don’t fuck with us, you piece of shit. You’re nothing to us. We’ll introduce you to democracy right here, right now, and then throw your corpse over the razor wire to that pack of animals if we have to.’ Still their eyes were downcast the whole time. Nobody was looking at me.

To be on the safe side, I played the submissive role again. ‘Yeah, I know you guys are tough. I heard all those animals telling you how beautiful your submachine guns are.’

Stupid as the black uniforms were, I could hear their brains trying to unravel whether I seriously thought their weapons were cute. I didn’t let them deliberate, and quickly told them that I *was* serious.

‘Listen, black uniforms, *your* institution is the one that issued this security clearance. It has your stamp on it. See?’ I said, holding it up for them to inspect closer. It had a tiny little rubber stamp with the seal of the imperial democracy, but since none of them were looking up, none of them could see it. After standing there displaying it to a bunch of people staring elsewhere, I shoved it right under the nose of the woman that had first led me through the fence.

She glanced at it and muttered, ‘It does seem to have our seal on it.’ Another black uniform produced another clipboard, another one told me to shut up, another menacingly asked me if I was being clever, and after about 30 seconds a different one ordered me to step past a barrier and stand against an impromptu wall that appeared to have been hastily erected for no other reason than for people to stand against it. They ordered me to spread my arms and my legs. The biggest black uniform of the lot

approached me, and patted me down roughly. He didn't flinch, and he didn't stare away like the others had done. 'Ok, get the fuck out of our sight, you piece of shit,' he told me gruffly. I walked away, not knowing where I was going, but I didn't want to cross that black uniform again.

I found myself wandering down another narrow razor wire path with no people on either side. The path guided me up to the heavy Old Courthouse door, which was open. I had never gone inside before; when I was young all I had ever done was circumnavigate the grounds, usually preoccupied with astronomy and the view of town and the surrounding hills.

The inside of the courthouse was silent and the benches were empty. Opposite the door I had entered was another door, on which somebody had placed a notice reading 'enter here'.

I pushed the second door open; it was big and old, made of cast iron and oak trees, and it filled the chambers of the courthouse with a good century's worth of creaks as it opened. I turned my back to have one more look at the silent benches of the old courthouse. Then I walked through the open door, and my spirits dropped. More black uniforms.

One of them grabbed me violently, and shouted right in my ear like a drill sergeant, '*you no good late sonofabitch. Who do you think you are, impersonating Ez?*' He grabbed me in a way that I assumed would result in violent restraint, but his grasp was remarkably weak. And he wasn't casting his eyes away either. I didn't resist. My head hurt, and I was exhausted, having had to cope with a shattered, sacred childhood memory for most of this chapter.

Another black uniform approached, lifting his shiny submachine gun high in the air. I could see what was coming: he was gonna batter my skull with the butt of that rifle and leave the remains of my brain neatly wrapped up inside the bandages tied around my head. Butt to man.

Here it came – some other bum was about to clean my clock, and I didn't even have a watch to be stolen this time. Well, getting my head bashed in by a moron wielding democracy wasn't as bad as what had happened to me last time. At least I hadn't bought this one a beer first. But this isn't how I imagined it would end...

Getting laid out by god was one thing. He was just some washed up schizo nut. But getting butted in the head with a piece of steel – even my durable noggin couldn't sustain *that*.

I thought about what god told me before he headed off into the dark. They'll probably turn this goddamn place into a housing development too. If I was lucky, they'd at least hang a plaque that read, 'On this spot, somebody's skull was bashed in soon after memories of their childhood bliss were similarly shattered.'

Impact.

## The courthouse scene

All of the black uniforms erupted with laughter, and so did a bunch of other onlookers who weren't black uniforms. One guy was so enraptured by the general hilarity he couldn't walk. He was down on all fours drooling, crying, gasping, coughing, and laughing, laughing, laughing his guts out. He looked like he was cracking up. The guy that had been feebly restraining me let go. The five or so black uniforms had now taken their masks off so that they could laugh and breathe at the same time. If it was hard to breathe and laugh wearing an imitation of one of those black uniforms, I almost couldn't help but pity the folks dressed up in the real thing. No wonder.

My bandaged head was made of a much harder substance than I expected – because the butt of the submachine gun glanced off it harmlessly. No pain. No nothing. Just me surprised that my head was still intact with a bunch of people cracking up around me.

I didn't know what to make of it all. What I had thought were black uniforms weren't really black uniforms. They were just suits that made you look like a black uniform from the front. From the back, no more than a few lonely strings tied it all together. Facades of black uniforms – that's what they were. The people wearing them had since untied them to reveal ripped t-shirts and polka dot underwear. And the shiny instruments of democracy that I thought were going to irreversibly alter the shape of my already puffy, bandaged head – they were plastic toys. Glorious, glorious pieces of plastic shit – born from liquid sucked out of the deepest darkest bowels of the earth and probably soon to be buried underneath the shallow grass, sitting for aeons trying to decompose back into the liquid from which they were forged. Everyone around was still recovering from my entrance, wiping their foreheads with their forearms, pulling handkerchiefs out of their pockets to wipe their eyes, and softly repeating out-of-breath to their friends how hilarious it all was.

A small guy, who couldn't have been taller than four and a half feet, with a businesslike demeanor, was stepping toward me over the bodies that were ravished by hilarity and strewn on the ground. He briskly walked up to me and said, 'Ez's emissary?' I nodded my head, and he extended his hand. I shook it, and he continued, looking at me queerly like he recognized my face from a long time ago, 'Sorry if this whole ordeal frightened you, but everyone is so alienated and demoralized inside this god-forsaken place that I seize any out-of-the-ordinary opportunity I *can* to try and kickstart whatever pathetic sentiment these folks are still capable of. And nothing gets them going like simulated violence. Your arrival's been the first chance in awhile,' he said, checking his watch. 'Nobody *new* has been in here for a long time now.'

He got up on his tip-toes so that he could look me even closer in the bandaged face, and then nodded to himself and frowned, 'After such a long hiatus from your childhood stomping grounds, this is probably as good a homecoming as any.' He checked his watch again, and then quickly carried on, 'Nobody ever goes in or out of the gates of this place anymore. I'm the only one that saw you come in, because I can be anywhere I like in a flash.' He checked his watch, and looked at my bandaged head. 'And with a shiner like *that*, it was easy to see you, even from up here.'

I was speechless, baffled as to why he checked his watch so much, still digesting the whole courthouse scene, and hoping that the mismatch between how I remembered this place and what it had become, would soon settle harmoniously inside my brain. ‘Well, I’m glad that I could uhhh... provide some entertainment. It’s like I always say: there’s only one thing worse than being talked about – *not* being talked about. And with this place being as boring as you make it out, sounds like I stand a chance of being talked about for years to come.’

The little guy looked up at me, hurriedly flashed a fake smile, and said, ‘No, as much as they like simulated violence, they’ll probably forget this whole ordeal within the hour. *That’s* what I’m dealing with up here.’ He lowered his eyes, checked his watch, and rattled off a question: ‘How much did Ez tell you about what’s going on up here?’

‘Not much at all. He told me it would be different than I remembered, said I should go find a guy he knew who was up here, and gave me his clearance.’

The little guy was staring up at me, blinking quickly, checking his watch some more. I asked: ‘What *is* going on up here?’

He checked his watch again. The pace of my questions was way too matter-of-fact for him. He lowered his eyebrows, and softly, quickly said, ‘Well you of all people should know what goes on here.’ He waited for me to understand, decided he didn’t have the time to endure my confusion, and carried on. ‘The point of this place is for people to leave it. It’s an *incubator* designed for departure. Like birth, like life, like childhood, like this story, like this chapter, like this paragraph, like this sentence, like every moment. Like everything.’ He looked up at me quizzically, with an ill-favored look. ‘But *you* have returned. I hope it works out for you,’ he said raising his eyebrows.

‘I’m hoping to track the bum whose sacred fist put my precious head in this predicament,’ I said, gesturing at you-know-what. He raised his eyebrows, checked his watch again, and like a train conductor, announced: ‘I have to be off immediately. You’ll have to speak to someone else now. Don’t be surprised if you see me from time to time; I’m one of the irreducible elements in all this,’ he said, gesturing abstractly at everything, ‘You’re lucky to have spoken to me for so long. It’s not my assigned role to sit around and dwell on it for any longer than a minute.’

‘Dwell on what?’ I asked, as he turned to leave and ignored my question. I shouted at his back, ‘What’s your name?’

‘The II<sup>nd</sup>,’ he shouted over his shoulder, picking his way over the bodies still strewn about. He was vanishing remarkably speedily.

‘The II<sup>nd</sup> who? You have any other –’

‘That’s it! Just the II<sup>nd</sup>!’ I heard him yell as his voice faded. Then he was gone, a blip on the transient timescape. He disappeared so fast, I could barely remember what direction he went.

What a weird name. What a weird little guy. The II<sup>nd</sup>. Can that *by itself* be a name for a person – or for *anything*? Wondering how somebody could have a name that implied but didn’t include an antecedent, my thoughts didn’t quite move on. It was like being named *next* or *last* or *fourth*. But he disappeared so fast, it was almost like it never happened.

Moving approximately in the direction that the II<sup>nd</sup> had disappeared off to, I stepped over some of the delirious still-recovering bodies, and looked around. The back of the courthouse was joined up with a large razor wire perimeter fence that enclosed most of the hilltop. I could see plenty of people milling about in between all sorts of haphazardly pitched little tents of every color and size. Most of the people that I could see looked like they belonged in the crowd that I had seen before I had passed through the fence.

Despite all this new chaos that I *couldn't* remember, the view up here was still the most beautiful in town, like I *could* remember – tainted only by all sorts of rubbish that appeared to be trapped in the razor wire fence. It was far enough off that I wasn't exactly sure of what it was, but it looked like fragments of plastic. Whatever crap it was, I could still see the opposite sides of the valley dotted with sheep and cows. I could see all of town, and I could see the river winding its way along the valley. In the fading light, I could just make out the very faint silhouette of the next town downriver. When I was younger, I always used to come up here and wonder whether someone in that town was standing on a hill, just able to make out the silhouettes of our courthouse, and wondering whether anyone else was staring out.

All the little dots of people going to and fro amongst the tents, I was orbiting. But I could sense that something odd – some kind of disturbance – was happening on the opposite side of the hilltop. I walked along the fence to check it out.

There was a guy with a bunch of canvasses the size of full-grown men. He had stretched them on the razor wire fence like it was an easel, and was silently decorating them. I couldn't see the one that he was working on because he was standing directly in front of it, and there was a crowd gathered around him. They wielded cameras, notebooks, and microphones. I looked down to inspect the security clearance of one guy in the crowd, and it said 'PRESS'.

The dense crowd was shooting pictures, writing notes, and taking soundbites. But they were causing such a crowded racket, I was pretty sure that their soundbites, photos, and notes captured little beyond their own racket. The guy around whom they were gathered worked with his back turned like they weren't there, seemingly totally oblivious to how closely everybody was clustered around him.

The only indication that he might have been aware of any of the chaos around him occurred every few minutes or so. He would be painting or drawing or whatever he was doing – I couldn't see – and then he would look up at a big black microphone dangling above his head, and proclaim loudly, 'I AINT SAYIN NOTHIN' Then he'd go back to whatever he was doing. The microphone steadfastly dangled, didn't sway an inch. Apart from the racket they were making, that was as good a soundbite as the clustered crowd would get.

Further along the fence were stretched a number of large and lonely canvasses. It seemed that there were two sets – each of which featured a different woman. I went to have a look at the one furthest from the press. The canvas asked:

'Do you take lots of pictures?' The lady on the canvas was conservatively dressed, emotionless. The small crack where her upper lip met her lower lip made a totally straight line. Her eyes were a deep placid blue, with no trace of pupils.

I moved on to the next one, 'Are you desperate for sharper images? Do you crave starker colors?' The straight line of her lips was cracked a little tiny bit to give a smile that was just detectable, and I thought I could make out a nascent pupil.

I moved on to the next one: ‘Do you wish picture-taking didn’t ruin the experience?’

Next one: ‘Are you tired of pausing to produce a camera?’ The lady’s grin was now unmistakable, and her pupils were expanding like an approaching climax.

‘Do you find yourself forgetting where you put your camera?’

‘Do you want a realistic and reproducible catalogue of experience?’

I walked up to the last one, and it read, ‘Do you wish you didn’t know if you were seeing things or taking pictures?’ Now, the woman’s pupils swallowed up most of the blue of her eyes, swollen like there was someone in there trying to see out. Her radiant teeth, sparkling through an obnoxiously expansive smile, were so bright I had to look away and blink my eyes a few times. Just as I did, I heard, ‘I AINT SAYIN NOTHIN!’ I turned back to the canvas for another look into her pupils, shielding my eyes to avoid the glare of her teeth, and I could just make out what looked to be the outlines of a tiny little guy inside. Her smile had gotten so large, those teeth were so bright, I had to squint just to see. I stepped closer and closer until my bandaged head was pressed against the canvas and I was staring into the picture, pupil to pupil. From this range, I could just make out what must have been the tiniest guy an artist could manage. He was inside one of the pupils with a camera raised to his face, just about to hit the button at me.

There were another series of canvasses that followed – this time with a different lady – she was very attractive. On the first one, she was wearing sexy librarian glasses, and she was drawn on a canvas the size of a full-grown man. Her midriff was exposed and her belly button was pierced. Her skimpy tight velvet shirt showed every contour of what a man might hope to glimpse. Her femininity wasn’t covered up by much, and there was a tattoo down there near her flower which was difficult to see, but from what I could make out, it said something in some foreign language. It had five symbols that I could just about make out:

λοζος

If only her pants were a little bit lower slung, then I could be absolutely sure about that tattoo. The text next to her read, ‘Do you adore words? Do you write things down?’

With every step I was nearing the press crowd. I moved toward the next canvas, ‘Are you worried about the *quality* of the dialogue in which you participate?’ She looked slightly older now, maybe by 5-10 years, but it was difficult to tell – seemed like there were a few wrinkles in her face. She was massaging that λοζος tattoo, her hands straying near her delicate parts. I was doing my best to avoid any arousal as I neared the press. They were only three canvasses away now.

‘Are you obsessed with the literary irony of your own thoughts–’ she’d now withdrawn her hands, revealing the tattoo, which was considerably faded, ‘–dwelling on them long after their time?’ The woman was older. She wasn’t as firm, her breasts weren’t so much standing out like soldiers as crammed into her chest by her tight shirt. The flesh around her waist was ever so slightly spilling out from her trousers.

‘Do you feel awkward about recording it all–’ she was rubbing again, more vigorously now, ‘– like it halts what would otherwise be literary?’ She had wrinkles around the corner of her mouth; her breasts had relinquished all traces of their youthful vigor, and the skin around her belly button was sagging. Her hair was wiry and thin, and her glasses were a lot thicker.

‘Do you find the written word a clumsy and oversimplified facsimile of the splendor of what it’s about?’ Her tattoo was showing, but it could barely be seen, only just distinguishable from the color of her flesh. She was old now. She had a moustache, her skin fell around her arms like curtains, and her hands were ragged and worn. That was the last canvas I could see, and it brought me to the outskirts of the press crowd. I couldn’t see what I assumed would be the next canvas. My vision was cut off by all the people holding cameras and dangling microphones.

I stood on my tiptoes, and I could just make out what the guy surrounded by the crowd was working on. It was the woman again. She was *really* old, and looked like she was masturbating but it was hard to tell through that crowd. From what I could see, it looked like everything was bare – no clothes anymore. I stood on my tiptoes, but I couldn’t make out any of that tattoo. What I could see of the text read, ‘Do you crave words so real you wont know if it’s *déjà vu* or you’re –’ That’s all I could see; I couldn’t tell whether it had already been written and I couldn’t make it out, or if it hadn’t been finished yet. Oh well, fuck it, I decided. I wasn’t going to stand around on the periphery of *that* crowd any longer – that’s for sure. They were so busy recording everything, I couldn’t tell if they even cared about what was happening. So I turned to walk away, and as I did, I heard another shout, ‘I AINT SAYIN NOTHIN!’

## First contact with the headship

Still pretty confounded by it all, I was chewing on why those tattooed symbols near that lady's genitals became progressively more flesh colored with each canvas. I decided to walk around the courthouse perimeter and see if anyone noticed me not noticing them. I had nothing else to do.

If only I had a cigarette.

I wandered along the fence perimeter. My bandaged brain oscillated between mindless speculation and mindless immediacy: an abrupt juxtaposition of looking at the view of town, the valley, the river, and the ground upon which my feet were treading with each step.

That's what was going on inside my bandage when I nearly walked into him. To this day, I still don't know how I didn't notice him at least a few steps ahead. The first I saw of him was a pair of naked feet right in front of my face – smell and everything. I halted as abruptly as I could, recovering my balance. The feet were as still as statues, and so was the body supporting them. Having grown accustomed to first impressions that usually involved eye contact, I didn't know what to do, and it was making me nervous. I caught myself blinking my eyes a lot and making grunting sounds in the back of my throat. I ruffled my hair for something to do, unnecessarily cleared my throat a few more times, and glanced from side to side, not sure what to say. I couldn't help thinking that this was ridiculous, especially because the feet didn't make the least indication that they'd registered my discomfort.

I stood there with my hands in my pockets staring at the feet, and then I heard from down below, 'Oi! What you doin' up there!?' Startled, I took my hands out of my pockets, and jumped back slightly. Oh my goodness – I was being spoken to by feet. I was finally going nuts. I moved closer in, well within the odor radius, and it wasn't pleasant. Everything was dirty up here. For lack of somebody to speak with, I stuck my bandaged head even closer, nearer and nearer to the big toe – the obvious seat of power, when I heard, 'Oi, you! You're not gonna be able to talk to those feet no matter how long you stare at 'em!' Nothing moved - neither the feet nor the constituent toes. The sound was coming from below, 'Hey! I'm down here you nut!' I looked down. There was a whole body down there: shins, knees, thighs, hips, a torso, a neck, and a mouth. And a Head on which it was all mounted.

'What are you doing down there?' I probed hesitantly.

'What are you doing up there?' the talking Head responded.

'I'm just walking around seeing if anyone else notices me not noticing them.'

'Well, seems like you noticed me. It's better down here!' the Head proclaimed, and then continued, 'You should try it down here!' I was just about to respond when the Head shouted at me, 'Why do you have that big shiny bandage around your head!'

'Some drunken self-proclaimed divine nut decked me after I bought him a beer,' I trailed off, recalling the incident, and then asked, 'Why aren't you standing on your

feet like a normal biped?’ I asked. ‘Three billion years of complicated evolution, and this is how you spend your free time?’

‘*This* is evolution at its finest,’ the Head proclaimed. ‘You should know. You probably wish you didn’t have *your* head in the clouds – otherwise you get clocked by divinity! And I’ve heard that if I stay like this for *long* enough, then I’ll conquer time. I don’t know what that means, but it sure sounds good!’ The Head shut up. I scanned the whole body, feet-first, and the Head continued, ‘Listen, if you’re bored talking to a pair of feet, then you’re welcome to join me down here... Then we can talk head to head, like humans do.’

I got down on all fours, and was now looking at somewhere between Chest and Belly Button. ‘You need to get down lower than that,’ the Head said. I laid down on my stomach, with my head propped up on my chin. The head said, ‘If you stay like that, I’m still gonna feel like I’m being talked down to.’

‘Goddamn,’ I muttered with tangible frustration. ‘You’ve found the position where your eyes are as close to the ground as they can possibly be... without the rest of you being buried in a pit up to just below your eyes.’ The Head responded with an upside down smile. I readjusted my position so that I was laying on my side with my head resting on the ground, my line of sight perpendicular to that of the Head. This was as low as I could get. It would have to do.

My curiosity quickly got the best of me. ‘So do you know anyone here?’

‘A few.’

‘I met somebody who seemed important when I first came in here. He said his name was the II<sup>nd</sup>.’

‘Yeah, I know him. Everyone that comes in here meets him, even if they don’t remember.’

‘I never heard a name like that – with no antecedent. I tried to ask him about it, but he was gone by the time the question occurred to me. He seemed pretty busy.’

‘He’s not that busy, that’s just the impression that he gives. He suffers from a bad disease.’ the Head answered.

‘What disease?’

‘I can’t remember exactly, but there was a medical guy up here awhile back who diagnosed it. It was a really obscure condition, he said. Affects his dreams and everything. I think it was called the-feeling-of-always-being-on-the-brink-of-something-thats-about-to-happen. Or something like that.’

Whatever the heck it was, it was too complicated for me. I changed the subject.

‘There was another interesting mind I ran across when I was walking around back there. He was doing some drawing or painting or something. Surrounded by a crowd. He had some interesting pictures.’

‘That’s Herman. His stuff’s all the same. Once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all.’

‘What do you mean, it’s all the same? I saw one about cameras. Another one with some aging lady with some word becoming the color of flesh. That’s not the same.’

The Head replied, ‘Herman’s become *known* recently – they’re plastering his stuff all over town. One of the more popular ones had something to do with hearing voices in

your head. I always tell Herman that if he's so worried about how weird it is to record it, he should *stop* recording it. But he's crazy. He'll never listen. He usually just looks at me, does a few grunts, tells me I'm crazy or says I should go to hell, and then screams I AINT SAYIN' NOTHIN. He's a trip, old Herman.'

'So you know him because he's *known*?'

'No. I knew him before. His tent's next to mine. He always stays up drinking brandy and talking to himself till the wee hours of the morning. When the media rolls up, clunking along with all their equipment so loud that you can hear them from a good half mile away, Herman's always too trashed inside his tent to hear anything. There's a few of us who take responsibility for waking him up to tell him that the media is coming – cause if they didn't have Herman to encircle, they'd be clustering around us, and nobody wants that. But it always works out OK. The instant we put our heads through his tent to let him know they're almost here, he pops up like he's possessed, grabs his artist box full of paints and pencils and markers and little bottles of booze and stuff, and walks in the straightest line you'll ever see him walk during a day. He goes right over to whatever canvas he's strung up along the fence, and gets right to work so that it looks like he's been there all night. Then the media arrives – tripping all over themselves, dropping things, leaving plastic garbage in their wake... The black uniforms give the media free range around here, and all they ever do is surround Hermann so thoroughly that nobody but them can see what the hell he's doing all day long. As soon as five 'o clock rolls around, they leave, raising as much of a racket as when they arrive. The second they're outta sight, old Hermann packs up and starts working on a *big* bottle of booze. That's what carries him through to the next morning, when it all starts over again.'

I looked at the Head, and he could see the upside-down confusion lurking beneath my bandage. He offered an answer to a question that I didn't ask, 'Every once in awhile, the media guys will produce some description of what old Herman's been up to for the last however-many-weeks, but it's always the same old stuff they write – he's on a *new thematic evolution*, they say. They'll discuss whether his former proto-meta-neo-ism is giving way to an awakening post-retro-supra-ism. Nobody in here really knows what all that means. As far as we can tell, he's drawing and painting.'

I muttered to myself, 'it didn't use to be full of so many characters up here.'

The Head was quick to comment, 'you watch. You'll see it all happen tomorrow, just like I've described.'

'Tomorrow? I don't know if I'm planning on being up here tomorrow. The only reason I'm up here is because my friend Ez told me I might find a guy he knows who wants to head toward the sea. I don't care about Hermann. I don't care about the crowd around him.' I was lying. I couldn't stop thinking about those weird pictures that Herman had drawn.

'How long have you been up here?' I said, trying to change the subject from lying.

The Head ignored me. He had more important issues that needed answers, 'How did *you* get in *here*? *Nobody* comes in here anymore these days.'

'My friend Ez gave me his security clearance.'

The Head looked at me, raising his upside-down eyebrows – 'and you don't know what's going on up here? HA!!' he shouted. 'You don't even have an inkling? Even

after meeting the II<sup>nd</sup>? And crazy old Hermann, you don't know what that's about? HA!!' he shouted again.

All I could do was respond with confusion, lowering my eyebrows. The head abruptly shouted – 'and you even know Ez! HA!'

The Head shut its eyes. I waited for awhile, and then broke the silence with a question, 'What's going on up here?'

'Up where?'

'Up *here*.'

'I'm down here, so how would I know?'

'Don't give me that nonsense. I'm down here too.'

The Head opened its eyes and grinned at me, 'All sorts of stuff is going on up here. Look around you. *You're* going on up here. *I'm* going on up here.' He chuckled to himself in a less-than-natural upside-down sort of way, and his disbelief was tangible as he muttered softly to himself, '...years since anybody came up here, and then we get some guy whose bandaged head shines like a beacon, asking me what's *going on...*' He looked at me quizzically, 'What do you want me to say to you?'

I looked at him blankly and gave him just as blank an answer: 'I dunno. It's weird up here. I thought maybe there was something special going on.'

'It's gotten even weirder since you showed up with a beacon like that on top of your neck,' the Head responded.

He held my gaze for awhile; I gave up on trying to get an answer to my question, and said, 'So then why are *you* here?'

The Head answered after a long pause, 'my parents dropped me off here. I must have been dreaming when they did it, because the last memory that I have before waking up here is going to sleep in my bed for the night at our old house as a child. Somebody told me that the reason my parents dropped me off is cause they didn't want me to be turned into pig food, like they knew was happening to them.'

'How long you been up here?'

The time had clearly been lost on him, 'How long have I been up here now?' he repeated the question softly. 'It's been a good while now. I don't know; I've lost track. Long enough for me to lose track.'

'And all these other people – why are they up here?'

'I don't know, you have to ask them. I have limited interaction with most of 'em. I usually just remain here perched like I am now. When I *do* talk to the others, none of us ever bother with *why* anybody's up here. We *are* up here, and that's that. Occasionally, somebody will talk about getting *out*, but never *why* we're here.'

Predictably, I spouted, 'Why don't they leave?'

He saw it coming, 'Well, I can't speak for everybody, but I do know that there used to be no fence up here and no black uniforms. People just came and went as they pleased. Now... now, nobody can go anywhere. Ever since the imperial democracy set up shop, the gaze of the black uniforms follows you everywhere, and everyone's loaded down with papers. Papers, papers, and more papers – a whole fleet of goddamn papers that fall in step behind you wherever you go. Papers for every

occasion you can imagine. Papers reminding you who you are. Papers justifying why you're here. Papers commemorating buildings you've lived in. Papers documenting your movements in space. Papers recording any work you've done. Papers commemorating anywhere you've visited. Papers giving you license to think. Papers telling you what you're worth. Papers telling you what you're owed. Papers telling you if you're healthy. Papers telling you if you're qualified. Papers giving you access to places you're permitted to go. Papers to wipe your butt. Fucking papers everywhere,' the Head cursed. With his frustration mounting, he seethed, 'I've seen people dead by suffocation in mounds of papers. So many papers, so little time.' He paused for awhile, and looked at me, 'you came in here with only one paper. And it had some other guy's name on it. Count yourself lucky for now. I've seen people so addicted to papers, they weren't able to identify themselves in a crowd unless they were first allowed to look at their papers and check which person was them.'

'Shit.' was the only response I could manage.

'Shit is right.' The Head agreed.

It was silent between us for awhile, and I asked 'any idea how long drunk old Herman's been up here?'

'I don't have a clue. The press crowd asks him that question all the time. Every time they ask, he ignores them. Only one time I heard him give an answer. He said that he'd been drunk so long that he used to fuck dinosaurs.'

This answer was wholly uninformative, that's for sure, and I could see that most of my questions were a lost cause. I picked at the grass in front of me, resting my bandaged beacon on one hand, wondering why *I* was up here if nobody else knew why *they* were here. The sun had long since gone down, and it was getting cold. A slight breeze ruffled the plastic bags caught in the fence. In my mindlessness, I noticed the Head's feet wobbling. 'You getting down now?' I asked.

'No. I'm getting up – gonna risk it and put the old head back in the clouds. What are you going to do?'

'I don't know; I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing up here, and how long I should stay.'

'Well, whatever the hell you decide to do – it's getting chilly. You can shelter in my tent if you need to. There's plenty of space.'

It was getting dark and cold. I didn't know anybody up here, I didn't want to face those black uniforms again, and I had a hunch that this guy might help me connect with the friend Ez had mentioned – the guy with whom I might be able to journey to the water's edge. *That's* why I was up here, I was relieved to remember. 'You sure you don't mind?' I asked the Head. It shook. It didn't mind. 'What's your name?' I asked.

'Head's fine for me,' it replied, 'And from the looks of it, fine for you too.'

## Head's tent

Head led me back to his tent. It wasn't far from where I'd first found him perched – way on the outskirts of where most of the other tents were pitched. There was a small, well-crafted clay oven near his tent. As we approached, he asked me, 'You hungry?' He didn't wait for me to answer. He bent down in front of the clay oven, and lit a small fire underneath it, using a small stash of wood and some bits of straw. He lit some candles and placed them on top of the oven so that he could see in the twilight. He looked over at me again and asked, 'you want some wine?'

'Sure.'

He bent down behind the oven and carefully removed a wooden board covering a small hole dug in the ground. He set the board aside, reached into the hole, and pulled out a large leather sack, the top of which he carefully untied. He produced a small tumbler, which he lowered into the untied sack. He pulled it out slowly, grinning at having just turned air into wine. He handed me the glass and said, 'Help yourself if you want more; you've seen how it's done.' Before taking the wine, I loosened the bandages in the vicinity of my mouth so that I could get it down and ease the pain that had been growing in my head ever since I arrived in this place.

He went back over near the oven, and grinned at me. 'This has been raising all day long in the heat of the sun absorbed by the rocks.' He showed me a lump of dough, and threw it against a wooden board laying on the ground next to the oven. He pounded, punched, stretched, and rolled that dough like it was a bad habit. When he stopped, it was spread out in a thin layer maybe 2 feet by 2 feet.

Satisfied, he went through the wine ritual again. He set the large wooden board aside, produced the sack, dipped his tumbler, placed the sack back into the ground, and then pulled out two misshapen chunks of cheese – one from a sheep and another from a cow. He also produced some onions, tomatoes, mushrooms, a flask of oil, some cloves of garlic, a small chunk of rock salt, and some peppercorns. He combined the salt with the peppercorns, smashed them with a stone, and then sprinkled the spicy dust on the dough. He chopped the garlic, rubbed it all over the dough, and then drizzled oil on it. He opened the clay oven, and placed the dough inside. He then set to chopping the onions, tomatoes and mushrooms. He pulled the dough out of the oven, scattered the chopped vegetables on it, and put it back into the oven. He tore the cheeses apart roughly with his hands. When he finished, he went back over to the where he kept the wine, going through the whole ritual of removing the sack and dipping the tumbler. He knocked it all back in one go. Then, he pulled the dough out of the oven, threw the cheese on it, and shoved it back in for the final time. He folded his arms, a look of satisfaction on his face, before he ritualistically refilled his wine again. After finishing the wine, he pulled his creation out of the oven.

I was so mesmerized by his haphazard precision that I hadn't moved from the spot where I had first received the wine from him. He plopped what he had made in front of me, and said, 'here we are.' I looked up at him; I could just make out his flickering grin in the light of the unsteady candles.

‘Just tear some off,’ he said, tearing some off. He chewed a couple chews and looked up at me. He was satisfied, and so was I. I fed myself through the mouth shaped aperture in my bandages. My chewing was restricted on account of my swollen face, and the pain it caused made my whole head throb, but it was so nice I couldn’t help myself. More wine went a good way to dull the pain of chewing.

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The following morning I awoke as the slow warmth of the rising sun gradually caused my head to perspire beneath the bandages. Head was out and about – already upside down with his feet in the air. There was some water heating up on his clay oven. ‘You want some coffee?’

I nodded.

‘Black ok?’

I nodded again.

His head was firmly planted. Mine was closer to the clouds, but the waking courthouse scene was audible to both of us. In the distance, I could hear what sounded like heavy laden vehicles straining up the hill, growing louder and louder. There were lots of them. The engines eventually shut off one by one, and further commotion ensued: vehicle doors were opened and slammed shut, shouts echoed around, stuff was being dropped, stuff was being picked up. Shouts cursed about stuff that was missing, stuff that had not been seen, stuff that was unaccounted for, stuff that had been thought missing but which had been there the entire time...

The commotion steadily drew nearer and louder. Head got down, worked the kinks out of his neck, and walked over to the only other tent in the vicinity – an old army green canvas tent. He threw open the flap, popped his head in, and shouted, ‘Hey Hermann, you old nut! The media’s here!’

Something alive inside the tent started fumbling around. I could hear muffled grunts, tossing and turning, and the glug-glug-glug-glug of a bottle’s contents being emptied. I heard what sounded like some small glass vials being broken as a body rolled over them, a few curses, some burps, some farts, and then a few sighs of relief. A few moments later, a shaggy grey head emerged from the flap of the tent into the sunlight, propped up on a sturdy weathered neck. The grey head looked up at the sun, blinked, looked away, and cursed softly, ‘goddamitt.’ Hermann’s hands soon emerged, and started rubbing his eyes in the sunlight.

Head was attending to the coffee. He was unphased, ‘Hermann, they’re almost here.’ There were some grunts, and then the rest of Hermann’s body struggled through the flap. He grabbed a bottle of something, and turned away from us. I heard swollen gulping sounds, and then he stood up. His ragged clothes were covered all over with small pieces of straw. He brushed himself off a few times, burped, and then wobbled in the direction of his canvasses. The media rabble was growing louder and louder. He arrived about a minute before they did, and was at it with the paints like he’d been there all night long. Before I could blink, they had him entirely surrounded, beginning their daily ritual of self-intoxicated observation.

The coffee was ready now, and Head was grinning ear to ear. He handed some to me. I took a sip out of the jet black steaming coffee, ‘What are you going to do today?’

He looked at me, sipped his coffee, and said, 'There's a career event inside the old courthouse. It's been organized by somebody I've known ever since I first got here; if you ask him, he'll tell you that the sole reason for all the black uniforms up here on the hilltop is to legitimize today's event.'

'Really?' I was stunned. 'So the reason the black uniforms are here is because this event —'

Head cut me off, 'But don't be fooled. It's *true* that he specifically asked the black uniforms to have a presence today, but the only reason he asked them is because they were already up here anyway.' Head paused, took another sip of the coffee, and carried on, 'It's not like the black uniforms will be leaving once the event finishes.'

Head sensed that I couldn't deconvolute this, and matter-of-factly responded with little in the way of clarification: 'it's a standard operating procedure for coping with arbitrariness. Used by lots of people up here: Transform circumstances into something intentional, preferably as something *aimed* at yourself in which you have a starring role, and you successfully maintain your role as the focal point of all the random shit that would have happened to you anyway.' Head lowered his voice, and looked around stealthily like he was providing me sensitive information, 'This guy who tries imagining that the black uniforms are here especially for him — he does this kinda thing all the time. It's a convenient way of mixing up causes and effects.'

Head must've been able to feel a raised eyebrow coming from underneath my bandage. 'Confused?' he asked. I shook my head, and he said, 'Yeah, me too, and I consider myself someone that knows him pretty well.'

Head took his last few sips of coffee, and stared for awhile into the bottom of his cup before he said, 'This place messes with people.' He looked up, right into my bandaged eyes, 'Not everyone in here is as sane as me, that's for sure. I been around long enough to see what happens to people who stay in here after too long. Most of 'em start out fresh enough — exploring, dreaming, dancing, babbling about how exciting everything is — but the more they explore, the more inevitable it is that they run up against the limits of this place.' He gestured with his hands at the hilltop on which we were perched, 'Too much of the fence and the razor wire and the barbed wire with all the plastic shit from town caught in it, too much of black uniforms everywhere, too much time under the shadow at the top of the old courthouse, too much talking to other people that have had too much of the same for too long and longer. Eventually, they all come to realize it's just about impossible to get out of here.'

'The best I can do is camp out on the edge of all the tents - spending most of my time right here,' he said, patting the top of his head, 'with nobody but myself and sometimes Hermann for company. For hours at a time, I pretend I'm a tree, and gaze out of the holes in the metal fence. That fence has so much plastic crap caught in it, it looks impenetrable from a distance. But up close, it's *full* of holes — it's just sharp skinny tenuous wires woven together. Other people don't believe me that it's full of holes. I've tried to drag a few of 'em out here to prove that it's just the plastic shit that makes it look like a big wall, but they all tell me I'm crazy, that they're too busy to come out here, and anyway what the hell's wrong with me that I camp way out here. The further in you camp with all the others, the more that goddamn wire fence looks like a concrete barrier. That's why I'm camped out here, not too far in.'

‘Crazy old Hermann’s the closest one around here. The fence is the easiest place for him to stretch all his canvasses.’ Head looked at me blankly, and continued, ‘All the tents nearer the courthouse have little media conduits in them. That’s the only way most people know about Hermann, since they don’t come out here – the renowned proto-meta-neo-ist artist that spends all day not saying nothin. Lots of the people camped so far in have forgotten they’re surrounded by black uniforms at all. The few that do manage to occasionally remember – they’re all more or less like the guy that’s organizing the career thing today – with some arbitrary hairbrained narrative to explain it all...’ Head trailed off.

‘How can they forget about the black uniforms?’

‘Well, unless you hang around the courthouse gate – near where you came in – you never really run into them.’

‘So nobody ever leaves?’ I clarified what I thought he meant.

‘No, nobody really leaves, unless it’s official business.’

‘Nobody leaves because the black uniforms won’t let them?’

‘Nobody knows because nobody leaves unless it’s official.’

‘Does anyone want to leave?’

‘People used to talk about leaving a lot more than they do now. I used to dream about leaving for the coast, but it’s been so long I can’t remember the last time I dreamed that dream.’

Ever since I’d met Head, I had an inkling he might lead me to the Ez’s friend, based on what I knew about the sorts of people Ez called friends. Sound was already muffled under all those layers of bandages in which my head was wrapped, but my ears piqued at this mention of the coast. That was, after all, where I needed to go to track down the hobo responsible for my state of affairs. I prodded Head a little bit more, ‘People don’t talk about leaving anymore? What happened?’

‘The watchtower,’ he announced.

I looked where he was pointing, and noticed something I hadn’t when I first came up here. Childhood expectations of what this place would look like must have prevented me seeing the tower when I was approaching the old courthouse from town the day before. There was an awkward appendage popping out of the courthouse, at the top of which was an octagonal tower with massive windows. The windows were all tinted. Shielding the sunshine from my face with my hand, I looked at the tower in the distance. The sky was reflected in its windows.

Head continued, ‘everybody up here sees the tower. There’s nowhere it can’t be seen from.’

‘The black uniforms are up there keeping track of everything that’s going on in here?’ I asked Head.

‘Maybe there’s black uniforms in there,’ Head shrugged, ‘Maybe there’s not.’

‘A watchtower with no watcher?’ I said, emphasizing how ridiculous that would be.

Head replied, ‘Anybody you ask will tell you there’s a black uniform up there, but I don’t think that anyone has seen a black uniform coming or going from the tower for years now. I’ve heard rumors that the first black uniform whose job it was to sit up

there got so bored that he went and found some random guy camped near the old courthouse, and made him go sit up there instead. At first, the guy didn't want to. He was worried what would happen if any of the other black uniforms found out he was up there. But the black uniform told him to shut up, and forced him up there despite his objections, saying it didn't matter *who* was up there, cause the most anybody outside the tower could see was an unidentifiable silhouette. Use a broom handle for a submachine gun. As long as you keep your goddamn mouth shut and pretend you're me up there, nobody'll know the difference.'

'The black uniform spooked the guy, and he stayed up there a good long while, but eventually he was overcome by boredom too. So he went and found some other guy, and gave him the same spiel: It doesn't matter who's up there, it's just a shadow, everyone will think that it's a black uniform, and the black uniform will think it's me; I'm the only one who'll know it's you – there's nothing to worry about. Just keep your goddamn mouth shut, pretend there's a black uniform up there and everything's fine – otherwise I'll report back to the black uniform that put me up here and he'll take care of you.'

'So the new guy went up there, but eventually he got bored too, went and found another guy, and gave him the same routine: "It's just a shadow, the black uniform will think it's the other guy, the other guy will think it's me. I'm the only one who will know. Just make sure you keep your goddamn mouth shut and act like there's a black uniform up there or I'll report back to other guy and then he'll report back to the black uniform and things'll get real unpleasant for you."'

Head paused, letting the tail-biting logic sink in, and then carried on, 'Some suspect it's been going on for years now – boredom eventually overcomes everyone up there, so they go find someone else to fill in, give 'em the whole routine about how the next guy will think it's the previous guy because you can't make out anything more than a shadow up there, nobody will know as long as you keep your mouth shut and act like there's a black uniform up there. And if you mess around, the black uniforms will make it real unpleasant for you...'

Head was looking at me, shaking it slowly back and forth, 'You can see why it's hard for people to leave this place – if they did, then they'd run a big risk of getting in some serious trouble for not being up there in the tower. Then everything would unravel. It would be chaos around here. All because it's so boring up there.'

'Do you know anyone that's been up there?' I asked him.

'Of course not. Nobody does.'

'But you make it seem like every single person in here mighta been up there.'

Head was facing toward me, but his eyes were looking past me, and his mouth was repeating dreamily, 'that's the question to which there's no answer. May well be that every single person in here's been up there. Nobody knows. That first black uniform that went up there all those years ago might still be up there.' Head snapped out of the reverie, 'Regardless of who is or isn't up there, nobody's willing to risk it.'

'Risk what?'

'Risk suggesting there hasn't been a black uniform up there for years,' he stammered, and continued, 'or worse yet, that maybe there hasn't been *anyone* up there for years. Or even worse, that *everybody* has been up there.'

‘What’s the risk?’

‘That they’d be telling a story different than the one that everyone else has been telling for years.’ Head sighed, ‘if I’ve thought it once, I’ve thought it a million times: there’s no room for the unrestrained nut up here amidst endless accounts of the same, which aren’t the same as his.’

The hairbrained self referential logic Head was communicating had me reeling, so I asked the most unambiguous question I could muster. ‘Head, is there a shadow up there in the tower or not?’

I finished my coffee, waiting for his response, ‘Nearly everyone agrees that there is. The few times I’ve stood at the base of the courthouse and looked for it, I’ve never been able to find it. People camped in a lot closer to the tower than I am, who see it first thing when they wake up in the morning and last thing before they go to bed at night, tell me that they see a shadow up there. They say that the reason I can’t see it is because I’m camped out so far that I’m not used to what it looks like and maybe I need to get my eyes checked. And they say that everybody knows there’s somebody up there so what more proof do I need. Who knows?’ he shrugged casually, ‘It doesn’t really matter whether there’s a black uniform behind the shadow that may or not be up there. Everyone behaves like there is.’

Head looked at me, scratched his armpit, glanced up at the sky like he was looking for rain clouds, and then turned to me with a curious look in his eyes. He sounded distant, like he was remembering things from a long time ago, and he muttered, ‘How did we start talking about all this? I often forget why I start talking about things.’

I seized the opportunity, ‘You were talking about how you used to dream of leaving here and going to the coast.’

‘Oh yeah... oh yeah... that’s right,’ Head recalled. ‘I used to think about it, but I’ve failed to leave so many times – that with each failure, I find myself dreaming of it less and less. And it would be hard to avoid them seeing me leave if I did go,’ he said, gesturing back at the watchtower.

‘Well, *I’m* going to the coast,’ I announced. ‘I’m gonna find the guy that’s responsible for the shiner hidden behind these bandages.’

He looked up at me with a small twinkle in his eyes, ‘Ez told you about me, didn’t he?’

I nodded. He looked down, and muttered, ‘Maybe this is Head’s last chance.’ Then he abruptly announced, ‘but first I must attend today’s event.’

I was shocked, ‘you’re still gonna go into the courthouse after all the things you’ve been telling me about the tower?’ I wrinkled my nose in disgust behind my bandages.

‘I have to go.’ He said, looking me in the eyes, ‘*I’m* the one that organized it.’

I was unsure what to make of this new information, but it was beginning to seem like it might be typical of this damn place. Nevertheless, I was pretty sure that I’d found Ez’s friend, or at least somebody close enough. I also figured I’d already dealt with one schizo, and it seemed there was no greater risk of getting my clock cleaned by this one. But most importantly, I was desperately hoping for company on my way to the coast. So I looked back at him and said, ‘If you’re going, then I will too. But after it’s done, *we leave*.’

Head ignored my declaration, and simply said. 'I'll meet you there. I have some things I gotta do first. And it would be good for you to wander on your own before it all kicks off.'

Head made his way to the perimeter, right next to the fence. He got down and made like a tree, not moving from one spot, staring out of the holey fence through all the plastic shit, taking in the view beyond the hilltop.

I began making my way toward the courthouse.

## Toward the center

Most of the tents were clustered in a congested mass around the base of the courthouse, with a few that were haphazardly scattered beyond. But none were as far out as Head's and Hermann's. They were about as far out as somebody could be.

The tents near the old courthouse were shabby and torn, and the grounds upon which they were pitched were strewn with rubbish. The same tinny voice emanated from many of them. Before I knew it, I was picking my way through a dense maze of ripped tents and trash.

I stumbled upon a handful of people gathered around a man who was shouting and waving his fists in the air. He wasn't very tall. Standing on a wooden box made him about the same height as his audience. He was wearing a bowler cap, a faded dinner jacket, and a red bow tie that was the same color as his rosy red nose. He looked like his breath oozed alcohol and unfinished mastication. He was pumping his fist in the air, yelling:

'god's so great, he wrote a book about it!'

'god's so worth being like, he created man in his own image!'

'god's so funny, he once told a guy to kill his son on an altar, and then at the last minute, joked around and didn't really make him do it!'

'god's so ironic, he let himself be betrayed by a guy, and then let the guy commit suicide from despair!'

'god's so clever, he tricked people into killing his son and then blamed *them* for it!'

'god's so secure, he designed heaven so that could be worshipped for eternity!'

The guy on the box paused, and looked out over the crowd. With a passionately inquisitive look on his face, he yelled out, 'My good people, can you tell me any of god's other attributes!'

No one in the crowd answered him. They just stared back. I carried on toward the courthouse, thinking about how tedious it would be to sing *anyone's* praises for *eternity*. Surely, not even god would go for something like that, unless he was some kind of egomaniac.

The people listening to the man remained silent. He yelled out again, 'My good people, tell me any of god's other attributes!'

Nobody responded, so I yelled out behind my shoulder, 'god's so schizophrenic, he cleans the clocks of those who buy him a friendly beer!'

Finally the others yelled some things:

'god's so timeless, he never once owned a watch!'

'god's so irritable, he drowned all the people right after he made them!'

That's the last I heard before I was out of range.

I glanced back one last time. The man on the box was raising his hands in ecstasy. I thought I could just make out very faint yells. ‘Holly – Loo – Yeah’, or something like that.

Nearer the courthouse, there were more and more people. Some made eye contact. Most didn’t. And some looked through me like I wasn’t there. I avoided the gaze of some because I felt like I wasn’t welcome. One guy that I passed by was holding a little notebook. We made brief eye contact, and nodded hello. Then he exploded into laughter and began scribbling in his little book. When I looked over my shoulder to see if he was still scribbling madly, I tripped and landed on my face.

I slowly pulled my head up and looked around. I was surrounded by scattered astronomy paraphernalia: textbooks, star charts, fragments of telescopes and binoculars, and little bits of optics everywhere. I had stumbled over an open textbook. I got up, but as I did, I heard a cracking sound, and realized that I’d accidentally stepped on a small concave mirror and a lens. Given my respect for all things astronomical I jumped back, but then tripped over some other books behind me that I hadn’t seen. I fell again – this time on top of an occupied tent. Right on top of the body concealed within.

Laying in the midst of a few broken tent poles and lots of loose canvas, myself and the body were separated by no more than a thin layer of nylon. I quickly determined that the body’s mouth was right next to my ear when it shouted: ‘Holy shit! What was that!? I’m losing it. I gotta stop. Oh my god, where did I put that shit? Holy shit, they’re finally coming to get me!’ The shouting stopped, and the voice tentatively enquired, ‘Uhhhh, is anyone out there?’

‘Yeah. Me.’

The body answered back quickly, ‘everything is fine in here, officer. Nothing funny going on. Situation normal. No need to worry.’

Officer? I reassured the body inside, ‘I’m not an officer. I tripped on a bunch of astronomy stuff scattered around your tent.’

‘So that’s where I put it...’ I heard from within the tent. ‘Well, there’s no need to worry. I’m just about to make my way to the career event at the old courthouse. Everything’s under control.’

Baffled by the response, I replied, ‘I’m not worried. Don’t worry yourself about me worrying. I’m on my way to the career event too. You wanna walk up there with me?’

There was no answer for awhile, but the tent was moving. Eventually I heard, ‘Yeah, sure, but can you get off my tent first?’

‘No problem.’

I got up, and watched the tent writhe as the body inside crawled around, muttering to itself, ‘Now where the hell...?’ Then, he shouted out to me, ‘I need a few minutes in here to find some things.’

A few minutes later, the body emerged from the tent with his head down, looking at all the stuff strewn outside the tent, ‘Sorry it’s such a mess out here.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I said, gesturing at the book that was responsible for my fall. ‘I tripped on that one.’

He looked down, ‘ahhh. My book of star charts. That’s a big one.’ He wore a look of concentration, and both of his hands were searching for something in the depths of his pockets. ‘You just woke me up.’ He methodically gathered up the stuff laying around the tent and tossed it inside. There were some big glass tubes that looked like they might be telescope components, ‘OK, I think that’s everything,’ he said.

‘What about these little lenses down here?’ I bent down, picking them up. He took them from me, and tossed them in the tent along with all the other stuff.

We began walking toward the courthouse. For awhile we walked in silence. Eventually I remarked, ‘You’re an astronomer, eh?’

‘Yeah. Lately I’ve been so preoccupied with the stars and planets that I haven’t been doing much else. My lover just left me cause she said that my astronomy had degenerated into mindnumbing stargazing. But I’m glad she’s gone.’

‘Things weren’t going so well?’ I mused.

‘She snored. Like a freight train. So bad I couldn’t sleep at night.’

He continued, ‘since she left, I’ve been sleeping better, my mind has been sharper, and I’ve been studying the heavens in a lot more detail. No more mindnumbing stargazing.’ He looked at my bandaged head, and said, ‘I never seen *you* up here before. Must be hard to stick your eyes close to a microscope or a telescope with all those bandages in the way.’

I nodded, ‘yeah, it is.’

‘How long you been up here?’

‘Only since yesterday,’ I answered, gesturing in the direction of Head’s tent. ‘I’m camped way out near the fence.’

‘What fence?’

‘The flimsy little fence that encloses the hilltop.’

He stopped and looked at me, clearly confused, ‘what the hell flimsy little fence you talking about? There’s a big concrete wall out there, but not a little fence.’

‘Yeah, yeah, that’s what I mean. The wall,’ I stammered, and then added, ‘If you look at it up close, it’s just a flimsy little fence.’

He looked at me sceptically, his eyebrows raised, ‘There’s a lotta people been up here for a lot longer than yesterday, and every one of ‘em’ll tell you that aint no flimsy little fence out there.’ He turned around, pointing at the fence, ‘Look.’ I looked. From so far away, with all the pieces of trash and plastic caught in it, the tiny fence *did* look like a wall. Just like Head had said. We both stared for a few moments, and then turned around and started heading for the old courthouse.

‘So why are you up here?’ I asked as we walked.

‘Well, like lotsa the people up here, I’m trying to get on a jury.’

I had no idea what I expected him to say, but jury duty wasn’t it. ‘Everyone up here is on jury duty?’

‘Not *on* jury duty,’ he clarified, ‘*Trying* to get on jury duty.’

‘What’s the draw?’ I asked.

‘Something real to do,’ he said.

‘Huh?’

‘Before they arrived up here, mosta these folks aint had much to do but let the media boxes tell ‘em what real life is like. Years gone by and by, and then one fine day somebody tapped onto the fact that there was real live drama going on every day up here at the courthouse, and they always need participants. So insteada being slave to whatever crap was being piped in through the media box, we thought why not try to get in on one of the cases showing up at the courthouse? At least we would know for sure that it was real.’

He carried on with the same casual cadence, ‘Some-a the folks up here are real picky. They refuse to be on a jury unless it’s gonna decide life or death. But not me. I’m not picky. Life and death isn’t the *only* interesting thing that can happen at a trial, I always say. There’s other edge-of-your-seat-real stuff: steamy sex scenes, tearful testimonies about a crime of passion, family rivalries gone wrong, life threatening accidents... All kindsa worthwhile stuff. The possibilities are so endless it’s mind blowing.’

He pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket, lit it, and gave one to me. ‘I’ll tell you something. Lotsa the folks out there,’ he said gesturing toward the expanse beyond the hilltop, ‘are fed up with the monotony of those goddamn boxes – and fed up with wondering whether it’s real or fake. Word’s spreading about the jury selection that goes on up here – how certain people get chosen by other people to decide the fate of somebody that neither knows. For lots of us, it’s too good to be true. A buncha people like us, sat in fronta media boxes for years now, finally getting our big chance. *To decide fate.*’

He grinned at me, and repeated how great it was, ‘Who woulda thought? A buncha people like us...’

He paused, took a drag on his cigarette, and decided to elaborate a little bit more, ‘You ever stepped on an ant?’

I nodded. I was as guilty as anyone.

‘Well, those moments looking at the ant before you step on it – that’s some *bona fide drama*. You’re the master of its fate. You can wipe out its impenetrable little existence in an instant. Or, maybe you decide not to, and then you emerge the savior. All for doing nothing but thinking about your power to destroy it. And it’s not only drama for the ant. It’s for you too. *All that are involved* leave entertained. It’s free, and there’s no arguing whether it’s real. That’s the most important thing. *No doubt over whether it’s real*. Not like the stuff piped outta those media boxes, where you never know.’ He shook his head and took a drag on his cigarette.

‘Probably best to prolong the case, huh? And not kill too many people? That way you assure yourself entertainment for a good long time.’ I mused.

At this point his tone changed. His enthusiasm dissipated into sober realism, ‘the truth is – I haven’t yet managed to get in on a case. It’s hard. Very selective. They ask you all kindsa questions. But as far as I know, there’s no obligation to drag out the trials. Or not to decide that people need to be disposed of.’

He looked at me and shrugged his shoulders matter-of-factly, ‘Why go to the effort if it’s *always* gonna end more or less the same? Where’s the drama in that? You gotta keep people on their toes.’

It was getting hot under my bandages with the sun coming up.

‘You probably wish you could be on the jury for whoever’s responsible for the shiner peaking out of those bandages,’ he said, taking a hard drag on his cigarette.

We walked on in silence for awhile longer, before my curiosity was roused, ‘you know anybody that’s been in on a case?’

‘Only one person. I don’t know him personally, but I’ve heard about him. Mosta the folks that came up here have given up – They’ve gone back to sitting in their tents and listening to their media boxes for the whole day. A few others went and became lawyers so they could get in on all the action from the other side.’

‘But you’re still trying?’

‘I’ve had a few interviews, but the selection panels always tell me that I don’t meet their criteria of what someone they don’t know should seem like in order to make decisions about someone that none of us know. Talk about an anticlimax.’

He shrugged and carried on, ‘I’ve asked ‘em if I could just hang out with the gang. You know, not actually *make* any important decisions. I just wanna sit in the back and shut up and go to coffee breaks and *pretend* I’m part of the jury. I’ve promised not to be annoying, and that when the long awaited moment of decision arrives, I’d just silently make a mental note about how I *would have* voted if my vote mattered. But the selection panels won’t have any of it.’

‘How often do you try to get in?’ I asked.

‘Whenever they’re looking for people. I’ve begged them so many times to let me in. Just give me a chance on *one* case, I ask them. I tell ‘em how long I’ve been trying, but they don’t care. They just tell me, ‘Sir, with the greatest amount of respect that we can muster, which isn’t very much: we don’t know you. And we probably won’t even remember you in a little while because we talk to so many people that we don’t know all the time. You’re just another person that we might never have talked to. Nothing special.’

He took a disgusted drag on his cigarette, and pronounced, ‘But I never give up. It’s a great gig. You only have to work from 10 am to 4 pm, with a good hour and a half for lunch, which is provided free of charge. And you get to chat with your co-jurors about the cases.’

We weren’t far from the courthouse now, and there was a long line to get inside, ‘They must not have opened the doors yet,’ my companion muttered.

We stood silently for awhile, waiting at the end of the line. My restlessness to get outta here and find the ungrateful bum who’d cleaned my clock and put my head in these bandages was growing. I started fidgeting, wondering what I was doing here. I turned to my companion, ‘what’s going on inside?’

‘Some kind of seminar on careers or something.’

‘Why’d you come?’

He could barely contain his excitement as he said, ‘this’ll be my first chance to see the room where they hold the cases... We might even get to sit where the jury sits.’

‘Hmm.’ I mused.

‘The other reason I’m here is because I gotta have some kinda alternate plan if I cant get in on a case. Otherwise it could all go to hell – like I’ve seen before.’

He paused and lit another cigarette, explaining what he meant. ‘Before I came up here to get in a case, I worked at a frozen food supply depot, driving a truck around all day long making deliveries. Mostly I was driving around recovering from star-gazing. Back then it wasn’t astronomy. It was just star-gazing. Every spare minute of the day – between deliveries, waiting at traffic lights, during lunch – I’d stare at star charts. I’d spend every night alone with my telescopes and binoculars. I did nothing else. It got so out of hand, I had to pay a ten year old to wash all my dirty dishes.’ He looked at me seriously, ‘You know that things have gotten outta hand when you have to pay a ten year old to face your own slop for you.’

The line started moving before he spoke again, ‘But I lost that job cause of a bastard co-worker who despised anyone with an interest in the heavens. But he had his own problems – drowning in delusions of grandeur about the frozen food delivery business. Enough time in those humming mobile freezers, and pretty soon it would be a fancy car, a fancy suit, and a fancy watch. That’s what he thought. That’s what he dreamed about.’

‘He hated me cause I despised the job that he wetted himself over. Every day at that job, I took abuse from the customers. They were always pissed off about something – water logged chicken, discolored potatoes, slimy fish. And at the same time, I half-heartedly kissed my boss’s ass because the lack of job security at that place paranoid the fuck outta me. It was a daily threesome at that place – the customers and the boss giving it to me from each side. Eventually, they fired me cause they said the other guy could do my job *and* his better than I could do mine alone.’

The line was moving now. My companion paused, his disgust appeared to be dampened by a certain sorry nostalgia. He pulled out another cigarette, and continued: ‘But it eventually took its toll on him,’ he said inhaling. ‘That guy found himself in the middle-a so many five-somes and six-somes, even his fresh optimism spoiled. Walking around with a box-a frozen steaks under one arm, a box-a frozen fish fingers under the other, surrounded by predators who expected you to obediently submit to their abuse – that frozen food job was his demise. Nowhere near as glamorous as he’d imagined. No car, no suit, no watch. And the food was bad.’

We were nearing the courthouse entrance. He finished his cigarette, and tossed the butt on the ground. ‘Like the Jesus of frozen food, it ended as well as it coulda for that guy. One Friday after all the other staff had left he walked over to packing and shipping, and wrapped himself up in delivery paper with a label that said *Highest Quality Fresh Meat*, and addressed himself express to our biggest customer. Then he went and locked himself in the freezer.’

‘Nobody pieced together what had happened to him until long after he’d been shipped. After the depot’s biggest customer commented on the exceptional quality of the meat in the last delivery, and asked if there was any more.’

## The word of Dogg

There were a lot less people in the courthouse than I would have guessed as I stood at the back of the line.

A group wearing suits and holding briefcases was gathered near the judge's bench at the front, which looked like an altar. My companion eagerly led me over to the vacant jurors' seats. He'd dreamt for a long time about this moment – when he could finally park his ass on that bench.

He was surveying the people sitting inside to see if he could recognize anybody. He nudged me softly, pointed, and said, 'You see that guy sitting over there?'

I nodded.

'That guy used to sell vacuum cleaners door to door in town when I was young. Whenever he talked to anybody, he always yelled 'Happy new year!' instead of 'Hello'. I used to ask my mom why he always said happy new year even when it was in the middle of July.'

'He never said hello?' I responded.

'I never heard him say hello. Just happy new year. But he said it like he meant hello.'

'And no one knew why?'

'Not my mom. Somebody – I don't remember who – said that maybe happy new year is code for something else. Like maybe it was a way of asking people if they were interested in purchasing high quality astronomy supplies.'

'As a vacuum cleaner salesman?' I replied sceptically.

'Maybe he stored it in the vacuum cleaners. He never sold very many. He used to come over and give us demos. All us kids would gather round and watch. Those vacuum cleaners couldn't suck a single breadcrumb off a hardwood floor.'

'One crumb,' I clarified. He nodded.

'He'd hold the hose only an inch or so away. Not far. Not like he was standing on the opposite end of the room.'

'If it couldn't suck one crumb off a hardwood floor, then it wouldn't stand a chance for a speck of glass on a carpet,' I mused.

'You're not kidding. We were always shocked by how little those machines could suck. He musta interpreted our open jaws as interest, because he kept coming over with his hearty happy new years, and doing that same crumb demo. A couple of times he almost got it –it danced, sputtered, and jumped, but never went up the hose. Gravity and friction always won.'

We sat silently for awhile, before my companion remarked, 'you can't expect a vacuum cleaner to have any sucking power when the chamber's loaded with astronomy supplies.' He sat quiet for a little while longer before musing, 'I wonder what he's doing here.'

As I shrugged back a response, a little guy quickly walked to the altar at the front of the courthouse room. He was frantically waving his arms to calm people down, serious about being in a hurry. His arms were going so fast it looked like he had blurry wings. There wasn't much noise – so it was unclear why he was calming us so vigorously. I couldn't place him, but he looked familiar.

He promptly began speaking, faster than a motorboat, 'Thank you for coming today everybody. Lot's gone into me being able to present you with all this. Without a moment to lose, let me welcome you, and let's get on with the show.' A few people absentmindedly and halfheartedly put their hands together, and then he was gone so fast that no one knew if he walked off stage or disappeared in a puff.

The lights dimmed slightly, and one of the ladies that had been standing at the altar with a briefcase stepped into a weak spotlight. Her arms were folded, and she was flanked by two poles upon which were mounted symbols of the imperial democracy. She was very attractive, wearing glasses with her hair up in a bun on her head. She began speaking like she was in a movie that's been made one thousand times:

'On behalf of the imperial democracy, the plastic-producing-plant in town, and the legal infrastructure society, I would like to thank you all for coming to our event today, which we've called *Twenty-First Century Career Paths*. I'd like to introduce Dogg, who'll be your career advisor for the session.'

A hulking man with an unshaven face, a wife beater T-shirt, torn jeans, a gray thinning pony tail pulled back tightly over his head, and arms punctured with tattoos and needle holes, stepped from the shadows into the light. There was a cigarette hanging loosely out of the corner of his mouth, and he wore a look of boyish resilience. He looked around the entire courthouse slowly, like he was trying to make individual eye contact with every single person in there.

Then, he started like he was giving a sermon, stepping behind the judge's bench like it was a pulpit. With an even tempo and a voice that was like pieces of sandpaper being rubbed together inside a cave, he said, 'my friends. Welcome.' He scanned the audience again, one by one. 'We are gathered here today in the midst of a great transformation that is among us. Many that are out there don't have a clue,' he said, gesturing outside the courthouse. 'A voice is crying out from the courthouse, in the midst of the madness.'

'We are incarcerated, my friends, incarcerated without even being aware of it. Now, some amongst us will pretend that we are *not* incarcerated, deceitfully calling it 'living', but these are the words of wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. They have no answer for the wisdom even children can understand.'

'That *incarcerate* and *incarnate* are basically the same word.'

'Now, my friends, you may ask me, Dogg, what *is* our incarceration?'

He paused awhile to let everyone's minds stew on the question and then began, one word at a time, speaking slowly:

'*Our incarceration is our incarnation.* As humans. Without any of us having provided express written consent. Nor any sort of informal prior approval. These are the suffocating circumstances into which each of us enters lived experience.'

'But we need not lose heart, my friends. We need not lose heart. Though we are surrounded on all sides, we will not become claustrophobic. We are human people

and we are rising up. In our hearts, we know that one *incarnation* per person is enough. There's no need for further *incarceration* on top of it.'

He paused, and his face panned around the courtroom. 'Today, we will have a reading from the first chapter of the first book of my head. Verse one. Since you don't have books to refer back to if you miss it when it comes out of my mouth, you'll have to listen carefully, like it's the first and only time you'll hear it. If you choose to write it down, then do what you will. But it will reflect more of your memory than it will of my intention, so be sure to attribute it to yourself and not to me...'

'My friends, we live in dark times. We fill our days with doing things, and the things that we spend our days doing are precisely those things that we wish we were not doing. We are increasingly alienated from the things that occupy most of our time.'

'Why are we alienated?'

'I will tell you why we are alienated, my friends. I will tell you why we are alienated!'

'We facilitate the mass production of indistinguishable disposables! And it consumes everything. Everything! Our hearts, our minds, and our spirits! Turning us into gelatinous globules of bored indifference!'

'Craftsmanship and artistry have been defeated by prosaic and regulated repetition! Mechanical reproduction has crushed our creativity, ensnared our enthusiasm, punished our passion, and pulverized our personalities! Mystical motivation has succumbed to mindless masturbation! On all sides, we are bound within cubicles that we cannot see! In line at the grocery store! Standing on the subway! Passing bums by like they were street signs! Acquiescing to war and violence like they don't matter! Allowing our souls to be sucked out by middle managers!'

'We are divorced from the life cycle of disposable stuff that saturates our lives. Factory workers use raw materials mined by miners they don't know, shippers ship boxes containing things made in factories they have never visited, salesmen sell things in boxes made by people they have never met and shipped by shippers they don't care to know. The boxes end up in the hands of hollow retailers whose eyes have no fire, who reflect alienation like a polished mirror, and who give the boxes to consumers in exchange for pieces of paper referring to capital that doesn't exist! And the paper of capital is managed by bankers whose business has never been anything more than strictly symbolic! Who soar above us sitting in skyscrapers so high they never see our faces! We live and move and have our being suffocated by a calculus divorced from the earth, its raw materials, and the human forces that make it! Yet it has come to dominate the origins of production!'

'All of this has seeped into the depths of our spirits, washed away our love, and weighed us down! The crevices of our mind are drowning in a chemical tide of disposable landfill *JUNK!*'

He softened his voice, 'this is our dark situation, my friends. It is what we are subject to, it is what we are bombarded with. An unrelenting assault of advertisements – some the size of skyscrapers – tempting us with disposable crap and worthless cash, which is all that the mechanized chain of production can offer. And as we tacitly lend our support to the origin of our temptation – our alienation from our spirits multiplies ten fold, one hundred fold, one thousand fold, one million fold, one billion fold, one trillion fold! – degenerating into figures so incomprehensible they might as well be

gibberish! The apparatus of symbolic capital is collapsing under the weight of its own alienation!

‘How alienated have we become? So much so that we work for most of our time, enduring alienation because we know that for a very small fraction of our time, we will not have to work! Boring hollow men who wear boring clothes and can talk nothing but boring shit toil for hours at boring jobs with no hope of ever recovering a trace of the soul that the cubicle has crushed out of them!’

‘A house divided against itself cannot stand!’

His voice quieted, ‘But, I will tell you this my friends. I will tell you this... the work of a builder is tested by fire and pressure on that Day, and so will it be with us. The foundation may be laid with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, or paper. But only on that Day, when it is tested, will the strength of the foundation be revealed! Paper will burn! Alienated empty shells will collapse! And cancerous chemical waste will ooze from the ruins of a shattered consciousness. What will remain? The broken, abandoned remains of a twisted and rusty cubicle! That is *all* that will remain!’

‘But, there is hope, my friends. Yes, there is hope. We *need not* be condemned to doing the things that we don’t want to do! We do not need to suffer alienation, spinning like suffocated cogs in unfathomably large machines of symbolic production. We can be saved. We can extract ourselves from the alienation of the workplace, and we can be reborn as human beings. Never again shall we be suffocated! Never again shall our doings be alienated from our desires! We shall be the authors of our actions! No more restraint in a cubicle whose foundations are the forces of consumption! No more need we be trivial atoms operating in the service of symbolic capital!’

Dogg was growing increasingly excited in the midst of his crescendo. Both of his fists were clenched, he was perspiring heavily, and the beads of sweat on his head were visible under the lights in the front of the courtroom. The inertia of his words was picking up momentum.

He started shouting: ‘*No more* need our creativity be stifled by tasks that suffocate our psychological frontiers! *No more* need we succumb to mind numbing repetition! *No more* will our spirits be quenched by the monotony of mechanical reproduction! *No more* shall our enthusiasm become homogeneous and sterile! We shall rip out the boring hearts of the hollow masses and breath life into them! We shall crush the tiny enclosed space of the cubicle! We shall reverse the predestined course of our alienation, and *reincarnate* ourselves with ruthless abandon!’

He stopped. His hands were shaking, and he was drenched in sweat. He pulled a packet of cigarettes out of his breast pocket, shakily removed one, and lit it with a lighter from his back pocket. He closed his eyes, oozing sweat out of his eyelids as he did so, and then took a long drag. His hands trembled less as the nicotine soothed his frayed nerves. He pulled a manky handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiped his forehead with it.

I looked around to see the other people in the courtroom. One guy was picking his nose, and intently examining a big juicy bugar now perched on the tip of his index finger. Another guy was nodding off to sleep, abruptly awaking every split second when his head fell too quickly toward his chest. There were a few other people like myself looking around to see what others were looking at. Some wore mildly

confused looks on their faces, but were nevertheless sitting and looking intently at Dogg, waiting to hear what he would say next. The cigarette had calmed him significantly. His face was no longer glistening with perspiration. He looked around again, slowly, preparing to speak.

I looked over at my companion, and he was delightedly stroking the jurors' benches. He didn't look to be paying much attention. I nudged him. 'We're screwed,' I whispered.

He ceased stroking the bench for a moment, pretended to produce a small gavel, and then hit the bench with it, imagining he was a real juror. 'Guilty,' he mouthed silently at me, really getting off on sitting in the spot where he hoped to one day sit for real.

Dogg began gently, like a different person, his voice radiating quiet and determined hope, 'So what are we to do in the midst of this captivity?'

## Career paths

Dogg calmly folded his hands in front of him. Then he softly muttered to himself, ‘How am I doing for time...’ He turned to look up at the old courthouse clock behind him, an ancient beast with rusty gears whose hands had stood still for centuries.

He looked around as he had already several times, and repeated, ‘What are we to do in the midst of such captivity?’

I blinked a few times; I think the guy next to me might have heard my blinking because he looked over at me, shrugged his shoulders a few times, and blinked back at me. Around the courthouse, Dogg’s question wasn’t met with much that was notable – a few forced coughs, the sounds of shuffling backs and butts on the hard courthouse benches, and not even the slightest murmurs. I could hear a few other people blinking. The attractive lady with the briefcase that had first addressed us was shuffling slightly. She shuffled some papers in her briefcase, and whispered into a small walkie-talkie. Standing in the shadows, it was difficult to make out exactly what was going on, but she was up to something over there.

Dogg was speaking as if in a trance, paying her no mind, and he gave a whisper that was fiercely audible even in the resonant chambers of the courthouse, ‘this life can be your salvation, my friends, but only if you truly believe with your heart. The greatest that have walked amongst us humans are those who have managed to destroy their cubicles.’

‘And as each has emerged from the crumpled heap of their former restraint, what have they found?’

He waited, letting us wonder for awhile in silence.

‘They find people waiting to force them into even sturdier and more impenetrable cubicles! They find reincarceration thrust back upon them! They find themselves accused and convicted! For living a life of crime!’

And with that, Dogg took a deep breath, surveyed the courthouse, and softly asked, ‘my friends: Have you ever considered a life of crime?’

Silence.

‘*All that dare* to transcend the confines of their cubicle find themselves on the wrong side of the law. Condemned as criminals.’

Dogg was approaching another passionate crescendo. ‘The greats that have walked among us have died to the law! That we might live if we walk as they have walked! The law is death in cubicles! The law is death outside of cubicles! And with the law comes the alienation of the spirit from the mind! But the law need no longer hold us captive! We seek new life! New life! To become dead to that which binds us!’

The response wasn’t deafening:

‘Blink.’

‘Cough, cough.’

‘Blink, Blink, Blink.’

‘BLINK,’ went a big fat guy in the back.

‘Blink.’

‘Blink, Blink.’

‘hmmmm-hmmmm,’ a throat cleared itself.

‘Blink... Blink, Blink.’

The lady in the shadows was no longer visible. Her briefcase sat perched like a monument to her inevitable return. A heavy sound of synchronized shuffling came from somewhere deep in the shadows.

Dogg continued, ‘we are free from the chains of the law, my friends. No matter what anybody may say to you, our cubicles are reinforced by nobody but ourselves. Our flesh need no longer be condemned to do that which our spirit does not wish to do. It is the law dwelling within our minds that convinces us to do what we do not want to do. Consider the infinite freedom available outside the tiny tunnels of reality that we carve for ourselves!’

‘The only bad thing about a life of crime is that you have to contend with the law – which is a cubicle so massive that it ends up getting even the best of them! But contending with the law is nothing compared to infinite freedom! Contending with the law is nothing compared to a liberation so limitless that it has the power to cleanse us from a tide as corrosive as that of the chemical waste in which we are drowning!’

The sound of the synchronized pounding was growing louder now, and Dogg was looking increasingly like his brain had ascended the confines of the courthouse. His eyes were glowing like they were focused on everything simultaneously.

The volume of his voice increased to contend with the impending pounding, ‘A life of crime is nothing compared to the suffocating confines you’ll be subject to here within the...’

#### *‘INCARCER-NATION’*

‘The bastards that run it’ll never let you go! Get out while you can! They want to see you crammed into as tiny a cubicle as they can fit you in! Barely space to breath...’

That was the last we heard of Dogg. His voice was drowned out as a door in the shadows smashed open with a bang, and a series of black uniforms filed through wielding submachine guns. There were six of them: two violently grabbed Dogg, threw him up against the wall behind the courthouse altar and handcuffed him. The other four took up positions at each of the corners of the altar at the front. Each was down on one knee like a compressed spring, scanning red laser dots affixed to the barrels of their submachine guns over the benches of the courthouse. The four red dots traced over the mostly empty courthouse benches with nothing to lock onto but a bunch of unsuspecting blinks.

As soon as Dogg was cuffed, the black uniforms shoved him into the shadows. Their booted feet violently kicked him toward the door. He looked back at us one last time with the light from his glowing face saturating the whole room. Then he disappeared, and from the sound of it, he was tossed and kicked down some stairs like a rag doll. The four black uniforms that were tracing us with their rifles sprang up. Two of them retracted their submachine guns and moved silently into the shadows. The other two

covered them, keeping their weapons trained on the courthouse. Slowly, these two backed off into the shadows, their red dots still flitting about the benches and tracing over the blinks.

Again, the response wasn't deafening.

'Blink.'

'Cough, cough.'

'BLINK, BLINK.' went the same big fat guy in the back.

'hmmmm-hmmmm,' a throat cleared itself.

'Yawwwwnnnnn.' somebody yawned.

'Blink, Blink.'

A few moments later we all the heard the reverberating click clack of stilettos. Just like her briefcase foretold, that lady re-emerged from the shadows. She walked into the spotlight at the front of the altar, and started shuffling through the papers inside it. 'Please allow me to apologize for how Dogg's presentation ended. We didn't plan on that. But don't worry, you won't leave disappointed. We appreciate that you have all taken time out of your extremely busy schedules to be here today for career advice. The way Dogg was carrying on, with his eyes and his face shining and his abstract rambling, you wouldn't have received much in the way of *practical* advice. That's why we took him away.' She had finished shuffling through her briefcase, 'I will do my best to quickly finish up where he left off, and give you the *practical* advice you came here for.'

She stood in front of us. In a voice that sounded like your mother reading you the script of a radio advertisement for a bedtime story, she started reading from the papers from her briefcase.

'In a life of crime, liberated from the law, there is no more suffering jobs that you can't tolerate. There is no more waking up early for a soul-destroying commute so that you can endure the misery of another day at the office. In a life of crime, you can work from home. You can set your own hours, and you can take extended vacations whenever you like. There's no impersonal command structure, with some manager instructed by some other manager shoving papers in your face telling you have it done by 9 am the next morning.'

'Because you can work from wherever you like in a life of crime, there's no more need for you to be confined in a sterile office making small talk to boring people you'd otherwise not even have a remote inclination to speak with. In a life of crime, *you* can make the decisions about what *you* do and the extent of *your* role in a project that *you* decide on. You'll have as much autonomy as you can stand. You can work within your own comfort zone on projects that you'll enjoy knowing have their genesis in nobody's mind but yours. There's no fixed term contract, you can retire whenever you like, and you can suspend or continue operations *whenever* and *wherever* you so choose.'

'In a life of crime, there's no more standing at an assembly line pulling a lever all day long. There's no more filing papers, there's no more scanning bar codes, there's no more looking up at the clock every ten minutes hoping that the next time you look up, three hours will have passed. A life of crime offers unmatched variety, and the possibilities for as yet unrealized combinations of criminal activity are nearly endless!

That's one of the most wonderful attractive features of a life of crime: definitions of what constitutes criminal behavior depend on all sorts of complicated variables – for example, where you live, how old you are, how old the victim is, the political ethos, what's culturally accepted to be normal and moral, fluctuations in public sentiment, the sophistication of the legal framework, who happens to be in power, how much corruption is tolerated, the technological sophistication of the society, societal gender roles, prevailing religious and/or secular sentiments, the socioeconomic class of both the victim *and* the perpetrator, dominant sexual mores, the societal psyche, the media attention that a case receives, prevailing definitions of psychological health, and all sorts of other things that are just *waiting* to be discovered!

'The adventure and excitement available in a life of crime easily beats the boring tasks you'll have in more traditional jobs. On the fringes of acceptability, you'll have the chance to meet new and interesting people that you can relate to. Not the boring robots you'd otherwise have to interact with. As you challenge society's legal fabric, you'll have chances for highs and lows that most will never experience – an intensity of experience that most can only imagine through glamorized depictions in film and television and literature. In a life of crime, *you* decide how many dreams and nightmares you live. And the possibilities for notoriety are real. Your criminal behavior might transform you from a boring member of the bourgeoisie to an infamous agent in an international cartel.'

'And let's not forget that there's no shortage of crimes out there to be committed. It's so dynamic that in some cases, new definitions of criminal behavior are just *waiting* to be discovered. All it requires is for somebody with a little bit of ambition and initiative to experiment with the boundaries of legality. But don't get me wrong, it's not all about new crimes; there's exciting and innovative ways to carry out old crimes too.'

'Just to give you all an idea of the variety and the potential for innovation, consider a small sample of some of the most popular crimes in *this town* for the past twenty or so years.' She proceeded to read a list written on her papers:

'Let's see. Let's see,' she said scanning the list, 'We have conspiracy, forgery, bribery, indecent exposure, extortion, involuntary and voluntary manslaughter, money laundering, corruption, burglary, prostitution, pyramid schemes, treason, robbery, wire fraud, stalking, hate crimes, grand and petty theft, disorderly conduct, rape, shoplifting, murder – first and second degree, starting riots, inciting violence, domestic violence, identity theft, terrorism, inciting terrorism, tax evasion, illegal entering, computer crimes, flag burning, larceny, perjury, drug cultivation and manufacturing, drug possession, drug distribution, drug trafficking, driving under the influence, racketeering, aiding and abetting, accessory, larceny, arson, assault and battery, kidnapping, embezzlement, and finally, fraud, for which there are all kinds: credit fraud, mail fraud, insurance fraud, securities fraud, and even telemarketing fraud.'

She paused to let it all sink in, 'Now, the important thing to remember is that that list is a mere *sampling* of the crimes *in this town*; I could have easily spent all your time today reading lists of crimes from all over. I guarantee I'd have introduced you to crimes that you'd never have dreamed up in a million years. The possibilities are endless. And every crime has a whole smorgasbord of *associated* criminal activity from which to choose. The possibilities really are *endless*.'

‘You can see how a life of crime is the perfect antidote to boredom in more traditional employment.’ She shuffled her papers and then looked up, ‘That’s about all that I have to say; if anybody has any questions, then I’d be happy to take them.’

She looked around at all of us from behind her glasses, ‘Does anybody have any questions?’ She waited, ‘No? There’s nothing about a life of crime that anyone wants to know about?’

She waited some more, still looking around. I shifted in my seat, deciding that I wasn’t going to ask my question unless somebody else asked theirs. ‘Well, no questions. Then I suppose that if there are no –’ she stopped. The guy next to me raised his hand, and she said, ‘Yes, you there,’ pointing at him.

‘I have a quick question,’ he said nervously. ‘I’m someone that likes to travel. I mean, when I used to work, the only thing that got me through the months was knowing that I was saving money to travel, and have a week where I *wouldn’t* have to work. Is there a lot of travel in a life of crime?’

‘I’m glad you asked,’ she responded, ‘because there’s probably lots of people wondering the same thing. If you’re someone that likes to travel – likes to explore new cultures, new places, and new languages, then a life of crime can open all sorts of interesting voluntary and involuntary travel opportunities. Oftentimes, travel is *requisite*. It can help you escape all sorts of litigation and inconvenient law enforcement. It can open up fresh new ways of thinking about old crimes. It might open new horizons of criminal activity: you’ll probably find that a new cultural and legal setting opens up unique and unanticipated opportunities. There’s even the exciting possibility of trans-national operations, which I forgot to mention earlier. And another thing that makes travel convenient in a life of crime is that there’s no criminal activity in international waters. So if land-based legal infrastructures are hampering your creativity or getting you down, there’s always the wonderful opportunity to develop a love of maritime life alongside a love of criminal life.’ She finished, and then looked at him sympathetically, ‘Anything else?’

He nodded his head no.

She asked if there were any more questions. The vacuum cleaner salesman had one. She nodded at him and he started, ‘Being a criminal seems like it could get pretty lonely – always having to be secret, being on the run, working under cover of darkness, and all that kind of stuff. I thrive off working around people, so I just wanted to know if it’s all as lonely as it seems it might be.’

‘Another good question,’ she said, and then asked him, ‘What do you do, sir?’

‘Well, before I came in here to this seminar, I used to be a vacuum cleaner salesman. But after hearing you, I’m really starting to wonder if I’m in the wrong job.’

She nodded empathetically, ‘in a life a crime, you can work in the conditions that best suit *you*. Whether you thrive in a team environment or you’re someone that prefers to work alone – without having to coordinate with others – it doesn’t matter, you can find your niche. You can formulate memorable and productive working relationships as a team member – celebrating with colleagues over a job well done, or using the group to dilute the misery of a botched job. But if you’re more of a loner, then that’s ok too. You can work on your own, responsible for nobody but yourself, with no need to be burdened by others, and keeping your criminality a private affair. A life of crime isn’t an all-or-nothing affair. In your case,’ she said looking directly at him, ‘with a

little bit of creativity, you could even keep your vacuum cleaner salesman job – dipping your toes into a life of crime as much or as little as you like. There’s plenty of people involved in these sorts of pursuits – they just live a life of crime occasionally – in subtle, non-intrusive ways.’

Someone with a gruff voice in the back that I hadn’t seen when I came in spoke up next, ‘What kinda money do people make doing this life-a-crime stuff?’

She apologized, ‘that was something that I had meant to cover, and forgot, so thanks for reminding me. The financial horizons available in a life of crime are whatever you want them to be. There’s the possibility of making it big quickly, but others choose to do just enough to maintain a comfortable standard of living. It’s up to you, but the sky’s the limit! And there’s always the possibility that you’ll end up earning more than any human could ever dream of – in which case you’ll have a lot more power than anybody who tells you that you’re living a life of crime.’ As she finished saying this, she winked.

She looked around for more questions. I raised my hand. She looked at me and I began, ‘All the criminals that I – ’ I was abruptly cut off by somebody on the other side of the courthouse.

It was Head. ‘I’m the organizer of today’s event, and I must confess, this isn’t the sort of advice I necessarily expected. I’m just curious – why are you telling us how great a life of crime is?’

She paused, and smiled at him like a mother stirring a pot of steaming stew, ‘Well you’re inquisitive, aren’t you? Let me tell you, my young friend, you might think that a life of crime is the domain of unreflexive and impulsive men of action, but you’d be wrong. It’s the lifeblood of philosophers and poets too.’

She paused, slowly cracking her knuckles one by one so that they echoed through the chamber like her stilettos had done a few moments ago. She looked down at her hands, and then looked up at Head, ‘Exploring the boundary of societal acceptability makes a whole slew of abstract questions a helluva lot more concrete. If you’re good, your criminal actions might even result in entirely new definitions of illegality, forcing a reinterpretation of the whole system. Depending on your motivation, a life of crime might help you become a martyr for society. For the poets and philosophers, there’s a whole retinue of crimes of passion and crimes of principle – the sorts of stuff that’s guaranteed to leave literature more emotive, and philosophical flights of fancy more immediate.’

She looked around calmly for more questions. Head’s question had made her lips curl, and they hadn’t unfurled yet. It had also made her voice sound more mechanized, like it was simmering under a façade of cheery indifference.

With her face smiling, she wrapped up, ‘And the last thing that I want to make clear before leaving is that a life of crime is not the sort of thing you have to dive into straightaway. Feel free to just dip your toes in. Ease yourself into it and take it at your own pace. There’s all sorts of activities that can prepare you – things that will give you a little taste without risking serious litigation: dishonesty, plagiarizing, glamorizing criminal behavior, permanently borrowing things, cheating, swindling, telling lies, tiny little ethics violations, blasphemy. Even killing people – but only *as long* as it takes place in legal warfare where you are paid a salary. If it’s killing on commission, then it’s usually criminal.’

That was it. She wrapped up, ‘Again, on behalf of the imperial democracy, the plastic-producing-plant in town, and the legal infrastructure society – good luck in your future career choices.’ She gave the papers in her briefcase one last shuffle, and walked off into the shadows with the echoing clicks of her heels fading in the wings. The spotlight at the front of the courthouse softened, and the lights slowly came back up.

## Planning for the future

I found myself standing outside the courthouse with the same guy whose shit I'd tripped over on the way in. My eyes were adjusting to the sunlight, and it was getting danker, damper, and direr inside all those bandages around my head. I looked over at the other guy. He was wide eyed, the cogs in his brain were turning, and his face was struggling to contain all sorts of unrealized possibilities. Mine wasn't.

I turned to him, 'Well, I don't know quite what to make of that; one guy gets taken down for talking about busting out of incar-nation or incarcer-nation or whatever it was... And then some lady tells us about the possibilities available in a life of crime for everyone, from the brutes to the poets.' I furrowed my brow and wrinkled my nose, trying to channel some of my confusion over toward him to deal with. 'Why were they bothering to tell us all that stuff?' I asked aloud.

I was talking to myself. The other guy wasn't paying attention to me. His eyes were rolled back in his head. I glimpsed the coarse details of his silhouette against the sunlight. He was stalled like a photograph amidst a pose that looked like a brain working overtime, doing math on his fingers like they were digits. The tip of his tongue was sticking out the side of his mouth. I could hear him as he worked it out to himself, 'Three hundred. Three to four per day. Times twenty, no, times maybe twenty-five. For a month. By twelve for a year.' His grin was slowly expanding to cover up more of his face, he was nodding, and he was loving how things were magically adding up right on his hand, 'you know, they were right. It's a goldmine! I'll never have to go into a freezer and get a goddamn mackerel fillet or a frozen potato in my life! No more being locked in a refrigerated delivery van like it's a cubicle. No more 9 – 5 threesomes; no more grappling with depression because of spoiled peas. Fuck it! I'm going to live the liberated life. Oh yeah! Goddamn, do I feel alive! Do I feel alive!' he screeched and hooted.

He danced around in a circle like a banchi for a minute, and then he ran off jumping for joy. I lost track of him in the glare of the sun.

I hoped that he was wasn't running off to go the way of Dogg, with those black uniforms throwing him around like a sack of frozen potatoes. I'd hate to see someone go that way. Just as they start getting excited.

Poor Dogg. He might have been anyone, for all we cared. But there he was – mid climax, *very* passionate – and he gets the shit kicked out of him for making a speech about the state of the incarcer-nation. All he got for solidarity was a few blinks and coughs.

I looked up and saw Head walk out. But Head was soon engaged. I shouted to him, 'Hey Head, what was he talking about before he got thrown down the steps by those black uniforms? *Incarcer-nation*?'

Head was upside down, and said matter-of-factly, 'Something like that.' He paused for awhile, looking at the horizon of grassblades stretched out before his eyes.

'Now we leave,' I said, struggling to itch my face under all those bandages.

He ignored me, 'Where'd the other guy go?'

'I don't know. He ran off like nothin's gonna bring him back.'

Head's eyebrows were still raised, 'The woman that spoke after Dogg left the scene must have really made a mark on him, eh?'

I nodded.

'Well, I hope he can pull it off, because her depiction of employment sounded pretty miserable: a slow, corrosive dissolution of the spirit... so alienated from yourself you don't even recognize it... it followed on pretty well from all that stuff Dogg was saying. About how the difference in going from *not being* to *being* is like going from *not being locked up* to *being locked up*. Poor Dogg.'

'Yeah,' I agreed, 'poor Dogg. He was too much of an idealist for his own good; you could see it in his shining face. He lost out to a cold pragmatist with no soul.'

Head got up, and for the first time in this story, looked me right in the eyes with his whole body stood upright in front of me. Face up, feet down. He said nothing, so I did: 'Are you coming with?'

'What do you mean?' he responded.

'Out of this place,' I said waving my arms.

'What place? Me standing upright in front of your face for the first time?' he asked.

That was it, he was driving me nuts standing in front of me with so much nerve and taking things so *lightly*, 'No man, this fucking goddamn compound that we're in! The one that's all around us!' He looked at me with unutterable confusion, so I continued, 'this place, with the fence all round! On top of the hill! With the courthouse in the center! And the tower on top! And tents everywhere! And black uniforms guarding the entrance! The place Dogg told us to get out of while we still can!'

'Are you OK?' he said, giving me a concerned look. He placed his hand over the bandages on my forehead. 'You seem a little bit warm. Maybe it's getting hot under there. You should have a little rest or something.'

I looked at him with as much disgust as my eyes could muster, but all he said was, 'don't worry, I'll keep tabs on your sanity. You do whatever you need to and don't worry about it.' Then he smiled, 'I told you that it's hard to get out of this place. Oh and by the way, Dogg wasn't talking *specifically about this place*. He was talking about *everywhere*. I'm pretty sure incarnation or incarceration or whatever it was aren't places *per se*.'

Pre-empting my speechlessness and looking in the direction where the other guy had disappeared, he said, 'Once you've spent some time here, all this crap becomes oh so familiar.'

'Well, I need to get the hell out of here,' I said. 'If it weren't for how miserable it's getting under these bandages, I doubt I'd even remember why I'm up here. Too long, and I'd go mad like old Hermann. Even worse, I might turn out like you.'

'Oh yeah. How's that?' he asked.

'Sane enough to provide insightful commentary. Sound enough to make observations that are pregnant with implication. Wise enough to interpret. But drowning in nonsense nonetheless.'

Head was still planted in front of me, smiling, ‘Sounds slightly better-than-average.’

‘Head, I’m leaving. I only know one way out of here. And you’ve promised to look after my sanity. So I’ll just assume that I go out the exact same way that I came in.’ I started to walk off in the direction of where I had entered.

‘Which way you going once you get outta here!’ he yelled at me.

‘I’m going to the coast to try and track down the fist of a bum called god so I can show him what he did to my face. Then I’m gonna change these hideous bandages.’

‘How long have you been planning on that?’

‘Ever since that bum knocked me for one and took my watch. After I bought him a beer and listened to his nonsense.’

I started walking off. Head jogged to catch up with me.

‘Not so fast, not so fast... there’s stuff needs doing before I set off.’

I seized his comment to ask a question that had been burning a hole in my brain since I’d been up here, ‘what needs doing? What the hell do you people *need* to do up here all day long?’

He was now walking briskly alongside me, and answered, ‘whatever needs to be done. That’s what we do. Eating. That takes a good portion of time. We’re slow eaters up here. There’s other stuff too. Making like a tree and being still. Taking naps. Looking out of windows. Drinking glasses of water. Drinking glasses of wine. Finding a quiet spot to eliminate waste. Checking to see if there’s any commotion at the courthouse. A little bit of cleaning every so often.’

‘That’s a whole day? That stuff doesn’t take up a whole day.’ I replied.

‘You have a different approach,’ he said. ‘You think about different activities taking so long, and the day as a holding a certain amount of time. Combine enough stuff, you think, and the day will eventually be *filled up*. Well, that’s not how I think about it. The stuff that I do fills up the day, whether it means to or not.’ He shot me a big grin: ‘I’ll happily stretch lunch out to a good four hours if that’s how long it takes.’

‘A *four hour* lunch?’ I repeated.

‘Depends how much time I put into it,’ he said. ‘You’re living to be busy, and I’m busy living.’

Eventually I broke the silence, ‘Well, *right now*, I’m busy leaving. And unless you tell me differently, I’m going out the way I came in.’

He carried on alongside me, and sighed, ‘I *have* been thinking about leaving for some time now. Head’s final march. But I’ve never had somebody forcing me into it like you are now. So be it.’

‘So we’re finally outta here then?’ I said.

‘Yeah. But first we need to go back to my tent and grab some provisions for the journey.’

‘Fine.’

We set off in the direction of his tent. The people that had been in the courthouse at the career event had long since dispersed; we didn’t see any of them, including the guy that had run off in glee. I kept my eyes out for any sign of black uniforms, but

saw none. We stepped carefully through the maze of tents in order to avoid the trash strewn everywhere: plastic bags, plastic bottles, some stuff that we optimistically identified as half eaten rotting food, and plenty of excrement. Birds and other small creatures were picking through the mess. As we made our way through, we could hear coming out of the tents the same tinny voices I had heard on the way in. I was able to make out a few fragments: 'today... Courthouse.... Career Event... Imperial democracy... Plastic producing plant... Scintillating presentation... Experienced career advisor... Fulfilling employment... Opportunities... Corporate experience... Make a difference... Televising the revolution...'

So it went. It sounded like somebody was being interviewed. Maybe the woman with the briefcase. We listened the best we could as we moved toward Head's tent, but heard no mention of Dogg. No mention of cubicles. No mention of the incarcer-or-incar-anything. And nothing about a life of crime.

## One man's resurrection

We were soon clear of the filth. The tents were growing sparser, the tower was farther away, and the perimeter wall was starting to look like the fence it really was. I followed Head back to his tent. I was looking down at my feet, 'So Head, where you plan on going once you're out of here?'

'Well, they told me that if I want to leave officially, then there's only one place that I'm allowed to go.'

'Where?'

'The famous learning institution in town.'

'I didn't know there was a famous learning institution in this town.'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'Very famous. Very highly regarded. The ones that come out of it can't *wait* to do their stint up in the tower.'

'You mean the one where there's nobody there,' I clarified.

No answer.

We walked on in silence for a few moments, and Head eventually said, 'the famous learning institution goes to great lengths to cultivate every learner's love of towers. They get 'em to the point where they can't think about anything else. But once they finally go up there, after all that build-up, it's the same old story. They get as bored as anybody else. Pretty soon, they're looking for someone else to fill in, telling them not to tell anyone else that they're not up there, otherwise they'll have to answer to the black uniforms.'

'What you wanna do at the famous learning institution?'

'Well that's where it gets complicated. I don't want to just learn about how to love the tower the whole time. I told them that I'd rather learn about why we always have to learn about loving the tower. Not too far removed from studying the tower, I tried to convince them.'

'What did they say?'

'Well, the head administrator said to me, 'Listen, little man, what you want to do is lovely. In fact, I'd love to do it *myself*, but we here at this famous institution specialize in *mass produced learning*. We take thousands of people from every walk of life and teach them all *the same thing*, and we're *very* good at it, which is why we're *so* famous. If we stopped doing it so well, then we would be less famous and then we would be able to teach fewer people the same thing. What we *don't* do is arrange for starry-eyed young people like yourself to explore the horizons of their imagination and the frontiers of possibility. If that's what you're looking for, then you're in the wrong place – unless there's a way for thousands of people to do it simultaneously and *learn the same thing*. That's what we do. And we're *very* good at it.'

Head carried on, ‘He said that everybody learning the same thing is what people want, and more importantly, that it’s what the tower needs. And if I wanted something else, then I’d have to go and get it myself. So I’m not sure where I’m going, but I’m gonna do what he recommended – I’m gonna find it myself.’

Eventually we arrived back at Head’s tent. I sat down and held my throbbing, sweaty head. Head was taking off his shoes to go into the tent and get some things.

I looked over in the direction of the sun, which was bright and yellow and hot and bringing no relief to what was stewing under my bandages. I yawned loudly, and when I did, Head fiercely whispered at me, ‘Shut up!’

I looked over at him. His command didn’t register very quickly, and he repeated himself with another urgent whisper, ‘Shut the hell up! Listen!’ He took a few steps away from the entrance of his tent, bending down to pick up a stick laying near his stove, and crept toward the tent entrance.

I shut up and listened. I could hear what sounded like faint snoring sounds coming from inside his tent. Head looked like he was ready to pounce. Then we both heard a really abrupt, loud snore, like there could be two people in there – a snoring attacker yelling obscenities in snore at the snoring victim that was being smothered. The walls of the tent flapped ever so slightly in the breeze, and the violent snoring sound that we had just witnessed settled back into a steady gentle snoring. Head crept toward the entrance of the tent, and unzipped it as quietly as he could manage. Then he backed off, stood up, and gestured for me to come over and have a look.

I crept over, bent down, and looked in. The guy inside was sound asleep. We watched him, and as were doing so, he had another bout of violent snores like we had just heard a moment before. Then he calmed down again. ‘Do you know this guy?’ I whispered to Head. Head shook no. No idea.

I stepped away, and Head prodded the sleeping man with the stick he was holding. It slightly interrupted his snores, causing him to shuffle a little bit. Head shrugged, and then prodded the man again. The guy moved more this time, but was still snoring. Head prodded a third time, more forcefully than the last two times, digging the tip of the stick into his back enough that he would notice.

The man shuffled again and slung a tired protest in our direction, like he was expecting to be disturbed. ‘Fuck you guys,’ he muttered. Then it went silent.

Head prodded a fourth time. This time the guy muttered, ‘goddammitt, I’m sleeping. I’m on strike, and you guys work me like a dog. You got no right. I’ve still never got what’s owed to me, and now you won’t even let me nap in peace. Fuck you all. You’re all a bunch of goddamn conformicators.’ He covered his head with his arms and curled his body up, feebly protecting himself against any more prods with the stick.

Head looked over at me again. I shrugged. He leant over, and spoke gently into the tent, ‘Man, I don’t know where you think that you might be, and if you need a nap, then I understand.’ Head looked back at me, and shrugged so as to ask if he was being reasonable. I nodded back that he was doing fine. He continued, ‘If you want to take a nap in my tent, I’m not necessarily opposed to the idea, but I *would* like to make your acquaintance first.’

No response. The man had his arms over his head and ears. It wasn't clear if he could hear us or if he was ignoring us. Head waited for a few moments to see if there would be a response, and when there wasn't, he said the same thing one more time.

Again, no response.

Head went around to the opposite end of the tent, where the sleeping man's feet would have been. He unzipped the flap, and gestured for me to come round and join him. Head gestured at the man's feet, 'If he's not gonna introduce *himself*, then I gotta introduce *myself*.' He reached down and grabbed hold of one of the man's feet, gesturing for me to take the other.

We yanked, and then yanked some more, and pretty soon he was out. He didn't struggle much, like he knew it was coming.

The guy was still covering his face and head with his hands, shielding them from the sun, but he began to roll over, and looked up at both of us, disgusted. He started muttering to himself like it wasn't clear if we were meant to hear him or not, 'Why are you fuckers dragging me out here? You got no right. I'm on strike, goddammit.'

Head was staring at him with a queer look on his face, 'What are you talking about?' he said.

The guy looked up at Head, uncovering his face. 'goddammit,' he said venomously.

Head looked back at him, wrinkled his nose with surprise, and looked at me.

'Dogg? Is that you?'

Dogg looked us both up and down, first Head and then me. 'goddammit. Who the fuck are you? You're not who I thought you were. Sorry for being so goddamn obstinate.'

'What are you doing out here?' Head asked, shocked.

I was similarly shocked, 'Yeah, what are you doing out here? We thought that you probably broke every bone in your body after those black uniforms chucked you down the stairs in there.'

Dogg looked at us, sighed, 'Well, I didn't. This is the way it happens every single time and it'll keep happening this way. No one ever remembers the last time, and even if they do, they don't act like they do. That's why it works every time.'

Dogg sat up, pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, lit it, and took a deep drag, 'Always the same. Every goddamn time,' he repeated.

We were both looking at him, stunned and speechless, not knowing what to say. He looked up at us, 'what the hell are you two looking at me like that for? You're freakin' me out. You just dragged me out of a tent. The least you could do is stare at me with your goddamn mouths shut.'

I shut my mouth, but then opened it again, 'What do you mean, this is how it always happens?'

Dogg took another drag on his cigarette, 'I'm on strike. I've been on strike ever since I served in the goddamn-mother-of-all-violent-wars. It was years ago, but I still wake up at night crying like a baby with cold sweats from that goddamn war. I've got images that I carry around in my head that would scare you kids so bad, you'd shit your pants and run back to your mothers to suck their tits like you were babies.'

You're lucky though – cause whenever I try and tell people about those things, they get lodged in my throat, and I start choking. People just think I musta had some food go down the wrong pipe.'

'How'd you end up here?' Head asked.

Dogg took a drag on his cigarette, 'Ever since I been on strike, the imperial democracy forces me to go around and give talks about careers at all courthouses up and down this god-forsaken valley. goddammit. That's all I got to say to them. It always ends the same way. That's what they want. That's what we practice. I bring it all to a charismatic and inspiring crescendo about the alienation of the workplace. Then the black uniforms come in, make a show of strength to a usually indifferent audience, treat me roughly, pretend to abuse me, and that's that. I usually end up with a few bruises. Once I stubbed my toe.'

'goddammit,' he said again.

I looked at Head, he looked at me with his eyebrows furrowed, and I asked Dogg, 'why are you on strike?'

Dogg looked up at me, 'It's not important...' he trailed off, looking into the distance.

Head and I remained silent and sat down on the grass next to Head's tent across from Dogg.

We sat and sat and sat. Eventually Dogg looked up at us, 'Y'all really wanna know why I'm on strike...'

We both nodded at him, and he began:

'I went on strike during the war. At that time, I was working for the good guys, and I was taken prisoner by the bad guys. After a few weeks of being prisoner, I realized that I was technically working overtime for the good guys, but I began to suspect that I wouldn't be getting time-and-a-half for my service. In fact, the other prisoners – guys that had been there for awhile – told me that they probably didn't even plan on paying me regular wages for my time spent as a prisoner.'

'The good guys didn't give a damn that I was working overtime, and the bad guys were gonna make me work unpaid regardless, with no breaks – so I was being screwed on both sides. Working as a prisoner on behalf of the good guys, and doing hard manual labor for the bad guys. I should have been making *at least* double time and a half.'

'Soon as I figured how much I was being screwed by both of 'em, I told those bastard bad guys that they had no right to keep me as a prisoner. I was no longer being paid by the good guys, so I was technically no longer an employee of the good guys. Which meant that the bad guys no longer had a reason to imprison me. But they didn't buy it; they told me that I shouldn't have tried to kill bad guys when I was being paid by the good guys. I told them that wasn't my problem. I was just an honest guy trying to put some food on the goddamn table, carrying out the orders my employer had given me. I told 'em I could prove it: I would start shooting at good guys now if they started paying me. But they wouldn't have any of it. They told me that I could wipe my ass with my stupid talk, and that maybe after spending a few long years unpaid as a prisoner, I'd realize how shitty the good guys were, and regret having listened to their orders to shoot bad guys.'

‘So I wasted away for a few years, forced to work for the bad guys – building airfields, chopping trees, making roads, building compounds. I wasn’t being paid by anyone. Eventually, the tide of the war shifted, and the good guys started getting the upper hand. The bad guys were desperate for recruits because they had so many deserters. One night, one of the bad guys came to my cell and told me that they would be willing to pay me to work 8 hours per day to shoot at good guys. I told him that he could go wipe his ass with his request, and that I was on strike, having now worked years for *both sides* without pay. He slammed the cell door in my face and told me that they were going to keep me a prisoner for as long as they damn well pleased, and that if I expected any reimbursement from those piece-of-shit good guys, then I had something else coming to me. I told him to go and fuck himself.’

‘Eventually, the good guys came through the camp where I was being held, and freed me. I was emaciated and wiry. None of ‘em recognized me. I still remember the day they broke down my prison door, after most of the bad guys in our prison camp had fled. ‘You’re free,’ they announced. Then they put a gun in my hand, and told me to help them find the bad guys that had fled and start shooting at them. Go and kill your captors, they said.’

‘No problem, I said, but first I wanted to clear one thing up. I told them that they owed me a boatload of overtime for the last three years – at least 168 hours-a-week, for my service as a prisoner of the bad guys. They said I was crazy. So I put the gun down and told them that I was on strike until I was reimbursed for my overtime. They were so taken aback that they lost concentration. A few of them even got gunned down by bad guys, who’d reformed ranks outside the camp, and mounted an assault at nearly the same time that I announced my strike.’

‘As soon as they got their act together and wiped out the remaining bad guys, the good guys returned and threw me back in the very prison from which they had just liberated me. They locked the door, and told me that if I thought the bad guys were bad, then I hadn’t seen nothing. Hell was gonna freeze over before I got three years retroactive overtime, they said. I told them to go and fuck themselves – they were as bad as the bad guys. So here I am now. The war’s over, but I’m their enslaved bitch. They force me to do unpaid work because they say that’ll humiliate me even more than sitting around in prison doing nothing.’

Head and I sat listening, not knowing quite what to make of his story, but beginning to gain an inkling into why he was so obsessed with cubicles. Dogg took a long deep slow drag on his cigarette, let out another ‘goddammit,’ and then signalled with his hand for us to lean in closer because he had something to tell us. He didn’t want it to be heard by any of the people that weren’t around.

We leaned in, and he said in a hushed voice, ‘you know what, they make me give these goddamn career talks. They tell me that they want me to give a talk that’ll scare the bu-jesus out of everybody. Then they pretend to beat the shit out of me. To scare everyone in the room that isn’t paying any attention. We rehearse this crap for hours and hours – you have no idea. But I’ll tell you what,’ he wagged his finger at us and glanced around secretively, ‘ – I’ll tell you what, I give one hell of a talk. Do I give them one hell of a talk,’ he repeated, very pleased with himself.

He carried on, ‘none of ‘em get it; they’re thick bastards. So tied to literality, they have trouble interpreting anything more than a slap on the ass.’

Dogg was grinning slightly, and still whispering, ‘Lemme tell you boys somethin. Those bastards want a talk, so a talk is exactly what I give ‘em. But *I* get the last goddamn laugh. I talk about the incarnation, the incarcer-nation. Stuff that *nobody* – including those bastard black uniforms – can ever get out of being locked up in,’ he said, winking. ‘No matter how hard they try.’

He leaned away from us, winked again, took a drag on his cigarette, and his tone changed to that of a weather beaten irrelevant. He wasn’t whispering anymore. ‘But I’ve given this goddamn talk so many times, and I’ll be damned if I can find one person that can tell me what I’m talking about. Usually, they’re more interested in their own goddamn bugars than they are in the state of the bloody incarcer-nation.’

Both Head and I were looking at Dogg with our jaws open. He looked at us, saw that we didn’t have our mouths closed, and repeated, ‘When you boys gonna shut your goddamn mouths. I already asked ya one time. goddammit.’

Head was the first of us to speak, ‘Listen Dogg, feel free to have a nap in the tent. Seems like you could use it. I can’t imagine how much energy it takes to be forced offa strike so long.’

Dogg didn’t respond. Head shouted to him again, ‘Dogg, if you wanna take a nap, feel free, cause we’re outta here.’

Dogg finally looked back at Head, ‘Thanks. I know those bastard imperials, and they’re combing the grounds for me right now. With dogs. Eventually, they’ll find me. They always do. And then they’ll force me offa strike and back into work – making me sweep the floor of the courthouse, wash the chalkboard, rehearse having the black uniforms kick the shit out of me. They’ll do anything to keep me from being on strike. Before you boys yanked me outta that tent, I’d been having some of the best strike action I’ve had in a good long while,’ he said, gesturing at the tent. ‘I should be able to get in a few more quality hours before they find me again.’

Head drew back the flap for Dogg to rejoin the strike that we had interrupted. He took a final drag on his cigarette, and started crawling toward the entrance. ‘goddammit...’ he muttered to himself several times as he crawled toward the tent entrance.

‘Hey Dogg, why do you curse so much?’ Head asked. ‘You give polite people an excuse to ignore you, scattering all those gratuitous curses all over the page.’

‘The tongue is like the tiny little rudder of a large ship, and I can sail it wherever I damn well please.’ Dogg responded. ‘And polite people? They can dance around in their polite little dream worlds and go fuck themselves. My story’s not polite. You think the goddamn-mother-of-all-violent-wars is polite? You think that dirty stinking shiner under your friend’s bandages is polite? Where you sail is no business of mine, and where I sail is no business of yours. But I’ll tell you boys one thing. If you seek, then you’ll find.’

Just before he got to the tent entrance, he turned to look at both of us, and winked, ‘Boys, before I go, I’m gonna leave you with one more piece of advice. If your right eye causes you to conformicate, then pluck it out. If your left foot cause you to conformicate, then cut it off. If you come to a place where you are imprisoned for not conformicating, then shake from your feet the dust of that place, and move on. That is, if you manage to break out of jail.’

He looked in the direction of the courthouse, before disappearing into the tent. He pronounced the only absolution he could muster: ‘Those black uniform bastards.’

As soon as Dogg was all in, Head zipped the tent flap. We heard him shuffling as he made himself comfortable. He yawned, and bid us a final farewell through the closed tent flap, 'don't forget about the incarceration. And don't conformicate.' Then he started snoring. Dogg was out.

## At the foundation of the tower

Head picked up a red and yellow bag, and flung it over his shoulders. Then he picked up a small silver flask, which he placed in his pocket. He turned to me and grinned, 'that's it. You got everything?'

I nodded, 'What now?'

He looked at me, 'Well, I don't know about you, but the only thing I'm missing is some funding.'

'For what?'

'To leave this place. And make my own way. Otherwise how am I gonna do anything?'

I shrugged. The thought hadn't crossed my mind. 'How are we gonna convince anyone to give us funding?'

Head looked at me, 'don't worry, I know just the place. Let's be sure not to forget what Dogg said. Remember the incarcer-nation, whatever it is,' He nodded at me.

I nodded back, 'Lead the way.'

We began what would be our final journey toward the tower – the last time that we'd have to navigate the trail of filthy consumption strewn every which place we planted our feet. 'I hope this is the last time that we have to pick our way through all this crap!' I shouted to Head.

Head shouted back, 'Maybe it's the last time we pick through *this* crap, but don't be fooled. You're surrounded by crap, and you better get used to it. No matter where you go is crap – a trail of empty plastic shells and the inertia of residual consumption. The river that runs through this valley is full of crap. The lakes up in the mountains are full of crap. The soil's brimming with all the crap that's buried in it. Crap that will take millions of years to break into tiny little pieces. And then millions more years to break into even tinier pieces. The water is steeped with crap. Your body is full of the residual traces of the mass produced chemical crap that has soaked through your skin and into your food. Even if you go to outer space, you'll find that our entire planet is shrouded in a diffuse halo of orbiting crap. You have to get *way* out of here if you want to avoid crap – out to where there's no oxygen so you can't even breathe. Cause if there were oxygen and you could breathe – or if you were even remotely close to some oxygen – then I can guarantee you – you'd find plenty of crap.'

'We're doomed, aren't we?' was all I could manage to say.

Head shot back, 'Of course we're doomed, but when weren't we doomed? Ever since we've been, we've been doomed. That's the state of the incarcer-nation. I can't remember a time when we weren't doomed. Can you?'

'No, not really,' I shook my head. 'Even the bum called god told me that way back when he came down here, he got doomed in a hurry.'

'Exactly. Even him.'

We carried on, picking our way through the filth. We arrived at the courthouse door that we'd entered earlier for the career event, but Head motioned for me to follow him to part of the courthouse that I hadn't yet been.

We turned a corner, and it got chaotic in a hurry. People were *everywhere* – busy like ants at high noon. They were erratically and purposefully going in every direction simultaneously – pushing wheelbarrows. Full of all kinds of things. Wheelbarrows full of gold, wheelbarrows full of bricks, wheelbarrows full of jewels, wheelbarrows full of books, wheelbarrows full of information, wheelbarrows full of electronics, wheelbarrows full of armour, wheelbarrows full of guns, wheelbarrows full of hand grenades, wheelbarrows full of intelligence, wheelbarrows full of clothes, wheelbarrows full of water, wheelbarrows full of electricity, wheelbarrows full of oil, wheelbarrows full of glass, wheelbarrows full of pipes and wires, wheelbarrows full of watermelons, wheelbarrows full of chickens, wheelbarrows full of grapes, wheelbarrows full of fish, wheelbarrows full of bread, wheelbarrows full of cheese, wheelbarrows full of rice, wheelbarrows full of medicines, wheelbarrows full of earth, wheelbarrows full of stone, wheelbarrows full of silver trinkets, wheelbarrows full of wine, wheelbarrows full of bread, wheelbarrows full of talismans, wheelbarrows full of musical instruments, wheelbarrows full of alcohol, wheelbarrows full of wheelbarrows. One guy was pushing a wheelbarrow full of children, another had a wheelbarrow of mortgage assets, someone else had a wheelbarrow full of confidence, another guy had a wheelbarrow full of loans, one guy had an empty wheelbarrow with a sign in it that said 'book learnin', and a few people had wheelbarrows of stocks, bonds, and cash.

Stopping and starting, we made our way through the erratically simultaneous maze of chaotic wheelbarrows going every which way. I looked toward the porch where we were heading. A lady on the porch was yelling through an open window at somebody inside the courthouse. It was difficult to make out what she was saying – something about a spoiled wheelbarrow of inspiration. As soon as we arrived at the porch, she stopped yelling, and she greeted us. She was heavy, and had a face so hardened by the weather that it threatened to chisel us if we messed around.

'Can I help you boys?' she asked.

I looked up at her. I looked over at Head. I didn't know what to say.

She was waiting, and the ambience was thickening like beaten egg whites.

Finally Head blurted out, 'I heard this place gives funding to people who need it.'

'Need it for what?' she asked.

Head responded straightaway, 'to do stuff. Like everybody else.'

She looked over at Head, and muttered, 'I've heard that one before.'

Head nodded back, and pulled an exaggerated smile that showed all of his teeth. Then she pulled what looked like a banana out of her pocket. She turned aside with it held to her ear, and we heard her muttering to somebody. All we could make out was intermittent fragments of what she was speaking. Behind a window which looked out onto the porch, I could see a man speaking into a 1920s style phone, grimacing.

He was waving his free arm around emphatically, and we heard the woman on the porch say, 'No...no... it's like I said.... just turned up... no wheelbarrows... one with

his head wrapped up like a ghost.’ I could see him through the window as he hung up his phone. She put her banana back in her pocket.

‘Gentlemen, please proceed,’ she said as she held the door open for us. As we walked through, she said, ‘First door on the left. Can’t miss it. No need to knock. Just go on in.’

The man inside was standing behind his desk when we walked in, and he greeted us with a handshake. ‘Gentlemen, gentlemen... please have a seat... right here in these plush chairs.’ We sat down. He was grinning from ear to ear. Just at the moment that we thought he was going to sit down with us, he didn’t. ‘Gentlemen, can I offer you something?’ We looked back at him blankly, relaxing our aching backs into the comfortable plush chairs, ‘Whiskey? Brandy? Tea? Coffee?’

‘Brandy for me’ I said.

‘Make it two,’ Head said, and then changed his mind. He pulled his flask out of his pocket, unscrewed the lid, and said, ‘Actually, why don’t you fill this thing up for me.’

The guy behind the desk grinned a grin that could have crucified Christ and melted Mary Magdalene at the same time. He took Head’s flask, pulled a crystal bottle down from a glass shelf, took out the cork, and started filling up the flask along with two emblazoned glasses. ‘Gentlemen, have we got some deals for you,’ he said as he poured the two glasses. He handed one to me, handed the flask to Head, sat down, folded his hands, pulled out a little bit of snuff, inhaled, and looked at us, ‘Now what is it exactly that you’re after?’

I looked at him quizzically, ‘what do you mean, what are *we* after? You said that you have a deal for us. Shouldn’t *we* be asking you what you have for *us*?’

‘I did.’ He winked and smiled that smile again. ‘So what’ll it be?’

I was confused as hell, but Head remained cool, and said, ‘We heard that we can get some funding in here.’

‘Funding, eh? That’s what you’re after? Well, have I got a deal for you. I’ll tell you what I’ll do,’ he said, winking and sipping his emblazoned glass of brandy, ‘I’ll give you a wheelbarrow full cash right now, and then I’ll let you keep it for awhile before I make you give it back to me. And you don’t have to give it back all at once.’ Head and I looked at each other, and he remarked, ‘See? You like that, don’t you? How’s that sound for a deal? Better than you expected, huh?’

Head looked back at him. ‘We don’t want a wheelbarrow of cash. We want a wheelbarrow full of something else, like chickens or apples or metal. Or coffee.’

He looked us up and down, ‘Gentlemen, gentlemen, a wheelbarrow of chickens? Are you sure? They shit *everywhere*.’

‘Yes, we’re sure,’ Head stated. I hastily agreed.

‘And why exactly do you want a wheelbarrow full of chickens?’

‘Well, chickens seem like they might be a good means to the end that both of us are eventually looking for, which is a wheelbarrow full of experience.’

The man looked at Head expectantly, like he was waiting for an answer he didn’t receive. Head continued, ‘but you guys don’t have wheelbarrows of experience, do you?’

The man looked at us with one eyebrow up, and said, ‘No. No, we don’t. You’re absolutely correct. We have wheelbarrows with almost anything imaginable, but the problem with a wheelbarrow of experience is storage. It’s too difficult to keep for any length of time, it spoils quickly, and sometimes we’ve had to initiate proceedings in the courthouse just to convince people that we even gave them a wheelbarrow of experience in the first place. I can’t offer you boys experience, but I’ll tell you what I *can* do,’ he winked at us. He picked up the receiver of his phone, dialled a number, and this is what we heard:

‘Hi, how *you* doing?’

This is you know who...

Yep.

...Looking for you know what...

Yes, well. Thank you...

And you?...

Right, well I have two in my office...

The ones without a wheelbarrow...

If you could, yes...

No, just the usual will be fine...

(waiting around)...

(waiting around more)...

Chickens? Experience?...

Yes, I’m sure...

The exchange rates *have* been volatile, I know...

No, I don’t know what they are now...

Oh really? You’re sure...

OK, don’t worry, we’ll work out something...

Cheers.’

He hung up the phone. ‘Gentlemen, the head of accounts tells me that you aren’t reliable enough for us to give you chickens. Chickens are a lot of work. They run off, they wake you up early in the morning, and they shit everywhere. In fact, you boys don’t qualify for much – all that you qualify for is a wheelbarrow of cash.’

Head scowled, ‘Cash? What the hell are we going to do with a wheelbarrow full of cash?’

‘Well, all sorts of things. You could put it in a cash repository and let it grow slightly before you start giving it back to me. Or else you could go and exchange it in places where people believe that it’s worth something. I think that you’ll find there’s plenty of places like that – you might even be able to acquire those chickens you’re after. Plenty of places, and I’ll tell you what, I’ll tell you what: do you know why it’s so popular?’

We both shook our heads no.

‘Because you can walk around and go to a lot more places with cash than you could if you only dealt in chickens or coffee or ... or... – what was the other thing you had mentioned?’

‘Apples. And metal.’

‘Yes that’s right, apples or metal. Well, let me tell you, cash is *so* much more convenient. In fact, it’s *so* convenient, I just had to remind myself that I’m in the middle of trying to convince you to take it.’

I chimed in, ‘It might be convenient, but it’s just pieces of paper with stuff written on it. Could we *at least* get a bunch of coins to go with the cash?’ I looked over at Head, ‘doesn’t cash have something about trusting in god written on it? He ended up doomed.’

Head nodded at me, and the guy behind the desk began again, ‘Well, coins are essentially metal. And I already told you that your reliability score isn’t high enough to qualify for metal. Now, you boys are correct that cash *isn’t* anything – just pieces of paper with stuff written on it, but if you look around at the number of people that behave like it’s a lot more important than paper with stuff written on it, maybe you’ll change your mind about ways that you can make *it* work for *you*. Did you boys see all those people walking around with wheelbarrows of all kinds of stuff when you came in here? What if I told you that the wheelbarrow full of cash, which we’re prepared to give you, is worth as much as the contents of all those wheelbarrows *combined*?’

Head spoke for both of us, ‘we’d tell you that you were nuts.’

The man behind the desk paused, nodding to emphasize his point. His hands were folded, he shrugged, and then began again, ‘Well, you’d be wrong. And to answer your earlier question – yes, cash does have something written about god on it, and that’s no coincidence. The way that god works has a lot in common with the way that cash works. The difference is that god is doomed, no matter what happens to cash.’

Head was sceptical, and it showed, ‘Since when is a wheelbarrow full of cash worth as much as all the wheelbarrows of all the other stuff?’ he asked.

‘Since it became so popular,’ the man said. ‘Look here, boys, we can’t give you chickens. Or anything else for that matter – because your reliability index tells us not to have the confidence that you won’t ruin them. Imagine if you’re walking along after it has just rained, the grass is slippery, and you’re tired. Your foot slips so you spill all the chickens into a ditch full of mud. Or imagine if we gave you a wheelbarrow full of anything else, anything else – I don’t know... say a wheelbarrow of hand grenades – and then you went and left them out overnight uncovered in the rain? They’d be ruined. Or imagine if we gave you a wheelbarrow full of metal coins, and you went and buried them in the ground and then forgot where you put them?’

He looked at us both directly, ‘All you qualify for is cash. If you *can* manage cash, then we’ll consider giving you other things besides paper. But I don’t think that you boys should be so critical of cash – cause based on what you told me, you want to exchange your cash for some experience, right?’ He smiled at us and continued, ‘well, I think that you’re going to find carting around a wheelbarrow of chickens or metal to be pretty heavy. You’re going to struggle exchanging them for anything beyond the annoyance of carting around the damn wheelbarrow. Cash is so light, and so dead, that it doesn’t matter if you spill it in a ditch. It doesn’t matter if you leave it in the rain. Hell, if you want, you can even throw it all in a sack and ditch the wheelbarrow

– and then you can go on your merry way to find some experience.’ He paused and reconsidered what he had just told us, ‘where you’ll put the experience, having ditched the wheelbarrow, that might be a problem... and of course you’ll owe me for the wheelbarrow...’ He looked Head in the face, and then said, ‘You lads look like you’d be clever to enough to figure out somewhere to store all that experience.’

He was still looking us over, ‘So then, cash it’ll be?’

We both nodded, resigned to our reliability scores. Head screwed up the top of his flask, the guy dialled a number up on the phone, and we heard him say, ‘They’ll take the cash.’ He hung up.

‘Gentlemen, if you wouldn’t mind following me. We’ll go and get your cash.’

He pulled a key out his pocket, opened up one of the drawers in his desk, and pulled out another key. He used it to unlock a safe that was underneath the alcohol cabinet from which he had fetched our drinks earlier. He fiddled with a combination lock on the door of the safe, and then proceeded to pull yet another key out. He went over to a door behind his seat, and unlocked it with the key from the safe. He stepped inside a small chamber and bent down. He lifted up a mat, and picked up another key, which he used to unlock the same sort of combination safe that we had just seen him fiddle with. He pulled another key out of the safe, and turned to us. We were confused as hell.

‘Gentlemen, come along.’ We stepped into the chamber that he had just unlocked, and watched as he unlocked a large metal door that had a serious looking steering wheel sort of thing attached to it instead of a knob. He was barely strong enough to push the door open by himself. He had to stop and loosen his tie, because he was breaking a sweat. We helped him push it open. ‘Thank you, kind sirs,’ he said. The door opened, and we followed him down a dark corridor, around a corner, and down a set of stairs into a large dark room. ‘Wait here,’ he told us. Soon, the place was illuminated by a lonely incandescent bulb.

The light he’d just lit only hinted at how vast the space was that we were in. It wasn’t damp, and it wasn’t cold, and it wasn’t empty. It was a cash storage facility. The temperature and humidity were actually quite comfortable. We were standing with our backs to the stairs we’d just descended. With the light on, we could see that we’d landed in the center of a space so large we didn’t have the foggiest idea where it ended. Between where we were standing and where the light faded into darkness, we could make out nothing more than silent stacks of paper cash, and plenty of wheelbarrows, neatly arranged in lines like at a car dealership. They were all full of the stuff. Nothing more, and nothing less.

He said to us, ‘feel free to choose whichever wheelbarrow you like. The most popular color is red. You know what they say: So much depends on a red wheelbarrow.’

‘Why red?’ I asked.

‘Why not?’ he answered.

Head wandered off to look for a wheelbarrow. ‘I’ll be back soon,’ he said. I stood there with my hands in my pockets for a good long while.

Eventually, I turned and looked over at the guy, ‘so where’d you *get* all this cash?’

The guy looked down, silent for awhile. It looked like his eyes were moistening a little bit, and he was fiddling with a ring on his finger. Some sort of nostalgia was

brewing. He cleared his throat, wiped his eyes with the cuff of his jacket sleeve, and began softly, ‘You know, we get a lot like you in here – folks who turn their noses up at the prospect of a pile of cold, hard, precious cash... I never understand you people. Personally, cash and I go way back. Way back...’

A comforting smile was breaking across the lines of his face. He murmured and nodded again, ‘cash and I go *way* back...’ He pulled out a handkerchief, dabbed his eyes, and said to me softly, ‘I’ve been a cashaholic for about 30 years now, starting from when I was a teenager. Even back then, all I could think about was cash, and in all these years, it hasn’t shown any signs of letting up. I’m addicted, I know. I’ve been in and out of cash-abuse support groups for the last 15 years. I just can’t seem to help myself. I’ve got enormous buildings full of nothing but cash. In fact, that’s been my biggest contribution to this town: I figured out how to build a skyscraper out of cash. No need for foundations made of metal I-beams or concrete. Most people walk through town, they see buildings. I walk through town, I don’t see buildings. I don’t see skyscrapers. I see metal and bricks dangling from a rock solid foundation of cash.’

I had no idea what the hell he was talking about, but Head was nowhere in sight, so I had nothing to do but carry on chatting, ‘How do you build something like that?’

He stopped dabbing his face with the handkerchief, delighted by my curiosity: ‘Well, I’m glad to see that *somebody*’s interested. The first thing that we do is make a huge rectangular stack of cash. Then we use a skyscraper sized crane to hoist a very heavy roof on top of the stack. This compresses it – till it becomes rock hard. As soon as we’re sure that the stack is hard enough so that it won’t shift very much, we hang the walls and offices from the mounted roof. It’s a very fast way of building a building.’

‘Offices?’

‘Yes, offices,’ he responded matter-of-factly. ‘They’re nice, because then we can *use* the structure for something. Otherwise it’s just an enormous monument to cash. Beautiful to behold, but not good for much else. And not only do the offices make the skyscraper functional – they also insulate the cash on all sides, and keep it dry so that it doesn’t go moldy and compromise the structural integrity of the skyscraper.’

‘What do the people in the offices do?’

He chuckled to himself, ‘Well, it’s funny you ask. Most of ‘em – their job is to make important decisions based on the stability of cash.’

‘What if cash isn’t as stable as they think it is?’

‘Well, if it weren’t as stable as they thought, then they wouldn’t be suspended in an office that’s hung from a stack of it, would they?’ he responded, clearly satisfied by this irrefutable logic.

‘So, these skyscrapers must be pretty sturdy, huh?’

‘As stable as cash. Which is pretty stable. Recently we’ve started experimenting with checks, although we’re having trouble convincing some of our older, stodgier engineers that you can use anything but cash for the foundation of a skyscraper. They get very worked up and worried when they hear all these so-called experts fumbling around talking about a cashless society.’ He’d made it a point to melodramatically emphasize *cashless*, and continued, ‘I always have to reassure them that there’s nothing to worry about. The only symbols that anybody – I don’t care how goddamn important they are – can use to build buildings, are material ones. Good luck trying to

build a building out of an immaterial symbol... unless you want an immaterial building. Like they sometimes say about the church.' He chuckled, rolling his eyes at me.

'What is it about cash that you like so much?'

He thought for a moment, 'It's the easiest thing to hoard. If I tried it with something else, like chickens, do you know how much space I would need to store it all? It would be impossible for me to store as much in chickens as I have in cash. You have any idea how many skyscrapers I'd need to fill up? Lots and lots. And unless the building was also a freezer, everything would end up stinking of chicken carcasses and chicken shit. The city planners would never go for it. And another thing – you wouldn't be able to drape offices from a 200 meter-high stack of compressed chickens. Even the thought is disgusting. Nothing quite like cold hard cash for building a building.'

'So where do you get all the cash from?'

'The imperial democracy prints it up and gives it to me. My job is to make it grow. That's why it's in my interest to fill skyscrapers with it. That way, when they ask me how much their cash investment has grown, I can point to the skyscrapers, the offices full of people making decisions about cash, and say to them 'You see? You see how much your investment has grown? So much that the people at the top of that skyscraper would be hard pressed to tell the difference between you and an ant. Now that's an investment worth protecting. It convinces 'em every time,' he chuckled.

'Don't the imperials ever want their cash back?'

'Sometimes. If they do, I just give them a key to some door in the skyscraper that opens onto the stack of cash. "Feel free to open the door and pull out as much of it as you can manage," I say.'

'Well, won't that make your building fall over?' I asked.

'That could never happen,' he reassured me. 'First of all, anyone so desperate for cash as to pull down indispensable infrastructure like a skyscraper would probably be carted away to a mental institution first. And second, it's near impossible to slip a few bills from the stack, because of how tightly it's packed down. Even if they do manage to pry something out, by the time they get it, it's usually ripped beyond recognition and totally useless, so they don't even bother.' He paused and grinned at me, 'Which means that it remains the holdings of yours truly.'

'Yeah, but what good is it if you can't get it out either?'

'It doesn't matter whether or not I can get to it – so long as the imperials think that it's propping up important things, then it's real easy for me to convince them to print up more, and give it to *me!*' he shouted, flinging up his hands in hollow glee.

My scepticism must have been tangible, because when he looked at me, his expression immediately changed, like a child caught in a lie. He cast his eyes down at the floor. He spoke softly, shaking his head, 'Now you understand the extent of my addiction.'

I felt bad that this entire conversation had more or less finished right where it started: the fact that he was a self-confessed cashaholic.

Still there was no sign of Head, lost in the stacks of cash. 'How big is this room?'

‘It’s massive. It has to be. It’s our cash warehouse. It’s where we keep cash reserves printed out by the imperial democracy.’

He leant in to me, ‘You know, I’ll let you in on a little secret.’ He gestured for me to come closer.

I leaned my neck and head forward, and he was whispering, ‘Not many know this, but the tower coming out the top of the courthouse is hung from a cylindrical stack of compressed cash. It’s among our most advanced projects to date. Right over there near where your friend disappeared off to,’ he pointed, ‘you can see the base of the stack from which the tower is hung.’

My eyes widened, ‘The foundation of the tower is in this room?’

He nodded at me silently. ‘The tower is hung from cash like the skyscrapers?’ He continued nodding. ‘So we’re underneath the courthouse right now...’ he was still nodding. ‘Is that foundation stable?’ I asked.

‘As stable as cash,’ he whispered, ‘and you know how stable that is,’ he winked.

I opened my mouth to make more sounds, but he cut me off: ‘ssshhhhhhh. Sshhh.’

But I couldn’t resist one last question, ‘So do you know – is there anyone up in that tower?’

Head was approaching, carefully pushing a green wheelbarrow filled with rolls of cash. The guy took a step back from me, briskly brushed the front of his suit with his hands, and pretended like we hadn’t just been speaking in hushed voices. He turned to Head, ‘so I see you’ve chosen a wheelbarrow. A green one. My personal favorite.’

He produced some papers from his back pocket and stuck them under the noses of myself and Head, ‘Now, gentlemen, if I can just get you to sign these, then you can be on your way, and I can be on mine.’

## Let's just call it an escape

The sun was going down, and we found ourselves back on the porch with a wheelbarrow of cash. The woman that had been on the porch when we had first shown up was nowhere to be seen. The odd individual frantically scurrying past with a wheelbarrow as the shadows were lengthening was all that remained of the chaotic scene that we had negotiated when we showed up.

Head rolled the wheelbarrow down the porch steps. I followed behind him. He was paying close attention as the wheelbarrow of cash bumped bumped bumped down down down. The sky was a vibrant orange, and the air was thick with urgency.

Behind us, the man that had arranged our cash was standing in front of his door with one hand in his pocket. He'd lit a cigarette, and shouted at us, 'you boys better go and exchange that cash for some education before you go and look for experience! That'll help you to hasten the day when you return to me more than what's rightfully mine...' Head carried on pushing the wheelbarrow, not looking back – mechanical, careful, and no doubt appreciating how light cash is compared to other stuff. I looked back. The guy was still standing there, and he shouted for the last time, 'and don't you boys forget! If you don't bring me back more than what I've given you, your signatures on these papers here gives me permission to make things very unpleasant for you!'

We continued on silently, like monks transporting a wheelbarrow of holy notes.

I followed Head, not knowing where he was leading. He took a corner around the courthouse, and then another, and I saw that we were heading for a small concrete building located inside the fence, not far from where I had first come in, when I was beaten by fake plastic guns.

Head parked the wheelbarrow outside the building, and then said to me, 'after you.'

I looked at him blankly, 'What?'

He pointed at the sign on the door to the place, which read: 'One at a time'

'Oh, me first?'

'Sure.'

'I don't even know what I have to *do* in there.'

'This is where we have to ask them to open the gate in the fence to let us out. You gotta go in there and tell them you're here to go.'

I couldn't hide my disbelief: 'we already had to ask them to let us *in*. Now we have to do the same thing to get *out*?'

He nodded, 'I told you it's hard to get out of this place. All bets are still off that we make it.'

I opened the door he'd pointed at, and stepped inside a small room. There were two sofas lining the walls, and a small coffee table with nothing on it. Opposite one of the sofas was a woman sitting on a stool behind a ticket window with her head down. She didn't give any indication of having noted my entrance. I knocked hesitantly on the

window. No response. I knocked slightly harder. No movement, no response. I knocked LOUD. She shuffled slightly. Wondering why so many of the people that I had run across so far in this whole goddamn compound seemed so lethargic, I was fed up. I lodged as much of my arm as I could through the small opening at the base of the window, grabbed one of her hands, and shook it. At the same time, I knocked LOUD, AGAIN, on the window. That finally woke her up. She came to life, and pulled her hand away. She adjusted the glasses on her face.

The walls behind her were stained from a yellow that had hung in the air for a long time. She stared at me like she had never seen a human in here before, and eventually managed a stunned ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m here to go,’ I recited what Head had told me.

She raised her eyebrows, wiped some sleep from one of her eyes, and said, ‘OK.’ She was probably thirty or so with a pleasant demeanor and an attentive shock of red hair that should have made her look enthusiastic. She was wearing a pin that read, ‘Going Somewhere?’ She got up from her stool, and bent over a file cabinet. She eventually found what she was looking for, pulled it out, and sat back down in her chair, looking intermittently at me and the files and then me and the files, staring at me like a specimen through a looking glass.

‘I’m going to have to ask you to fill out some forms.’ She passed a stack of papers through the hole at the bottom of her window along with a pen.

I took them, and sat down on one of the sofas.

She watched me for awhile like I was a zoo animal, and then went back to sleeping.

I began scanning the forms. The first page was this:

### *Leaver’s Document*

#### *To the Prospective Leaver:*

*We hope that you have enjoyed your stay within the secure confines of the impenetrable imperial barrier and its state-of-the-art democratic tower, where you are protected from everything that’s not inside. Whoever is up in the tower can see right through everything inside this compound.*

*Before you leave, we would like to warn you that there’s hollow people walking around outside these walls, and except for maybe some straw, they don’t have an ounce of anything inside their undead heads. They look like people and they are easily mistaken for humans, but they lack basic human qualities like spirit, values, and conscience. Not like the people in here. We do our best to see through them, but we can’t. Now, you might be forgiven for thinking this means that they’re opaque, but that is impossible. It is impossible because if they were opaque, then we wouldn’t be able to see through them, and we have already told you that we can see through everything. We don’t need to see through much of them, because we see through enough to see that they have something to hide. If they didn’t have something to hide, then they would come inside this safe compound, where the gaze of our tower can penetrate everything. It’s lucky that we’re able to see through everything, because it*

*helps us to help you define the differences between you and them, and helps us give you reasons to be suspicious.*

*You have likely received this form because you are here to go. You really ought to appreciate the extent to which we have your interests and security in mind. Before you attempt to leave, we'd like to ask you a few questions about the time you spent within these reassuring walls, in the transparent compound we have created. Your answers will help us to create a more transparent and honest compound with nothing to hide. We know that you appreciate how honest we are with you and how we don't hide anything from you.*

The second page was this:

*1) When you looked out at the horizon, what did you see?*

- a) An impenetrable wall keeping you safely inside*
- b) An unbreakable barrier keeping the undesirables out*
- c) Who cares?*

*(If your answer to the above question was c, skip to question 4)*

*2) What would make you feel the most comfortable?*

- a) Walls/barrier moved closer in*
- b) Walls/barrier moved back farther*
- c) Walls/barrier kept at the same distance*
- d) Clean all the junk that gets trapped in the walls/barrier*

*3) Has you or anyone that you know ever considered objecting to the walls/barrier that has shielded and protected you for the duration of your stay?*

*4) Please describe the circumstances of your initial arrival within these boundaries.*

*5) If any of your relatives were also located within this safe compound at one point, please provide their names, and the duration of their residence.*

*6) Have you ever been apprehended, threatened, or glared at by the black uniforms that protect these grounds? If yes, then please provide the dates on the which the encounters occurred, and a brief description*

*7) Have you ever been outside of these walls?*

*8) If your answer to the above question was yes, then please list the dates for each departure from these safe confines. State what business you were up to when you weren't inside.*

*9) Please provide us with evidence of how much you're worth.*

There were more questions, but I stopped reading. It was boring as hell, and not worth repeating. I looked over at the woman behind the desk. She was fast asleep. I walked outside. Head was out there, upside down, facing toward the setting sun. 'You finished in there?' he said when he saw me.

‘I had to get outta there. It was too goddamn boring...This form... I don’t know how the hell to answer all these questions.’

‘What kind of stuff do they ask?’

I browsed the questions again, and muttered, ‘Lots of stuff. For example, there’s one where they ask for evidence of how much we’re worth.’

‘We got a wheelbarrow of cash!’ Head shouted. ‘Just draw a little picture of it. I’d even be happy to pose for you like this if you want to wheel it over by me.’

I was disgusted with Head’s happy-go-lucky attitude, ‘Listen, there’s other questions for which a stupid picture won’t do, like how did I get in here?’

Head shot back, ‘you know how you got in here, don’t you? You came in via the front entrance.’

‘goddammit, Head, I got in here using identity fraud,’ I said caustically, and then continued, ‘I can’t just mark that down.’ Eventually, I abruptly said, ‘Head, I would really appreciate it if you could have a look at this thing.’

‘It’s hard for me to read when I’m in this position,’ he said.

‘How long are you going to be like that?’

‘Why don’t you read it to me?’

I read the form and the questions to Head, and he started laughing, his chest heaving with enough laughter to make his feet start wavering.

‘What’s so funny?’ I said, making no attempt to hide my contempt at our circumstances. ‘This is serious shit. We’re never gonna get out of here, no matter how many wheelbarrows of cash we got.’

Head started to lower his feet. He was still chuckling to himself. When he righted himself, he looked at me. ‘What are you afraid of?’ he asked.

‘The imperial democracy sees through everything. How the hell am I – are we – going to get out of here?’

He responded calmly, ‘You worried about that penetrating gaze from the tower, huh?’

I nodded. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Like any gaze, it can’t tell if it’s penetrating a surface or being reflected by it.’ I wrinkled my nose and narrowed my eyes with no idea what the hell he was talking about, infuriated by his lack of urgency.

He went on, grinning, ‘Leaving aside issues of whoever might not be up in that tower, let’s talk about *seeing through*... For them to be able to *see through* everything like they claim to do, they need a surface or some *thing* to see through. Otherwise, how could they *see through*, right?’

I nodded.

Head carried on, ‘and let’s say that they can perfectly *see through* everything. In that case, it’s like there’s nothing to *see through*, right – cause they can see through it like it’s not even there.’ I nodded again, and he carried on, ‘But if there’s *nothing* to *see through*, it becomes real difficult to talk about *seeing through*, right?’ I nodded again.

‘You see where I’m going with this?’ he asked.

I shook my head no.

‘Don’t worry about it. It’s just like everything up here.’ he said flatly. ‘Transparency relies on raising the spectre of opacity. And vice versa. Otherwise neither means anything.’

He was clearly smug with his little explanation of the mechanics of transparency. I was still holding the forms in my hand, ‘Ok, ok, very nice little syllogism you just worked out there, but that doesn’t tell me what to write on this damn form.’

He ignored me, and I was losing patience, so I shouted, ‘the form! What do I put on the goddamn form!’

He didn’t immediately respond, and my frustration was mounting. Getting dangerous. I was considering introducing him to the fist of a man whose face was touched by the fist of a bum called god.

He spoke softly through his shut-eyed head:

‘...When every possible surface can be seen through like it’s not even there, it gets hard to tell what’s behind what. There’s no reason why an image located on the surface couldn’t be just as sharp as whatever lay behind it. Everything gets real superficial in a hurry.’ He cleared his throat, opened his eyes, and slowly emphasized, ‘A deep looking surface, or a superficial depth can go a long long way... Cause in a world where all the surfaces are windows, the sharpest image is the one that’s not behind glass. Otherwise, you usually have to contend with your own reflection.’

He matter-of-factly turned toward me and then disappeared for a few moments. When he came back, he was holding two brown sacks. He bent down, and began undoing the cords holding each together, muttering, ‘There’s a few different options for how to proceed – either spend a lot of time producing a deceptively elaborate image which the tower’s gaze will think looks deep enough to sit on the surface, or just attempt to annihilate the goddamn gaze altogether.’

He looked at me, winked, and said, ‘I sense that you’re getting antsy, and I left my art supplies in Hermann’s tent, so we’re gonna go for the gaze annihilation option – but don’t get too excited – I’ve seen lots of people get as far as us now, and they didn’t get much further. But what the hell, we might as well try.’

‘What’s your plan?’ I enquired angrily, ‘And why did you bother to have me go in there to get this form if you had another plan all along?’

Head looked at me, ‘If you wouldn’t have gone in there, then you wouldn’t understand what we’re up against, and what we’re about to do next.’

‘So you never had any intention of going in there?’ I said, unable to hide my irritation. This was getting ridiculous.

‘Maybe I would have, if you had come out with a form that said something different than every other time I’ve ever gone in there. But it doesn’t, so we’re taking the SOS – same old shit – approach.’

I rolled my eyes, ‘Well then, is this plan of yours doomed too?’

‘Maybe – although, I’ve never before been able to procure gaze annihilation devices of such high quality.’

‘A gaze annihilation device...’ I repeated. ‘What the hell kinda thing is that to carry around? And where’d you get it from?’

Head had the contents of the bag strewn on the ground – different incompatible looking pieces of crap. ‘The vacuum cleaner guy sells ‘em. The Bentham Buster, he calls it. Proprietary gaze shattering technology. Happy new year,’ he said. He handed me what looked like the back of a picture frame. I turned it around – only to observe my own fractured image, reduced to nothing but disjointed and fractured nonsense. I couldn’t even make out if I was staring back at me.

‘These are just broken mirrors,’ I said.

‘Call ‘em what you want,’ Head responded.

He handed me three more and some cord. ‘The vacuum cleaner guy says these are the only devices he knows that can get you outta here. He says that with these things on, you’ll be so diffracted that you won’t look like anything more than a bunch of distorted and twinkling sparkles.’

Head had assembled two large cardboard boxes. They were big enough to have held refrigerators. ‘You hang the gaze shatterers from the outside, and then you wear one,’ he said pointing at the boxes.

It seemed crazy to me, but I followed him. We silently hung the shattered mirrors from the sides of each box. Before putting the boxes on, Head passed me a small periscope. ‘Pop this out of the top to see where you’re going.’

Silently and carefully, we both put the boxes over our heads, carefully slipping our arms through the pre-cut arm holes. In the dark inside, I heard static, cackling and glitching at me. ‘What the hell is that noise?’ I wondered, before hearing the far away sound of Head through a small radio transmitter in my left ear. Even though we were bumping into each other as we walked along, he sounded a million miles away.

‘Gimme the loud and clear,’ his tinny voice instructed.

I swivelled the periscope popping out the top of my box toward Head, and saw him plodding along beside me, his arms stuck out either side of his box, pushing the wheelbarrow. ‘Loud and clear,’ I said.

Next thing I heard was a curse and crash. I looked through my periscope, but couldn’t see anything, so I said into the receiver, ‘Head, what was that?’

‘I tripped,’ I heard his voice say through the radio in my box, ‘It’s ok.’

As I was trying to see him through my periscope, I tripped on whatever must have taken him down. ‘goddammit!’ I shouted into the receiver as my head banged into the periscope. I heard some mirrors fall off my box.

As I struggled to get up, I tripped on something else. ‘goddammit!’ I shouted into the receiver again. There was no response from Head. His line on the radio had gone dead.

I swivelled my periscope around to find him, but couldn’t see anything, sprawled out as I was in a refrigerator box. The radio was still dead. I was worried about Head. I shouted, hoping that he would hear my voice through the box, ‘Head, where are you?’

Then I felt a jolt, like somebody was kicking my box. ‘Oh, shit,’ I thought. Whoever was out there kicked it a few more times. ‘Get the hell out of that thing.’ I heard a voice outside say.

I slowly crawled out and looked up. It was Head, ‘in theory, these damn things always seem like a good idea, but you always end up taking a spill. I’m going like this,’ he

announced. ‘The sun’s almost down so they’re useless anyway. There’ll be no light to scatter or images to shatter. Help me put the cash back in the wheelbarrow. It all fell out when I tripped.’

We cleaned it up and carried on, heading for the front gate where I had first come in.

We were walking quickly, moving quietly, and Head’s face was set toward the path in front of him. ‘We must be resolute,’ he said. ‘Otherwise we’ll just keep going round and round and round. And that’s nowhere to end up.’

‘Why, what’s the problem? What’s so hard about getting out of here?’ I asked, still not sure about this place.

‘There’s no problem,’ Head said to me. ‘But I’ve been here lots of times before, and usually, I end up falling asleep or getting dizzy or something, and end up staying for a good long while more. And you can bet that I’m not the only one it’s happened to.’

‘What in god’s name is so difficult about getting out of this damn place?’ I exclaimed, and continued. ‘I can’t for the life of me understand how it could be so hard! Fuck, I can’t even understand why everyone’s in here to begin with! Nobody seems to have the foggiest idea! And they all seem so tired!’

The whole mass of disorienting experiences I’d had up here so far – old Hermann, the tower, the career event, the black uniforms, Dogg, the vacuum cleaner man, the wheelbarrows, the customs office – confused the hell outta me.

‘You get real uncomfortable when you can’t underpin everything with a logic,’ Head said drowsily. ‘Can you ever just coast along with the ebb and flow of senseless progression? The logic that begins with unexplained causes? The goddamn sequence that sprouts from inscrutable seeds? The fact that here we are – you and me – inaugurated into being without our express written consent, arisen from a long chain of ancestors that stuck their genitals together, and that’s about all we know?’

Head carried on, ‘you know, you’re gonna drive yourself nuts. I’ve known guys like you. And every one of ‘em went crazy cause they looked for answers for everything – and tried to graph it. Emotion as a function of time, satisfaction as a function of service, thinking as a function of pleasure, love as function of romance, religiosity versus economic status, sickness as a function of money, hatred as a function of anger, life as a function of vitality, error as a function of confidence. You name it, these guys probably graphed it. Graphed the hell out of it in fact. These guys had so many graphs it made my head spin – scatter plots, pie charts, histograms, space curves, venn diagrams, bar graphs, line graphs, spline curves, contour plots, graphs on the complex plane, vector field diagrams, disconnectivity graphs, correlation diagrams, polar plots. They had graphs in two dimensions, three dimensions, sometimes even four dimensions.’

Head paused, caught his breath, and continued. ‘And you know what? They cracked. All of ‘em. Some new fancy graph drove ‘em to the brink. One of ‘em was trying to plot graphical accuracy as a function of both categorical clarity *and* logical linearity. Or something like that. Whatever it was, I don’t remember exactly, but it confused the hell out of ‘em. That was the last graph they ever made. They can no longer speak in human speech – just unintelligible babble that only they seem to understand, all day long.’

We were standing outside the entrance that I had come in through when I had first arrived. It was barred, and there was no sign of anybody anywhere nearby. Head

gestured for me to follow him, and led me through a small dark path under some trees. The dark silhouette of the outer fence was on our right. We walked along until we arrived at a thick yellow line painted across the ground, doing the best it could to serve in place of the convenient door-sized gap in the fence.

‘I’ve never been this close before,’ Head trailed off.

‘Finally,’ I said, stepping across the yellow line and out of the compound. Once and for all.

Head turned away from the line. He knelt, put his bag on the ground, and removed two bags from it. Then he started cramming as much cash from the wheelbarrow as he could into both bags, stomping it down with his feet to fit it all in. He tossed one of the bags to me across the yellow line, and then picked up the other and placed it on his back. He looked down at the line for a few moments with his feet firmly planted.

His lips were moving quickly. He was either talking to himself or the line. I couldn’t tell, but if it was the line, then the line appeared to have the upper hand.

He turned away from the line, looked over his shoulder at me, and said, ‘It’s been good knowing you, my friend. Such is our unanticipated parting. I’ll see you later. I can’t do it. They’re gonna see me, I know it.’ Then he stepped back into the darkness from which we had just emerged.

This was it. No time to lose. I quietly leapt back inside the compound. Swiftly and silently, I ran up behind him. Then I touched his face with my holy fist before he knew I was there, doing unto him as I had been done unto by god. He collapsed to the ground. The bulk of his fall was broken by his cushy bag of cash.

I grabbed him by the legs, and dragged him across the yellow line, out of the compound. Once and for all.

## The holy trinity

Head murmured to himself as he came to. The shiner on his face was growing as we sat outside the compound on the other side of the yellow line, at the side of a road.

As he gently ran his fingers over his swollen face, he said, 'It's great we're finally outta there, but it's probably best if we pretend it didn't happen that way. A little bit violent for my liking.'

'Fine,' I agreed. I didn't care, and was just happy to have finally made it out.

We sat in silence for awhile longer with the packs of cash strapped to our backs, wondering what came next.

In the distance, we could hear what sounded like an approaching vehicle. As it drew nearer, we saw that a soft light was coming from inside. We could just make out silhouettes of the people inside. Muffled chaos seeped out.

The van came to a smooth halt alongside us. The window rolled down, and a young beauty stuck her head out. 'Whoahhh,' she remarked, 'I haven't seen such a bright set of faces for a good long time. Far out. If you took that bandage off yours,' she said to me, 'it would be bright like his.' The part of her body that we could see through the window wasn't wearing any clothes. Same for the two others in the front cabin with her – an old man and another woman.

'Where you guys going?' she said.

'I'm going down to the water's edge, and then further afield,' I said.

She nodded, and then looked at Head, 'and you?'

Head paused for a second, shifted his pack of cash, thought for a little while, and then said, 'It's unclear.' She smiled at him. He continued, 'I'm getting away from this place, and this guy here's partially responsible for the state of my face,' he said, nodding toward me. Both of his thumbs were cocked forward behind the straps of his backpack of cash.

She gestured at the rear door of the van for us to hop in. Head enthusiastically opened the door and was about to step inside, when I nudged his backpack of cash.

'Do you think this is a good idea?' I whispered, awkward and loud.

Head froze for a moment. He looked at the three of them sat in the front cabin and tossed out a nominally investigative, 'Who are you guys?'

The driver – the male of this trinity – tossed a quick glance at Head, whispered something to the woman that had spoken to us, and she said, 'we're with the media. And even if we weren't, you probably wouldn't know the difference.'

Head shrugged at me, got in, and sat down. I followed.

We started off down the road running outside the compound. As we wound along, the bright headlights of the van illuminated the trees lining the road.

The two women turned back to face us. Head was beaming. The other woman that hadn't yet spoken to us was smaller and feistier than the one that had. She was holding a clipboard and a pen.

The driver again gestured at the first woman, and she said 'Good thing your heads are so easy to see in the dark.' She didn't take her eyes off of Head. His face had grown even puffier, but it didn't seem to hamper a free exchange of lust. She was smirking at him, suggestively raising her eyebrows and batting her eyelids. Her cheeks looked a little bit flushed. Finally, she managed to re-ask the same question she'd just asked us, 'So where you guys heading?'

I was suffocating as the cabin became thicker with lust, and wishing I'd taken the opportunity to clean Head's clock more thoroughly than I had – given him at least as good a number as god had given me.

Head didn't say anything. He just carried on staring at her, scratching himself where the sun don't shine.

I blurted out, 'I'm trying to get down to the water.'

Head eventually gave an indication that he had processed my comment, and gave me a look like he had never seen my face before.

The driver looked at me through the rear-view mirror, gestured to clipboard woman, spoke in her ear, and then she turned around. The driver was still looking at me through the mirror, and she asked, 'Loddy wants to know why you want to get down to the water.'

'Loddy?'

'The driver.'

'Oh, he's called Loddy?'

She nodded.

'I'm trying to find the bum that's responsible for the state of my face,' I said.

She again bent over to the driver and whispered into his ear. It looked like he made some facial gestures at her, and then she turned back to me. 'What happened to your face?'

'Who wants to know? You? Or him?'

'Him,' she clarified.

'Well, I met a bum called god and bought him a beer. As far as I could tell, we had a pleasant conversation. But before he left, I looked down at my watch, and he smashed me in the face. Knocked over what was left of my beer. I'm gonna find him. And show him *my* face,' I finished.

The same thing happened again. The woman bent toward Loddy and whispered something to him. He contorted his face for awhile, and she turned back to me. Before she could say anything, I interrupted her, 'What the hell is going on here?'

'Señor Mala is deaf and dumb,' she announced, letting me reflect on my insolence.

'I am among the few that can understand him. He communicates his questions at me, and then I convey them to you.'

She continued, ‘And he wants me to tell you that if you can already find god without even looking, then you better be careful what might happen if you look too hard.’

I had nothing to say; I was a little bit ashamed at my disrespect for the old deaf mute.

The other girl chimed in, ‘Señor Loddy Mala is the leader of the media, and we’re monks in his travelling media band. You best be careful what you say, and tame your tongue, because he hears through vibrations, smell, taste, and vision – every sense but hearing, which is probably a lot more than *you’d* ever think to use.’

She winked at Head, and he said to her, ‘So, do you girls make media round here often?’

Loddy Mala started giggling. He was looking back and forth through that rearview mirror – Head, me, Head, me, Head, me, Head, me...

The girls were giggling, and I saw Loddy Mala wink at Head. Head smiled back. I shuffled my sack of cash nervously, wondering if this was typical, and wondering why the hell all these media people were naked.

After all the laughing died down, Loddy Mala threw a facial contortion back in our direction, ‘Media make everything,’ clipboard girl translated.

She kissed him on the cheek, and he chuckled like a drunk. ‘Oh Loddy, I love you,’ she crooned, and he started chuckling again. She kissed him again.

‘Why are you guys all naked?’ I said, opening my big mouth. I didn’t actually *know* if they were naked downstairs.

The girls looked at each other and smirked, ‘Loddy Mala’s rules. He says that too many clothes confine the monks underneath. The outside must die so that the inside may live.’

Head smiled, and stretched out his arms along the top of the seat we were sitting on, increasingly appreciating the ride, and placing one of his arms behind me. ‘Can’t argue with that,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Can’t argue with that.’

‘So how long you all been together?’ Head said to the girls.

‘A long time,’ one of them said. ‘Loddy started the whole thing. He invented the language, he germinated the bud, and he manipulates the parts. He is the leader of the media – all the way from the top of the hill where the courthouse sits, down to the sea.

‘Well, *I* never heard of him before,’ Head said. His puffy face was dominated by his grin. His legs were spread wide, one arm was around me, and he was in the mood for chatting. ‘So you’ve told me all about Loddy, but what about you girls? What are your names?’

They were giddy with excitement, ‘Well, I’m Lenka,’ said the one without the clipboard, ‘and I’m Voz,’ said the one with the clipboard.

We sat silent for awhile. Loddy was still looking through the rear-view mirror at both of us. Eventually I asked, ‘What do you guys do up at the old courthouse?’

‘We follow Hermann around,’ clipboard girl responded.

‘Why him?’

‘Well, for starters, he’s renowned. That’s just as good-a reason as any. And second, if we were to cover so-called important things, like the next thing the imperial

democracy does, then the news gets pretty predictable. It's either some new oppression or some new way of polluting. Crazy old Hermann is far more unpredictable; you never know what he's going to do next. In one day, he can cover a more disconnected range of this and that you could ever dream of, from weaving a fence, to pissing on a walnut, to picking his nose, to splashing his face with paint, to dancing around drunk on an idea, to standing still for 8 hours straight, to whatever else pops into his head. There's no master plan, there's no grand narrative. There's so little logic that it's pretty much always a fresh story. With the imperials, it's much more prosaic – same actors, same intention, and the same plot. You can only cover it for so long before you're bored out of your nut.'

'Cover Hermann if you want,' Head said, 'but he's crazy.'

In response, Loddy Mala handed a folded piece of paper to Voz, who handed it to Head. He opened it up, grinned, and then passed it over to me.

I opened it and had a look. This is what it said:

*Loddy Mala Lesson # 1: A Recipe for Doing Stuff*

- 1) *Drop out of a vagina one day, without prior consultation*
- 2) *Get accustomed to waking up and then going to sleep, doing stuff in between.*
- 3) *Carry on with instruction #2. Cultivate awareness that the stuff you do now is related to the stuff you did before and, with any luck, stuff to come in the future.*
- 4) *Go on doing stuff, doing stuff now because you did stuff previously – in a manner that guarantees that you will have more stuff to do tomorrow*
- 5) *Continue as long as possible, till you can't do anymore stuff. If you're lucky, maybe there's no more stuff to do after that. Otherwise refer to the first instruction.*

Before I finished reading, the girl next to Loddy, still making eyes with Head, whose comfort was beginning to calm even my racing mind, started speaking, 'Even though we usually spend most of our time on Hermann, it's not really our job. It's *actually* the black uniforms that pay us to go up to the courthouse. We're supposed to record the tension between the black uniforms and the people in the tents.'

'Why?' I asked her. This question even got Head's attention, who was busy imagining what he couldn't make out behind the seats in front of him. His ears pricked up.

She carried on, 'It's very simple. If there weren't any tension up there, then there'd be no reason for the black uniforms to be up there. So it's their job to *create* some, and they pay us to document it – so that some threshold of tension will be maintained all the time. It works like this: we record it, sell it back to the black uniforms, and then they give it to the imperial bosses when budget review time rolls around. So long we provide enough examples of black uniforms and tent dwellers going head-to-head, or evidence showing that head-to-head is a legitimate *possibility*, then all the black uniforms make it through another pay cycle without getting the sack. They're not very bright, those black uniforms, so they need all the help they can get. If you look at the small print in our contract, our precise role is something like "cultivating ambient dissonance."'

She was silent for a moment, and looked at clipboard girl, clearly unsure if she had accurately nailed down the wording. Clipboard girl nodded her head and corrected her reassuringly, ‘ambient *instability*’. Loddy Mala was beaming at us through the rearview mirror like he understood every word.

The woman continued, ‘so that’s how it goes. We record tension. Two or three examples per budget cycle is usually enough. Occasionally, it’s just too peaceful up there, and we’ll have to tell the black uniforms that we don’t have any material. They’ll actually have to get in there and mix things up – you know, beat someone into a pulp, fire their submachine guns into a crowd, or something like that. Only to prove to their bosses how important their jobs are.’

Even though he’d seen them up at the courthouse everyday, Head evidently never had the media’s purpose up there explained to him in these terms. I could see him digesting the information.

Clipboard woman winked at him, and the other one spoke, ‘A lot more people than just the black uniforms pay us to do this kinda thing. We do it for large groups, small groups, we do it for individuals. We have one guy – a janitor – who hires us to follow him around and film his epic battles against dirt and filth, most of which he makes himself. He’ll go into the toilet, take a big dump, and then stuff the bowl with lotsa toilet paper, till he’s sure it’s clogged. Then, he calls us in, and overflows the thing as soon as the cameras are rolling.’

‘These days it’s all about jobs. People don’t have loyalty to much more than themselves and their next paycheck. We’ve helped out cardiologists who run fast food joints, builders that manage demolition squads, environmentalists that run nuclear power plants, prison managers that moonlight as shoot-em-up script writers, peacekeepers that specialize in the sales of big weapons, elected presidents that fund self-appointed dictators, vacuum cleaner salesmen that run dust production facilities, disaster mitigation companies that specialize in chemical spills, holidaymakers that campaign for less vacation time, psychologists whose therapy consists of elaborate definitions of depression, clergymen that specialize in sinfulness, gays that preach against homosexuality, pornographers that produce clothing lines designed for puritans, socialists posing as CEOs... The list goes on and on and on, everyone towing opposite sides of the same line. It’s the only way to get ahead – the only way to guarantee that you’re sure to keep doing stuff,’ she sighed.

Head and I were silent, and Loddy bent over to the woman again. ‘Loddy wants to know if you guys have problems keeping *your* jobs,’ she said.

I indicated no, imagining they wanted to follow me around with a camera and capture me manufacturing a reason for doing stuff.

Head, on the other hand, was predictably more inquisitive, and it wasn’t clear to me if I had understood the question when I heard his response, ‘Why do you ask? You got an opening for another media guy?’

The girls giggled at each other, and Head laughed at the giggles like they were prearranged.

Loddy bent over again, and clipboard girl said to us, ‘No, but we got an opening for a couple of sacks of cash.’

All the sudden, Loddy was hysterical. I was praying that he'd keep his eyes on the road instead of looking at us through that goddamn rearview mirror all the time, because I didn't know if he could control the van with such fits.

Head laughed. I was baffled whether he'd point out that cash normally flows the other way - employer to employee - but he didn't. Instead, he picked up the sack of cash from between his legs where he had rested it. He unzipped it in a single motion. The cash was packed in so tight that a bunch popped out as soon as it opened, covering our feet. 'I got so much cash,' Head proclaimed, 'it's meaningless! I'm in!'

The girls giggled more; the one with the clipboard threw it in the air in excitement, and it hit me in the forehead. Their giggles grew into hysterics, anticipation, insanity, it wasn't clear what. Then they started doing all kinds of kissing. To each other and to Loddy. He was splitting a gut laughing his deaf and dumb laugh, and the car was swerving all over the road. I hung onto my seat for dear life. Both of the girls leant over the front seats, their naked boobs dangling over the laps of me and Head, as the van bounced along the road. They started kissing him, making a kissing trinity. And all the while this kissing was going on, the girls, Loddy, and Head were tossing handfuls of cash up into the cabin like it was a fresh snow.

One of the girls shouted, 'You're going to get monkied tonight!'

Loddy was still hysterical, and the cabin visibility was significantly reduced from the blizzard of cash. I was clutching on for dear life, and my mind was racing.

Eventually, it settled down a bit, and I blurted out my thoughts, 'What's the other side of the line that *you guys* tow!'

There was no response for a long time, until Loddy leaned over to the girl without the clipboard and contorted his face at her. She looked at me and said:

'As media reveal everything,'

'So media reveal nothing.'

Of course. I should have guessed.

## He's gone

I didn't remember the rest of the journey, but I dreamed hard that night as the van trundled along. And you can bet that I was glad to be dreaming. It made me conveniently oblivious to god-knows-what going on between Head and those three in the front seat.

Head was nowhere near overweight. He was wiry and hard, but in my dream, as he sat next to me, he grew more and more obese. He noticed my shock at his transformation, and he leant over and told me that he was pregnant. I watched him grow more and more swollen with life until he fell asleep. As he was snoring away, lots of flies started to hover around Head's plump uterus. They could smell it – bulging with burgeoning life that was soon to sprout. Impotent me the observer – I was dreaming like I was at a movie. I saw Head fall into a deeper and deeper sleep, and the hovering flies descended on his belly. Slowly, methodically, they devoured everything, finally arriving at the intoxicating kernel of delicate succulent life concealed deep within. At the end of it all, Head's belly was no more than a hollow cavern. The flies were long gone, and his exposed flesh was starting to rot.

Sometime after that I came to, and found myself lying alone in a small square with people passing me by. No trace of Head and Loddy and the crew. I was surrounded on all sides by tall buildings, and the sun wasn't yet high enough in the sky that I could see it. As I was laying on the pavement looking at the buildings, a dog wandered up and started licking my head. Somebody's voice called to the dog. It gave me one more lick before trotting off.

I sat up, and shuffled my bag, which was lying next to me. There was a note underneath it, and this is what it read:

*As I have known you, so I write to you:*

*You will remember when we learned from Dogg of the incarcer-nation. Loddy has spoken of even higher mysteries, one of which is called the re-incarcer-nation, but which still – on some level – pertains to cubicles.*

*Considering the circumstances associated with our departure from the compound, and after diagnosis by the venerable Loddy and his devotees, I recognize that I am lacking in self-discipline.*

*Loddy and his devotees have promised to help me to transcend the bounds of any cubicle – no matter how subtle – through the cultivation of self-discipline. And all that is required is a sack of cash, which I am glad to give up. I no longer care whether it is returned to the man at the base of the tower. If this is a crime, then that is what is required in order to break the condemnation of our incarcer-nation. So be it. I suspect that you are rapidly arriving at a similar conclusion. Criminality will see us both flourishing.*

*You were asleep at the climactic moment when I came to the decision in the wee hours of the morning. This is what I decided:*

*For the next several years, Loddy has convinced me to abandon sleeping in my bed, and sleep sitting upright in a pine cubicle. That is the trunk of the story, and I will not rest until I have sat in that box for a good long while – after which time, my knowledge and understanding of cubicles will be so thorough, I will learn how to dissolve them into light and sparkles and compassion. Through confinement shall I be liberated. Cubicle walls will melt with a blink and a twinkle, and they shall have no dominion over me. Within a cubicle I shall deepen my understanding of how mind and matter create and negate one another, and I shall no longer be slave to either. Hopefully I don't crack up.*

*I will emerge once daily from my cubicle, garbed in Loddy's robes, and chanting alien phrases for long periods at a time until I understand what they mean. I will also participate in things of which I may not speak – only hint at – as I am now. As I said, nothing is too sacred along the path to compassion. Along with Loddy and the girls, I will eventually learn to destroy cubicles everywhere, and strengthen others to do the same.*

*I am sorry that the manner of our departure is abrupt, but you seemed to be dreaming hard, and Loddy remarked that you look like a guy that could use a good dream here and there. We thus decided it was best to leave you to it instead of waking you.*

*Based on what you last mentioned, we have left you in close proximity to the water. While I do not know exactly how you plan to go about your quest, I suspect that your journey is not so different than mine, and probably involves some sort of cubicle.*

*After you had started dreaming in the van, Loddy saw that my clothes were dirty, and told me to remove them. His eyes were radiant, like my face.*

*With Loddy's help I will build an ark, and I hope that one day you will sit in the front seat with me. I laid the foundations yesterday with the removal of my clothes, and Loddy will oversee things long enough until I have sufficient momentum to finish it myself. If you are stuck at the seaside some years from now, and even if you aren't, then you can hitch a ride when I pass by in the ark.*

*Do not worry about me; I will be just as I would have been, but with discipline. That will be the difference. You must remember to be disciplined as you explore the stars.*

*Loddy says that you may communicate with any of us by pretending that he is a thought highway to any of our minds. Just send the thoughts along on their way. You have no excuse for not staying in touch.*

*Head*

*P.S., I took a few handfuls of cash from your sack – Loddy says that it would be prudent to assure that we do not run short too soon, and anyway, it will lighten your load and your stress levels. It will also make the zipper on your backpack easier to do up. You won't have to pack the cash in there so hard anymore.*

*P.S. The girls left you some stuff, which they think that you will find useful.*

*P.S. I'm not sure what this means, and Loddy wont explain further (not even to the girls), but he was emphatic that I tell you this: Nobody turned into anything last night. What you dreamt you saw is a classic representation of nothing, in all its confounded significance.*

I wasn't entirely surprised by this turn of events. Head was charismatic and good looking. His eyes were piercing, and he was analytical and self aware enough to get places – inside a cubicle or inside those girls. He had a more-than-casual interest in the mysteries of the stars and the cosmos, and he was on a high having finally made it out of that compound. Fresh out of that lecture about alienation, career paths, and the re-incarcer-nation, there was no way he was going to sign up to a long stint inside some standard old cubicle.

Who wouldn't want to recruit him for their little group, especially coming with a sack of cash, a radiant face touched by the fist of a man whose face was touched by the fist of a bum called god, and a few more handfuls of cash just for good measure?

All that stuff in his letter about cubicles and compassion? I was unsure how an exceptionally long stint in an exceptionally small box was going to help abolish the sort of boundaries that tend to quench everything. But it's hard to be too disappointed with somebody when they list compassion as a motive, even though it sounded like lotsa weird exotic rituals. Seemed to me Head might get a jumpstart on compassion if he didn't have to wade through all the foreign phrases and the robes on the way. Who knows what he found appealing about it.

Maybe any other path was just too boring to inspire. Maybe he was worried about being taken seriously if anyone, including himself, recognized him too well. If his mother, his brothers, and his old teachers saw him tromping around with Loddy, naked or wearing strange robes, dissolving cubicles with a flick of his wrist, and sleeping in a box, they'd probably just roll their eyes like you do at someone you've known for a long time who started acting weird all the sudden.

The one thing about Head's circumstances that I really envied was that he would have people looking after his shining and swollen face. Unlike myself – attempting a journey across the water, with a head verging on unbearable under that bandage, and starting to strongly suspect that there was an infection brewing. I had to find that bastard god before I ran outta time and my face lost out to the bacteria. It was gonna be one ugly puss-oozing mess when I finally revealed it.

In any case, Head was a hell of a guy, and this story will move on without his company. Maybe he'll come back into it, and maybe he won't. Whatever happens, I hope that he doesn't waste away in that box.

There was a small cloth sack next to where I had picked up the letter – presumably the stuff that the girls had left for me. Inside were a handful of nuts and a blanket. I opened the blanket up to see how large it was. It had thin red and white stripes on it, and clumsy thick blue block lettering that said 'KEEP THE DREAM ALIVE.' I folded it up and tied it around my waist, taking note of a stale breeze that I could tell had been suffocated as it wound its way toward me through a tortuous maze of tall buildings.

I stumbled in the direction from which the breeze seemed to come, and discovered within my pocket a small folded piece of paper.

It was another one from Loddy:

*Loddy Mala Teaching #2: If you can't find god near where he found you, then beware of looking too hard elsewhere. It can be a risky business.*

## Pearls before swine

Wandering toward the breeze led me through empty streets that were little more than narrow canyons lined on both sides by tall skyscrapers – probably supported by enormous stacks of cash – way more than enough to keep a business afloat. Through the windows, I could just make out the tiny silhouettes of office workers – all crammed into far-away cubicles and busy managing cash science for all of us down below: filing tax returns, checking deductions, reviewing claims, and auditing accounts. Lots of activity up there.

One of the streets I wandered down eventually emptied out onto the sparse maritime industrial landscape of the dockyards at the water's edge. I walked along a network of small bridges and walkways, over rotting boardwalks, underneath cranes, and along abandoned rusty tracks no longer used for transporting heavy crates of cargo to and from ships. There were some old dilapidated container cars sitting on the tracks. One of them had

SULFURIC ACID TRANSPORT ONLY

written in military stencil on its side. Another one read

POLYTETRAFLUOROETHYLENE

Both of the tanks had long since rotted through, and the chemicals they'd contained leaked unremarkably and silently into the water.

Against the monotonous sound of water lapping at the undersides of the boats and the concrete lining the docks, I could just make out the sound of some muttering and cursing.

I turned around. Sitting behind me on the steps of a building whose windows were lined with metal bars, and a door that looked like it hadn't been opened for centuries, was a fat bearded guy.

'Pearls before swine... Pearls before swine...' I could hear him muttering away, hunched over on some steps going down from the door.

He was absentmindedly turning the pages of a tattered volume lying in front of him, 'Pearls before swine...' There was a pair of binoculars and what looked like an old star chart laying next to the book that he was leafing through. He was holding a paper bag in his right hand. He put it up to his mouth, took a few swigs, and let out a small burp before taking another swig. 'Pearls before swine...' he muttered again.

He still hadn't looked at me, but him and myself were the only ones anywhere around here, so it was only a matter of time. Noting that he might be a fellow astronomer, I

walked over to him. He still didn't look up at me, turning pages and taking swigs, and muttering muttering muttering.

'What kind of binoculars you got there?' I enquired.

'7 magnification by 50 objective diameter,' he muttered without looking at me,

'The most reliable kind for gazing at the heavenly bodies,' I replied.

That got his attention, and he looked up. 'Yep, the best kind... that's about all I have these days... staring off into space at night through these things.' He paused, took a swig, and added, 'at a distance of 100 million light years, lets me see 14 million light years across.' He stared vacantly at his book, turning another page.

'You an optics guy?' I enquired, impressed with how effortlessly the optical knowledge tripped off his tongue.

'Laser physics... the locals on all the islands around here used to know me... as soon as they saw my ship coming in the distance, they would lay the red carpet out for us before we made landfall... but my fortunes have taken a turn, the system has aligned itself against me, and now it's just pearls before swine... Pearls before swine...'

'You been sitting here long?'

'Well, let's just say that I do a lot more sitting than sailing these days,' he hiccupped at me.

'You have a boat?'

'Yeah, I have a boat.'

He took a swig out of his bottle, and soured his face like it pained him to think about his boat.

'Where's your boat?' I enquired. The steps on which he was sitting overlooked a canal that connected to a bay that I could just make out around a bend. He gestured across the canal, 'There she is.' I looked in the direction he was gesturing, only to see the most dilapidated ship I'd ever seen. Its hull was a duct tape and particle board patchwork, covered in meticulously detailed and elaborate decorations, but nothing that would hold water. The main mast was growing a split down the middle, like it was trying to transform itself into two masts. The prow was a spear with a propeller on the end of it. 'She might not look like much, but she hasn't seen much action for a good while now. I have too little money to look after her anymore. I'm living off what's left of my savings. All I got enough money for is the sauce,' he said, nodding at the bottle concealed in his brown paper bag, 'and some reading material. I looked down at his feet; there were a few scattered publications – they all had the same dull cover with the same dull title: *The Imperial Journal of Angular Momentum*.

'What's with the propeller? Some kind of hydroplane or something?'

'It has nothing to do with propulsion. It's a reminder that angular momentum is what makes the world go round. And nowadays, I've taken it as a reminder of how spun out I've become as I sit and watch her decay, a shade of my former glory. Look at me, sitting here outside what used to be my local public house, drinking out of a bag and staring at all my valuables. Pearls before swine.'

There was a growing commotion around the bend, in the direction of the bay. Some kind of vessel was approaching, and large volumes of water were being displaced as it drew nearer. A magnificent wooden vessel's prow came around the bend. The prow

figurehead was a statue of an old stern looking man with a handlebar moustache. The crew was busy making their landing preparations, yelling to each other across the deck and taking down the sails as the ship made its way into the dock. It moved steadily and gracefully as it cut through the still water of the canal. At the helm was a gray haired old man with a gentle look on his face, confidently guiding her in as he looked to have done a thousand times before.

The guy sitting on the steps looked down as soon as the ship came into view, listlessly turning the pages of his journal and muttered, 'Those bastards.'

The ship carried on gliding along the canal, and eventually disappeared from view. 'You know, I've travelled deeper than any of these bastards. None of them have the *vision* to travel as deep as me. No one's gotten closer to the fundamentals than me. I been to islands that none of them even know *exist*.'

'There's islands around here?' I asked, vaguely remembering the pictures that Ez had shown me way back.

He shook his head. 'The waters around here are *littered* with islands. More than you could imagine in your wildest dreams, boy. You could easily spend your whole life in any of 'em, but those charlatans,' he gestured at the wake of the ship that just passed, 'have so little vision, they don't bother going farther to the interior than the second ring of any of the hundreds of islands they've arrived at. They're a bunch of useless island hopper tourist voyeurs. Cheap thrills and sterile sightseeing to nurture their addiction to novelty and give them a reservoir of inconsequential small talk... that's all they're after. The skipper of that boat has tried recruiting me to come along with him so many times, tempting me with his bloody gentle demeanor, but I shake my head and tell him that it's pearls before swine... pearls before swine.'

'With a bottle and a few star charts, I don't even need a seaworthy vessel. I can sit here on these goddamn steps, and travel so deep it would make the unimaginative amateur crew on his ship soil themselves with fear that they've forgotten what small talk sounds like...'

'You sure you're not upset with those guys because of the state of their ship compared to the state of yours?' I asked.

He didn't like that question one bit. 'Listen, you little piece of shit, you better watch yourself. I don't know who you are, where you come from, or what you want, but I'll have you know: I'm *known*. Are you known? You might want to think about *that* before you start with the naïve comments about seafaring and my vessel. These journals I'm reading here, they're literally *saturated* with tales of my journeys.'

I responded immediately, 'I don't have to be an expert at seafaring to compare vessels. Anyway, you might be known, but *I* never heard of you. Or that journal you're reading.'

He looked down, took a few swigs. 'Well you better move on then. Leave an old man to rot in peace with his beloved vessel. And his journals. You've said your piece. The seas beckon; don't waste your time with an old burnout like me...'

But I liked the guy, especially the propeller on his ship's prow. Seeing his bulky frame hunched on the stairs, staring into the bottom of a brown paper bag, surrounded by old star charts and tales of journeys long since past, lots of pity swelled up within me. He was still staring into the bottom of the bag with his glassy bloodshot eyes, and I saw a solitary tear running down his whiskered face. I went back to the steps and sat

down next to him till I hoped I had done enough silent penance that he might be willing to talk some more.

‘So you don’t sail then? You sit here staring at your ship, telling yourself that you can go farther sitting here than they can by moving? It’s poetic, but it doesn’t really help someone like me, who’s looking for a way across the water.’

He looked up at me, ‘I’ll tell you the same thing I’ve told plenty of people: I used to travel with that bastard on his fancy ship.’

He gestured again at the canal, ‘He and I travelled very deep into the interior of a few islands.’ He shook his head, reminiscing, ‘deeper than most have travelled. But it all came to an inglorious end. He started worrying about cash. Said that we weren’t attracting enough passengers to maintain the boat, and that the longer our trips to the island interiors lasted, the more obtuse we became. He said that if we kept taking such long trips, we ran the risk that we’d soon re-emerge so alien that everyone would think we were nuts. I argued with him – who cares, people will be drawn to our obtuse charisma and the poignancy of our dreams! The masses will never be able to ignore us! The more alienated we emerge after a trip, the greater the proof will be of our twisted brilliance!’

‘But he wouldn’t have any of it. He told me the cash would dry up, and pretty soon we’d forget how to do basic societal things, like stand silently in a queue at the grocery store or the bank, or take a shit in a bowl of drinking water, or be serious when black uniforms treat us like we’re from a different species than them.’

‘We needed to get into the island hopping business, he said. I went along with him for awhile. We started island hopping, and sure enough, the passenger numbers *did* pick up, and the cash started rolling in, but I got to a point where I could no longer stand the unreflexive nitwits we had to cart around from island to island – always stopping off here and there to let them get their kicks and celebrate their ignorance. Island-hoppers don’t care anything about the *interior*; for them, island trips are about comfort and convenience, which they hope will provide an antidote to their unassailable incarceration by the mind-numbing *status quo*. Those poor island-hopping fucks wear the number of different island landings they’ve accumulated like a badge – all in an effort to help themselves forget their imprisonment.’

‘You don’t know a guy called Dogg, do you?’ I asked him.

‘Dog? I aint got no dog.’ He looked at me quizzically, clearly puzzled by what he interpreted as an unexpected question about canines.

‘You bored? Am I talking too much for you?’ he asked.

‘No, I’m fine. I don’t mind listening to you,’ I assured him. ‘It’s just that I met a guy up at the compound near the courthouse called Dogg, and he talked a lot about imprisonment, a little bit like you.’

He nodded his head, took a swig, ‘they got all kinds of nuts up there and I imagine they know a thing or two about incarceration, but I never met a dog. The last guy that I’ve seen around here was a middle-aged black guy, and he kept talking about some old prison.’

At this, my ears pricked up, ‘Did he say where he was headed?’

‘Not exactly. He mentioned that he was headed to visit some place where he’d been locked up for aeons. Said it was on one of the islands out here. He tried to steal my whiskey,’ he said, gesturing at the paper bag he was holding.

‘He wouldn’t back off till I told him to drop it or I’d knock him over the head with a fresh bottle. He said something about how I was lucky to have gotten off better than the last guy he talked to. And something else about how he reckoned he could get farther than me and my ship if only he could remember how to walk on water. Normally, I got no time for his type, and I woulda laid him out flat on his back. But he seemed like he’d had his share of hard knocks, just like me.’

I nodded, confident that I was hot on the trail of the bum who’d planted his fist on my face. ‘That guy’s responsible for the state of my face,’ I said.

‘With your face enshrouded in all those bandages, it’s hard to see what the state of it is.’

‘It aint pretty,’ I said. ‘And that’s why I gotta find him.’

‘For what?’ the guy said.

‘So that I can show him my face.’

He shrugged, ‘Whatever you need to do.’

‘Can you help me find him?’ I asked.

He was silent for a few moments, and then said, ‘You’ve never navigated through these waters before, have you?’

‘Nope.’ I shook my head.

‘It’ll drive a man to drink.’

## The same sorry old edge of infinity

‘These waters are *littered* with huge islands. And no two are completely alike. To date, all the maps that we have – those made by the old explorers, and those made by more recent expeditions, tell us that the island structures all have one thing in common: they all have lakes inside of them, with islands inside those lakes, with lakes inside those islands, with islands inside those lakes, with lakes inside those islands, and so on and on... you get the point. Most of the island hopping bastards never been any farther than the first few outer rings.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s a lot of work – you have to carry your vessel over land to the next water crossing. And inevitably, you have to abandon it altogether, because the closer you get to the center, the smaller the islands get. So small that the boat becomes useless. I remember the first time I approached the center. I knew I was getting close – because the lakes and islands were getting so small that I was able to see the other side. They went from being miles across, to meters across, to millimeters across. Some of the smallest islands I had ever seen. I tripped over a guy with a microscope hunched over a speck of dust floating on the surface of a single drop of water. He didn’t even look up at me – just kept peering through his microscope, and muttered something about how he was boarding a ship for the next island, and he hoped I didn’t want a ride, cause it didn’t look big enough for the both of us. He was one of the pioneers. Legend had it that he’d been hunched over that speck of dust for years, steadily making his way to the interior.’

‘Was that the farthest you’ve been?’

‘No. After I returned, I set to the task of building *my own* microscope, and went to find a set of islands with nobody hunched over the interior. I spent years camped out trying to get to the center, but it’s hard going. Very quickly you arrive at a point where your microscope isn’t powerful enough to see the very tiny islands. At that point, either you decide to turn back, or you spend years dreaming up ways to find tinier and tinier ones – the whole time isolated by yourself in some god-forsaken set of tinier and tinier concentric circles. That was exactly the situation that we found ourselves in when that bastard skipper – my ex-comrade – took a step back, and asked me how we must look, hunched over something nobody could see, telling passers-by that we were making our way across the next lake bound for the interior.’

‘He said that most people don’t care if they’re approaching the interior; they just like the novelty of crossing something - water or land; they could give a damn about their proximity to the interior. If it’s too small, they’ll never even believe they’ve crossed something.’

‘I told him that I could care less about *most people*. I wanted to continue the journey to the interior. He didn’t. Since it was *his* boat and *his* cash that had funded our excursion, I had no choice but to go with him. We abandoned our quest for the interior, and I helped him run his island hopping service for awhile, but eventually I couldn’t take it anymore. I told him I wanted out, or I was gonna crack. From the cash

I had helped him raise running the island hopping service, he gave me a cut so that I could buy my own vessel.'

He paused and gestured at his dilapidated ship, 'But the cash dried up real quick – and after our maiden voyage,' he looked at his ship with forlorn eyes, 'when we had to turn back because of storms and big waves, I've never been able to afford any repairs. So here I sit, way on the outer edge of things except for my memories of what the center is like. I'm tattered in rags, drinking bad liquor, talking to disrespectful young punks like you who have no idea about nothin', and reading about the tiniest journeys that have been managed by others that have tried to make it to the center. I hope to make it to the interior once more before my number is up. I'll die trying.'

We were silent for a moment, as he took a few more swigs from his bag. 'Are you sure that it's not all in vain?' I asked him. He frowned at me, so I clarified, 'How do you know that there *is* even a center?'

'Well,' he pondered for a good long time, 'I *don't* know that there is a center. Nobody does, and lots of eminent explorers in times gone by have hung their heads in frustration and disappointment, declaring that we should all give up – that *there is no center*. And that looking for one is a doomed quest cause we can't go any further. But every time this happens, somebody makes a final last ditch attempt, and succeeds in an even *tinier* journey toward the center, finding an even smaller lake or a smaller island. And that'll inspire the whole community to press on toward the center for a little while longer. It's very ambiguous progress though, let me tell you,' he told me, shaking his head to tell me good, 'because when you get that small you're never sure whether what you've found is a new lake or a circular river. I've seen guys stalled out for years and years, confounded by whether the thing on the other side of their microscope lens is a circular river or a lake. They go to bed at night, camped out on the edge of countless lakes within islands within lakes within islands within lakes.... and they're haunted by dreams of whether or not whatever they've just stumbled upon is a lake or a circular river. They think that whatever they determine its identity to be will mark a fundamental development. Whether or not it is a fundamental development is inconsequential. The fact is, that question gets them out of their tent in the morning, and spurs everyone to keep going for at least another few months. *That's* what keeps us going. The idea that if we've come this far since we started measuring, then there must be a tinier one to measure. It's the only way to live.'

Sat on the stairs, head over his paper bag, nothing but the bottom of the bag was staring back. Possessed by things so tiny as to be invisible, he was like a priest who'd long ago been rejected by the mainstream priesthood, who worry over things that are so big as to be invisible. He glanced up at me occasionally, torn between conversation and mourning the end of another bottle – probably pretty similar to how he looked when he was bent over the microscopic interior islands.

'Here you sit, staring at your bottle with a bag staring back, by the side of the canal where the ships come in. Does any of what you're saying *really* matter to the people in the world, or is it just the same old sob story that you give to every soul that passes you by?'

He was quick in responding, and nodded his head at me to indicate that he'd heard every objection anybody could possibly dream up, 'My son, my poor amateur son, let me tell you... Of course it matters. I have a lot more than the weight of me behind what comes out of my mouth. There's a whole *oeuvre* of work that underpins the

structure that I'm trying to communicate to your young ears – if you *had* read the logs of the early explorers, you'd have seen that they got mixed up *all the time* about where they were. They never knew which island or which lake they were on, if it was the same or different from the last one, whether they were coming back or going out. Lots of the early expeditions were lost. The ones that returned were always completely disoriented, and never had maps that made any sense to show for their journey. So you, you *young* boy, you have no idea the complexity of the issues you're talking about. So don't act like it. Cause I'm not buying it.'

Still staring into the abyss of the bottom of the bottle leading to the bag, he sensed that I wasn't buying him not buying me, and carried on, resigned to explanation, 'Eventually some old monk decided it was crazy to lose every goddamn expedition that set out, and wondered whether everything was going in circles, like the children of Israel in the story about Jericho. He proposed that we use systematic knowledge to address the question, and it worked a charm. Far fewer of the subsequent expeditions were lost. The new generation of explorers decided that whenever they arrived at a coast – either by water or by land – they would go in circles. They'd mark their landing spot, and carry on, hugging coast the entire time. It turns out the old monk's intuition was bang on. The explorers found out that, no matter the coast, they always returned to the same landing spot, and so their journey was always a circle. Now, some of the islands are so massive that circling one single coast will occupy the bulk of a man's entire life. But, here we sit now, with the hindsight of lots of expeditions, and all the data we've accumulated shows that every island ever visited has a lake with an island with a lake with an island with a lake and so on and so on...'

'Sounds like a pretty good endorsement for systematic knowledge,' I commented.

'Yeah, you'd think so, but the ecclesiastical powers at the time put that poor monk behind bars. They said that his theory of knowledge was too circular. They didn't like it because it ended where it started, and with an attitude like that, they feared that people would never get out of bed. No chance for a growth economy with an attitude like that. Any epistemology that's going to go somewhere, and motivate people, needs to start and stop with linearity. End up somewhere different from where it starts. If it doesn't, then how are you gonna know if you're making progress? And if you're not making progress, then you risk a society of people just sitting around, doing nothing, wondering if they're coming or going, and not knowing whether it's worth doing anything. How are you going to build weapons out of an approach like that? How are you gonna convince people to fight wars? How are you going to convince people never to stop aiming for infinite growth? With that kind of circular attitude, you'll be an impotent child that will be taken seriously by nobody.'

'Did they let him out when they found out that his theory was correct?' I asked.

'The poor bastard was dead and buried by the time that the ecclesiastics came around to accepting the returning explorers' reports about the island structures. Sadly, his only reward was to spend his final days staring out the linear bars of his prison cell. Years later, when he was dead and gone, they made an attempt to give him some sort of tribute in recognition of his insight: they exhumed his corpse, twisted it around in a circle with his feet in his mouth, and reburied him in a circular coffin.'

This was how we went, back and forth, back and forth, for a good long while sat at the edge of the water. Occasionally, the big boat with his former skipper would pass by, and he would grimace and curse and go through the whole thing about how he had

been disenfranchised, how he had been ignored... how he was a voice crying in the wilderness, how they were a bunch of good-for-nothin' island hoppers, how none of the bastards paid him any heed, and he wasn't going to cast his pearls before swine. From what I could tell, there hadn't been many, apart from myself, that had bothered to stop and listen to the old stories, trotted out day after day after day. And even though I was irreverent and disrespectful, he couldn't get enough of being listened to, even if it was the same sorry shit.

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The next day right after breakfast, which was a couple of swigs from the bottom of a whiskey bottle in a paper bag, I turned to the guy. I had started calling him Santa, because he was as generous with the knowledge that came out of his mouth as Santa was with his big bag of mostly useless presents.

He disagreed with being called Santa, 'Santa gives out presents one night per year. I never take a break.'

I told him that he was wrong, 'Santa can't deliver all those presents in one night. It's impossible, to climb down that many chimneys or crawl into that many pueblos or igloos or wigwams or tents or whatever. Just like you, he works year round – chasing Christmas eve night around the globe on that flying sleigh, trying not to miss anybody.'

He looked at me, despondent, 'But he'll never manage, the poor bastard, because old people are leaving and new people are arriving all the time. But he'll die trying, just like me.'

From that point on, he responded when I called him Santa.

The pain under my bandages was growing unbearable. I was increasingly finding myself delirious with pain, imagining Head in his box with those girls looking after his smashed up face. If I stayed camped out here for too much longer, I'd soon find myself laid out in a box. Either I needed to find the guy whose fist was responsible for the state of my face, or I needed to give up on the quest. Otherwise I would rot away on those steps, drinking out of a paper bag to relieve my pain while bacteria devoured my inferno-of-a-face, and talking shit till my number was up.

'Santa, if I don't move on, my face and I aint not gonna last much longer. Have you seen the juice that's been leaking out of my bandages?'

We were silent for awhile.

'How much juice you reckon she's got left?' I weakly wondered aloud.

'Your face?' he responded.

'No, your ship,' I said, gesturing across the waterway at his rotting vessel with its ornamental propeller mounted on the prow and spinning absentmindedly in the wind.

'She'd get us out of eyesight, but not much farther,' he said.

'Is she beyond repair?'

'No, she's not beyond repair. If I had the money, I could make her float farther than out of eyesight. A lot farther. But I'd need a lot.'

'I got a backpack full of the stuff,' I said. 'I'd be happy to give you a chunk if you can get us outta here.'

He walked over the pack and unzipped it. I sat there silent staring at the concrete while he shuffled through it, counting silently to himself.

‘This whole sack is a good start, kid, but I’m gonna need more than this to get her in shipworthy shape.’

‘How have you gotten money for her in the past?’ I asked. ‘Or have you just sat here, ever since you’ve been abandoned by him?’ I said, pointing at the big fancy ship, which was just leaving its berth headed for the open water, its deck crammed with another delivery of tourists bound for the trivial.

He shook his head in disgust. He hated those goddamn pleasure seekers. They sickened him. Obsessed with their stupid pursuit of inconsequentially unfamiliar novelty, they ruined the islands, contaminating them with their waste and their amusement. Those unreflexive morons wouldn’t even register so much as a blink if they planted one of their shoes right smack in the delicate and subtle concentric interior network of any given island – tarnishing its virgin beauty for future generations of microscopists. All because they were too stupid to appreciate anything beyond the straightforward repetition of their own stinking shit. He’d ranted about it so many times, I wasn’t surprised when he responded, ‘I refuse to get any help from that bastard.’

He mostly radiated animosity and loathing, but I had learned to use it to my advantage.

‘So that’s it then? You’re just gonna waste away here, drinking yourself into a stupor, pathetic and impotent, watching her rot while more and more clueless moronic tourists are carted away to defile your beloved islands? Is this it?’

He put his bottle down carefully, but he was so drunk that it wobbled around and then fell over. The small amount of booze left within leaked out, into the cracks on the pavement. ‘You’re right. It’s time to leave here. Ever since you showed up, I’ve started feeling the longing, brewing and simmering stronger than I have for a good long while. The center is calling. I think it’s time for me to get my microscopes out again, and start polishing them.’

He picked up the bottle, and checked to be sure it was empty.

‘We will have a fundraiser,’ he declared. ‘Yes... a fundraiser, with rock and roll and vibrations that will resonate with the youth that live in the town. Yes, yes, my son... the sons and daughters of the stupid tourists in town, they will finance my last journey back as they indulge their flesh in the night. They might be a bunch of unreflexive bastards, but they’re my only hope if I’m gonna get off these steps.’

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I told him anyway, ‘you know, you really sound like a priest. If only you didn’t curse so much.’

He ignored me, removed a key from his pocket, and opened the door behind us, in whose shadow the steps had always lain. He went inside and soon emerged, holding a fresh bottle of whiskey, which he set in front of me, his eyes far away. I was growing increasingly delirious, and my face felt like it was melting. ‘We will leave soon,’ his eyes flashed.

I was crumpled in a heap on the steps, and feebly started cracking into the fresh bottle of whiskey that he had set in front of me, hoping that that my burning face wouldn’t be my ultimate fate, and imagining that the future would bring about my

metamorphosis. I imagined the future like it was a train station, and once I arrived, my troubles would be over. This kind of displaced future satisfaction was the only antidote to what seemed a deliriously imploding spiral, initiated by the fist of a bum called god.

‘Nothing but a bunch of center-stomping voyeurs,’ were the words of Santa that reverberated in my head.

Santa was nowhere to be seen for a good long while. Once I drunkenly staggered through the door to take a piss, thinking I was near the canal. Disoriented with delirium, the next thing I remember was him running into the room yelling at me to get the hell out of there and quit pissing in his shoe. ‘Go piss in the canal’ he said. He startled me so much when he chased me out that I tripped and knocked a few of his microscopes off the wall.

I was spiralling down down down. I couldn’t tell if Santa knew or cared. Increasingly, I entertained thoughts of abandoning the quest. My drinking carried on steadily, doing little more than causing me to remember less poignantly what I should be worrying about. I found myself thinking about god, Head, Loddy and Dogg, wondering what they were all up to, and wondering if they were any better at forgetting about their selves than I was.

## Dream bubbles within dream bubbles

My delirium, stagnation, and pain were all gradually accumulating – warping my experience of time and space more than so far in this tale. I remember Santa emerging from the door after a good long while, and he had two fresh bottles of whiskey. He sat down on the step above the one where I was sat, and set both down firmly. One for me, and one for him.

‘Well, my boy, our departure draws near. I have a whole collection of microscopes, and we’ll soon be bent over them staring into the invisible center... I’ll teach you everything I know.’

‘Let’s have a toast, my boy,’ he said, opening both bottles, and handing one to me. ‘Tonight, I will rely on the short-sighted youth to see no further than their next 10 minutes of carnal satisfaction. Their desires will provide the cash to propel us toward the center. The vibrations and the rock and the roll and the elimination of inhibitions. That’s what it’ll take for us to scrape together the dough to get outta here.’

I could barely muster a response to Santa’s toast. I feebly held up the bottle, doing my best to move my mouth and tongue and lips in a way that I hoped would end in communication.

My brain fumbled with the words, ‘...that good for nothin... hiccup.... star tattoo on his hands ...hiccup... watch stealin ...hiccup... beer drinkin’... hiccup... abandons people ...hiccup... with shining faces... gonna show him... hiccup... once and for all... see if he can handle it.’

As I mutilated this description of who was to blame for where I was, I dropped the full bottle I was holding. It shattered on the edge of the bottom step. My body slumped over. I could hear Santa taking a meaty swig as I ponderously ebbed into a torturous drunken dream fog short of anything resembling real rest. It was thicker than tar – probably not what Ez’s woman had in mind when she recommended that I have a hard dream once in a while, but nevertheless I could hear a distant voice unclear, growing louder and louder...

*...Step right up! Step right up! Step right up to see how it’s done! If you’ve been camped out on the water’s edge at the same sorry old edge of infinity for too long, then what you’re about to learn may be just the thing you need: the blame chain construction game! Apart from sex in the garden and naming the animals, it’s probably the oldest game there is! Here’s how it’s done! Learn it from the originals:*

*god said to the man: man, why did you eat my apple?*

*The man said back: the woman made me do it.*

*god went and found her, and said: woman, why did you make the man eat my apple?*

*The woman said back: that serpent made me eat one, and it was really good.*

*god said to the serpent: serpent, why did you make the woman eat my apple?*

*The serpent said back: it's not my fault. I've been inhabited by something called the devil. I don't know what it is. Says it knows you. It lives in the spirit world, so I'm helpless to resist.*

*god went and found the devil, and said: why did you inhabit that serpent who made the woman eat my apple?*

*The devil said back: it's not my fault. You made me a spirit and then kicked me out of your club. Now I wander hungry and condemned in a non-spirit world. You know just as well as me that if I get hungry down here, the best I can do is inhabit a non-spirit being and vicariously enjoy their refreshment. What the hell am I supposed to do? Those are some tasty apples.*

*god had no answers for the devil. The devil yelled back: Hey god, I asked you a question. You gonna answer?*

*All god could say back was: Just leave your dirty hands off my apples.*

*That's it folks! The blame chain construction game! Easy as 1-2-3-infinity! As long as you're not god, and even if you are, then it might not be your fault! All you need to do is link yourself into the endless chain of effect! The easiest game ever invented!*

But my dreaming wasn't over yet. It was gonna take a lot more than something about a hungry spirit to get my attention, and I sensed that Ez's woman was out there somewhere, not through with me yet. I was aware of an increasing density of people surrounding me. I was drifting amidst the commotion like a hungry spirit condemned to not enjoy an apple.

I soon found myself enveloped in loud coherent vibrations. I hoped it was the rock and roll and pitch of a ship on open water. I carved out a little bubble in the thick dream tar where my body was protected from the rocking and rolling.

My mind turned to Head. What was he up to? Crammed inside a box?

This very thought brought on a fit of violent giggles. I imagined Head as I had seen him so many times – upside down, staring out the fence of the compound. I was laying down with my head on my hands, staring into his eyes. I tried to repress the image and its accompanying giggles, but it was useless. Hidden safe inside my dream bubble, I scribbled in a little notebook:

*In memoriam of Head*

*I'm taking a bridge over to the address at your mind-in-a-box. I hope that Loddy's offer still stands, and that he's up to the task.*

The ambience intensified, and the rocking and rolling rattled my dream bubble. I was dreaming harder now. The people moving around me were unidentifiable, except for the little dream trails that followed them around... Head slowly took shape in my mind's eye: sure enough, he'd been in a box this whole time. There he was, sleeping in the box, bolt upright, with a comfortable look on his face. Ruthless giggles again overcame me, and I pulled out my notebook to add:

*Head, maybe you didn't know that I've been confined in a box too, for the last god-knows-however-many pages.*

That was all I could manage before I was retaken by giggles. The simple fact of my hysteria made it even more hilarious. I put the notebook away. Slowly, I become aware of lots of other dreamers crowding my little bubble in the dream fog – their vibrating bubbles rattling my own. Nearby was a particularly unremarkable bubble of female energy. From what Santa had told me, she had all the makings of an uninspired tourist. She was accompanied by another similarly inconsequential dream bubble of male energy. Both of the dream bubbles they inhabited were so vacant, I wasn't sure if there was actually anything inside.

The male dream bubble reassured me that their dream bubbles weren't vacant. He was flashing around a small image capture device. Holding it, he would fully extend his arm above his head. Then there would be a pulse of blinding electric light which instantaneously saturated the interstices of the entire dream fog without any warning. The electric pulse train came came came and kept coming a good few more. When he finally retracted his arm, I was left reeling. He showed the device to the bored female tourist. Disinterestedly, she looked at it, no more interested than she was before he showed it to her. In her infinite boredom, I imagined Head and erupted with laughter like a possessed hyena with a notebook in my dream paw. He hadn't moved an inch, and was sleeping upright, peaceful as could be. Loddy and the girls were at other brain-in-a-box addresses. I wrote:

*Head, you've always gotten a kick out of my obscure plans and vague intentions to find the fist of a bum called god. 'Something about a beer, was it?' I remember you saying.*

The female dream bubble boredly noticed my scribbles and giggling hysteria. Her bubble was so bored it should have had a sign hung above it that read *VACANCIES*. No wonder big Santa despised these tourists so much. The dream fog started thinning a little bit; the dream trails following everybody around weren't as long as they were before. My center of balance was flagging, and I steadied myself as further fits of bleary-eyed laughter overcame me. The female dream bubble was hovering near me, like she was trying to glimpse what I was scribbling. At this, the male dream bubble tried to assert some form of territorial rights over the female dream bubble. He made what looked like an attempt to grab her menacingly. But it looked pretty funny, because he was a bubble, she was a bubble, and funny is what it looks like when one bubble vainly tries to grab hold of another one. Even funnier was the force of his sudden motion being immediately damped by the drag of the dream fog, rendering his possessive gestures completely useless. Like a doberman trapped in a water balloon, he was totally infuriated, totally impotent, and totally drowning. All he could manage was an impression of looking tough. A water balloon dream bubble trying to flex its muscles. What a hoot. I giggled and scribbled:

*I got the hoots so bad, it hurts my hand to write.  
I got the hoots so bad, it hurts my fists to fight.  
Wouldn't hurt so bad if my eyes weren't full of light.*

The female dream bubble was craning her neck, trying to act normal, as if she wanted neither myself nor the male dream bubble to notice that whatever I was scribbling was

burning a hole in her brain. She wanted desperately to be in on a joke that might not even be there.

Head again popped into my brain. He was getting ready for bed. He brushed his teeth, washed his armpits, changed his underwear, and then crawled into the box. He was fast asleep within a few minutes, with his eyes wide open and a comfortable smile on his face. My vague aspirations to find god were the farthest thing from his mind. Wondering whether this was as funny as the female dream bubble might have suspected, I covered up my notebook, like the contents were top secret for everyone but you the reader, making sure that the girl's craning neck and probing eyes couldn't see:

*Life is more middle of the road when you don't have many attachments. A small pine box is a really hot sportscar for that kind of road.*

The girl dream bubble was unmistakably curious. Another dream bubble that I hadn't noticed – a hefty one – had also taken an interest. Both were looking at me. Head-in-a-box, sound asleep – the same goofy smile I remember him with! Gets me every time. Notebook out. The female dream bubble was no longer making any attempt to be covert. She wanted to know what was getting scribbled, and she apparently couldn't give a damn who knew that she wanted to know. She was practically breathing down my dream bubble to see. I pretended to take no notice of her, orienting my dream bubble so that she couldn't see what I was writing, which said:

*(Dr. Indecipherable)*

I put the notebook away and we went through the cycle again. Head-in-a-box, happy as can be, meeting me on Loddy's dream highway. Notebook out. The female dream bubble was breathing down the back of my neck. Muscles had given up his tough water balloon act, and even he seemed interested. So was the other hefty dream bubble. Like he was doing a play-by-play for an amoebic reproductive act, I heard him say, 'Every few moments, that dream bubble erupts into laughter and scribbles something down in a little notebook.' Careful to arrange myself so that the notebook was out of sight of everybody's eyes but my own, I wrote:

*Everyone around me wants to know the secret. ssshhhhh.*

I was still laughing at Head-in-a-box, but now I was also laughing at the fact that all this mysterious nonsense had arisen from other bubbles' curiosity at my vision of Head-in-a-box. The manufactured ignorance was bona fide ridiculous, and the more attention came my way, the harder I chuckled. None of the dream bubbles in the vicinity were trying to hide the fact that they wanted to know what the hell was being scribbled. Here we go again. Time to propagate the myth, just like god's done to me since this whole damn story began:

*Head, let me tell you an important little secret that not many people know. I'll just jot it nonchalantly, like it's no big deal:*

*I'm being repressed.  
By myself.*

*And I'm doing it on purpose.  
For a change.*

I put the notebook away. Now I was laughing because I was behaving like god. As if sleeping upright in a box was any more pure. Notebook out. All the other dream bubbles crowding me, trying to get in on the secret. The joke started a long time ago and it showed no signs of letting up soon; I hope they weren't expecting a punch line. Only time would tell. In the meantime, let it drive them crazy. A larger fraction of the vacant tourist world than ever before had been awakened within their hollow chambers. And that was progress good enough for me. I had to write with really small squiggles so that I could fit the writing underneath my cupped hand and keep them all in suspense. It was for their own benefit.

*Aeons later and god's still adding to his coffers. He doesn't even have any use for savings. He charges just for the hell of it.*

I kept pretending not to notice any of the dream bubbles that were crowding me. The girl dream bubble was a breath away. I could feel her on my cheeks. I winked at her through my bandaged head, and exaggeratedly covered my little notebook to put the finishing touches on another scrawl. She smiled pleasantly, pretending to be bored, but annoyed as hell that she had managed to uncover none of the secret. Like a saint performing a last ditch ritual of self sacrifice to save everyone else, I wrote:

*Head, this is why I have to write you in secret. Bon voyage, my friend. Give a honk when you pass by in the ark and I'll jump in, wherever I am. Build the cockpit big enough so there's room for at least the two of us.*

My dream bubble chamber began collapsing in on me, and awareness of my surroundings dimmed as what had formerly been a dream fog started thickening into a dream foam.

And that was it, I was just about gone. Somewhere out there was Ez's woman, hopefully satisfied that at least I'd have made some amount of progress by the time this whole tale is over. My last scrawl was this:

*The fist of a bum called god. What a con. Maybe my time would have been better spent in a box.*

I put the notebook away.

## Don't get sentimental now

When I awoke, land was nowhere in sight. We were gliding along at speed on the glistening water. There was still a propeller attached to the end of a spear at the ship's prow, but other than that, the boat was sparkling. The deck was shining, the hull appeared to have been patched up. The propeller was quietly fluttering around on its axis. First one direction, and then the other, and then the other, responding to the random turbulence of the next wind eddy. Santa was at the helm, and shouted at me, above the sound of the wind and sea, 'Good to have you back!'

I blinked in the bright sunlight a few times. My head hurt a lot less than I remembered, and my bandages were fresh. It was still swollen to a few times its original size.

Looking around slowly, I said to Santa, 'You fixed her up, huh?'

He nodded proudly, 'Yep. The plan came off without a hitch. Your cash – combined with what I managed to get from the fundraiser – was just enough. I thought that we'd lost you, though. You were unresponsive for a long time. Your face was swollen to about three times its normal size, shining like the sun, and some frightfully colorful juice was leaking out from under those bandages.'

I felt my bandages. They were dry, and the burning sensation that had been growing ever since I'd met Santa felt like it hadn't gotten too much worse.

'So, where you wanna go, boy?!' Santa shouted at me.

I stared at him blankly. I had lots of questions about what had happened in the interim and how he'd finally managed to get this hunk of junk in tip-top shape, but standing at the helm, he looked like somebody transformed, and now wasn't the time. I couldn't immediately remember where I was going. I had to dig around on the deck of the ship for awhile in order to locate my notebook, careful that the question didn't slip away from me as I searched for it. Eventually I found it, lodged in a crack in the deck. As I browsed little fragments of what I had written, I forgot the question I was looking for.

Santa's shouting reminded me, 'Where you going boy! Cause we'll soon be approaching the outer perimeters, and that might be a stage later than where you wanna get off!'

I turned to the end of the notebook, hoping that I would rediscover my final thoughts. Sure enough, scrawled messily on one of the pages were words that I could barely make out, but which looked like:

*The fist of a bum called god. What a con. Baybe my rime would have been better spent in a box.*

Confused as to what exactly it meant, it did enough to jog my memory of where I needed to go. 'I'm going to find the guy responsible for the state of my face! I think I might be after the same guy who told you that he could walk on water and make better progress than you!'

'That bastard!' Santa shouted. 'Well, we'll see who has the last laugh! What he called *walking on water* looked a lot more like what I would call *swimming*! I got no idea

where that nut was headed! But I know a guy who might! I can drop you off near him! No guarantees though!

‘Ok,’ I blankly responded.

I started looking around for whatever might be left of my sack of cash. It was knawing on my brain – how the hell this boat had become so sparkly and coolly guided through the water by a guy who I found staring at the bottom of an empty whiskey bottle in a paper bag only a few chapters ago. He’d moved beyond the whiskey – now he was sipping cocktails with little umbrellas in them. In the distance, off the prow of the ship, I could just make out what looked like little specks of earth protruding from the horizon.

‘Hey Santa, did you see my bag!’ I shouted at him.

He gestured at me, taking one of his hands off the wheel to grab a sip from a cocktail, ‘It’s just over there!’

I picked it up. It was a lot lighter than I remembered. Looking inside, all I could see were a few scattered notes. I shook my head in memoriam of quite a bit of cash that had long since disappeared, ‘Santa, you took almost all my cash.’

‘I’m Santa, I bring things to people,’ he said. ‘You should know that, boy. Don’t accuse me of taking! Only of giving. I had to pay off some wandering doctor to change your bandages and bring you back. The state of your face was far beyond my skills.’

He turned his face toward the prow, drowning the insignificance of a few lost handfuls of cash with what lie ahead on the horizon, ‘Look boy: *The outer perimeter.*’ He looked over at me hesitantly, ‘The guy I know is called Job, and he’s on the second ring of one of the islands. You sure that you don’t want to go all the way to the center with me? I got plenty of extra microscopes, and I’ll teach you all I know. With your expertise in optics, you’ll soon be building even better ones, and no doubt go on to establish *yourself* in the hallowed halls of those who have made the tiniest journeys ever.’

‘How close to the center is Job?’

‘Nowhere as close I as plan to get. And he’ll probably require some cash for his services, just like me. I imagine he’ll clean out whatever you got left.’

My mind was preoccupied with every other possibility of what that sack of cold, precious cash might have achieved. I stared sornily at the few remaining notes left inside. ‘Cash,’ I whispered into the bag, quiet enough so that Santa couldn’t hear me, ‘I never knew that little pieces of paper could elicit such powerful feelings. As much as a letter from a friend. I’ll never know another piece of paper like you.’

‘Did you hear me, boy!’ Santa shouted. ‘Job’ll suck every last drop outta you! This is your last chance: you either go find him or you head with me toward the center! You’ll probably never have the possibility of journeying as far to the interior as you do now!’

I didn’t doubt that Santa was a more-than-competent microscopist. A few times I watched him peering into the neck of his whiskey bottle, looking through to the bottom of the paper bag. One eye was closed, his brows were furrowed, and there was little doubt that the man had mastery over complicated light refracting magnification devices. But I still wasn’t convinced that I wanted to follow him on his last journey –

just so we could magnify the center *slightly more* than the last guy managed. I had other things to do.

I communicated my decision to Santa with my eyes, and he nodded solemnly. He jerked the wheel hard to the left – so sudden that I lost my balance and fell over, banging my bandaged head on the sparkling clean lifeboat tied to the polished rails.

‘We drop you off then!’ he declared.

The spots of land that I had seen on the horizon were much nearer. The vessel looked to be heading for a natural harbor at the outer perimeter of one of the islands. Santa guided it in toward what looked like an abandoned dock.

‘Get your things together, boy, and get ready to jump off the side of the boat as we pass by! I can’t stop, not even to say goodbye! If I do, this whole ship’ll tank! The polish will fade! The propeller at the prow will stop spinning! My cocktail will disappear! Me and the ship’ll drop like a rock to sleep with the fishes! And if that happens, then my hopes are dead for embarking on what will probably be my last attempt to make it to the center! So get ready to hop off, and godspeed to you! Tell Job that Santa sent you! Tell him to send one my way every once in awhile!’

I walked over to the starboard side of the ship, where there was a small gap in the railing. Santa straightened the ship out of a gentle turn. With expert precision, he manoeuvred it so close to the side of the abandoned dock that I was able to casually step across. As soon as I did, he turned the wheel hard for open water, orienting himself for what might be his last approach toward the centre. He winked at me, tipped his hat, and nodded. I nodded back, wishing him well on his way.

I stood there watching him glide away, not really knowing which direction I should go. I could see him pick up an umbrella cocktail and take a sip. Then he shouted, ‘Follow the signs, boy!’

As I walked along the dock toward land, I wondered just how small Santa would manage to define before he died camped out at the edge of his infinitesimal frontiers. I wondered whether he cared that in his quest for the tiniest lakes and islands, he’d destroy untold numbers of the just-larger-than-tiniest-ones. If he made sure that he camped out in the same place all the time, and that any footsteps he made in the vicinity of the final frontier were always within the boundaries of the first set of irreversibly destructive steps, then he might minimize the extent of damage he wreaked on the center of it all. But that was a best case scenario.

Looking around, I spotted a gnarled old sign nailed to a spindly old post which was planted on the edge of what looked like a path at the end of the dock. On it was carved the words, ‘Preservation Institute.’ That must be the place. Its orientation was only slightly aligned with the path, but fortunately I could only follow the path in one direction.

I wandered along for miles, with little beyond brush and scrub in sight. The only things of note were a bridge or two, and a few other shoddy wooden signs posted along the way on which were carved the same thing: ‘Preservation Institute.’ Focussed too much on what the next sign might tell me about where I had been and whether where I was headed was correct, I had lost all sense of orientation with respect to the coast where I’d landed. I couldn’t tell if the path I was on ran parallel to the coast, whether I was moving toward or away from the interior, or if I was simply crossing rivers that pointed toward the center like spokes on a wheel.

As I carried on, I could see a sort of cylinder against the horizon. I had no idea what ring of islands I was on.

What had looked like a cylindrical building in the distance turned out to be a circular gate. Another one. I knocked, and a small panel in the door opened. Some crazy sounding woman's voice spoke to me, 'Can I help you?'

'Santa sent me; he said I could find his friend here.'

She asked, 'What are you looking for?'

I recited what I had read on the signs that had led me there, 'the Preservation Institute.'

She closed the little shutter through which she had spoken. I heard shuffling, and then there was a creak as a door that hadn't opened for a long time was perturbed from its stationary state. Its opening was followed by the same woman's voice welcoming me in. Wondering to myself why so much of what I'd encountered so far in this tale was in the shape of a circle, I stepped inside with nothing but a few ragged notes of cash strapped to my back.

The woman inside looked at me like she had a million and one things to say with nobody to say them to. She'd been keeping the gate for a good long time in silence, and was bursting with conversation whose simultaneity appeared to be cancelling itself out. No wonder her voice sounded so nuts.

But dealing with nuts was turning out to be one of my specialties, so I was undaunted, and ventured to open the tap and speak with her, 'You know Job? Is he the guy that runs this place?'

She looked at me. Her eyes were glazed with millions of thoughts and words banging around in her brain trying to escape whichever orifice they could manage to squeak out of – nose, ears, eyes, mouth. But all that the simultaneous chaos could manage was annihilation, resulting in a reasonably sensible exchange.

'Yes I know Job. He's the chief librarian, and he's just like the building.'

I surveyed the area inside the gate once again. There was a cylindrical building with a single story. No windows. It was so old it looked like it was made out of old coal.

'What do you mean, he's just like the building?'

'Well, like everybody, 90% of him is hidden and secret stuff that you can't see. Like an iceberg.'

Ignoring her description of Job, I instead honed in on what she was saying about everyone else.

'You think everyone is like an iceberg? I'd be tempted to agree, if you meant that everyone was like an island, or they were cold, or they were carried by currents, but not because 90% of them is what you can't see. How do you know it's there if you can't see it?'

'How do you know it's not?'

Another powerful mind, but I answered back anyway, 'You're saying that people are mostly made up of things that you and they don't even know about?'

She nodded and declared, 'Absolutely.'

I fired back, ‘If I ask you to tell me about the 90% under-the-surface of any given person walking down the street, you cant give me any more detail than the fact that it’s there. 90% of who-knows-what. That kind of talk drives me crazy. Maybe you’re right that 90% of a person is what you don’t see, but maybe you’re not. There’s no way to tell. Why not look them in the face, and let that be that. It’s called taking things at face value. Why saddle them with other less obvious dimensions until you *actually* encounter them – if you even encounter any at all.’

‘Fine. Take all those bandages off your face, and it will be easier for me to take *you* at face value.’

‘I can’t,’ I sighed.

‘Why not?’

‘It’s too long of a story. It goes all the way back to the beginning...’

‘See?’ she said, grinning at me and looking me right in the eyes. The long lonely insanity oozing out of her eyes was reassuringly comforting.

Clearly unaware that she’d made her point in dramatic fashion, she carried on with the iceberg talk anyway, ‘You know what – if you were the captain of a large ship gliding through an icy ocean, and decided to take everything at face value, you would come to a sad end. You’d see a little piece of ice floating on the water, and you’d assume that was it. I tell you what, you’d end up wishing you’d known that most of it is hidden under the water, just like your face.’

All I could offer back to her was this, ‘I’m just worried it could get ridiculous – I might even convince myself that words scribbled on the pages of a book have *real* people underneath.’

She rolled her eyes at me, ‘Let me see if Job has any time for you.’

She came back a few moments later. ‘He said he’s been expecting you.’

I was puzzled how he knew I was on my way, but so be it.

She led me through the circular courtyard to a small dark stone door in the cylindrical building. ‘Down those stairs,’ she gestured as she opened the door.

I stepped to the edge of the door, looking into a blackness pierced by nothing but dim little torches that wound down alongside the stairs.

## As close as you're gonna get

I put my ear down that tunnel, cause for the purposes of deciphering what the hell might be down there, my eyesight was pretty useless. My ears could make out faint cries that echoed from below.

'Job'll be waiting for me at the bottom?' I asked the woman.

'If he knew that you were coming, then don't worry – he'll find you once you get down there. I told you that this building is like an iceberg. He lives at the base.'

I nodded, and started down into the blackness. The noise of crying or shouting – whatever it was, I couldn't tell – grew louder; it could be anything. I was winding winding winding down down down, passing the solitary flickering torches one by one, alone with the reverberating sound of my footsteps. Finally I drew near the end.

Not yet fully descended to the bottom, I got a glimpse of the chamber into which I was headed. There were endless stacks of books and shelves full of words, lit softly from the floor, and stretching on and on and on into blackness. People were scattered about the stacks, all wearing robes with hoods covering their heads. They were browsing, and they looked like professionals – silent and serious. I could still hear the noises I had heard when I began my descent, but had no idea where they came from. All I could tell was that they were getting closer.

A man who looked like a taller, thinner Santa was striding toward me. He looked full of life, a distinct contrast to the initial impression I had formed of this place – bleary, expansive, and solitary. As he approached, I heard him say, 'Welcome... Welcome to the library of Babel. The more rare and precious the manuscripts, the deeper we dig and the farther down we put them. We're the deepest darkest book repository that's ever been.'

He could sense that I was confused as hell, like I had been by pretty much everyone and everything I'd met for awhile now. 'Forgive me for the tone,' he said, 'but that's the standard introduction to our collection. Mechanical, I know, but it's part of the job. Please just do your best to endure it. We'll have plenty of time to speak frankly later.' Gesturing toward the stacks and stacks of books, he cleared his throat and resumed his marketing tone, 'You're probably wondering how it is that we've managed to preserve so many manuscripts.' I actually *was* quite curious, but his voice was managing to dissolve the bulk of my interest. He carried on, 'the real innovation was to take the whole operation *underground*. For aeons, we wasted thousands and thousands of slave-years building free-standing *above-ground* preservatories, but something would inevitably neutralize our efforts – tornadoes, hurricanes, cyclones, large hailstones... all manner of trials and tribulations, mostly involving violent storms and blustery winds sent down from the heavens. And the ensuing rain would inevitably wash all our precious words right off their pages. All that effort, over and over and over again, only to meet the same fate every time.' He lifted his hands to the ceiling indicating the expanse of the chamber, and raised his head, 'But down here, sheltered from the heavens and the winds, we've dug and dug and dug for centuries

upon centuries with no major incidents. That's the main reason we've been so successful preserving the words of god.'

He carried on looking up at the ceiling, like he was enraptured, and then abruptly looked over at me, 'The only thing that could scupper our efforts down here are disturbances emanating from the bowels of the earth.'

'Are we speaking frankly now?' I asked.

He nodded.

'How did you know that I was coming?' I asked him.

'Santa got in touch and told me that you were on your way. He told me about your face.'

'You know Santa?' I enquired.

'Yes, we go way back... way way back...' he trailed off before continuing, shaking his head, 'I hope that you didn't have to tolerate him for too long, telling the same tired old stories day after day after day with nothing better to do than stare at his tattered old ship, clutching at a paper bag.'

'Santa wanted me to go to the center with him –' I said, before I was cut off.

Job rolled his eyes, 'Ever since I've known him, that Santa's been completely obsessed about journeying to the interior. It's part of what makes him so endearing, but also so pathetic.'

'Pathetic?' I crinkled my forehead at him. I felt a sudden urge to defend old Santa, 'what's so pathetic about a guy that wants to go deeper than anyone's ever gone before? It's something to do. And I could think of a lot worse.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' Job nodded at me, 'Santa's mind *is* focused, and he will wax eloquently for hours about the purity of his pursuit toward the center, and how the disgusting tourists have tainted our islands with their insatiable triviality... But, as you will come to discover, my boy, the *real* visionaries don't bother trying to magnify the interior. They don't bother with the tedium of chasing infinite regress toward the center. They stay out here. On the outer rings where they can see it all with out troubling over its tedium.'

I looked at him quizzically, and he carried on, 'All of it – *the whole god-forsaken structure* – it's lakes within islands within lakes within islands within lakes within islands, and on and on and on... you know this, my boy. You know this. I don't need to tell you. I'm sure Santa drilled it into you. But Santa misses the most important part of it all: the bigger lakes and islands *include* the smaller ones. *And it doesn't work the other way around.*' He stopped for a moment, and gestured for me to follow him. He led me to a massive star chart, hung from the ceiling. The tiny little white, yellow, and blue stars, floating in their constellations, sparkled against their black background.

'You're an astronomer too, huh? Just like Santa,' I remarked.

'*Of course* we're astronomers in here. We're the ones that *print* these star charts that you keep finding everywhere around this story.'

He led me over to another star chart, different from the last one. His pride in it was tangible as he announced, 'This one was made an explorer of ours that managed to journey to the most expansive island anybody's ever been to.' The chart – which I presumed was hung from the ceiling but couldn't be sure because it merged with

blackness as I looked up – draped all the way down to the floor. Instead of individual stars, like I had seen on the other chart, this one had all sorts of little speckled galaxies – tight spirals, loose spirals, some that looked like unintentional spiders, and some that were more diffuse, like dusty radiant clouds. Each had its own distinctive colors.

Job intently watched me as I examined the chart, ‘These are the biggest islands that we’ve been able to map, captured from as far away as it’s possible to be.’

‘So which one are *we* on?’ I asked him casually.

He hesitated, and stammered slightly, ‘Ours isn’t on the chart.’

I looked at him confused, ‘Why not? Whoever made this chart forgot to include it?’

He shook his head, ‘No, no... It’s simply that it’s not yet possible to get far enough away from *here* to take a picture of it. We’re much better at charting everything else.’ He looked down at his feet, clearly embarrassed that I had asked him the one question he hoped I hadn’t, ‘Rest assured though – we’ve got people working around the clock to fix this. Even now, we have explorers who are trying to get farther and farther away till all of this –’ he gestured around at everything ‘– becomes so distant it ceases to even be a speck on a star chart. Then we’ll be able to have a picture with *our* island alongside all the others.’

I responded to him, ‘Well, it sounds like maybe you and Santa are towing opposite sides of the same line. He can’t get close enough. You can’t get far enough. No wonder you guys are friends.’

Job shook his head in disagreement, affirming that their projects were *not* the same, ‘you made a wise decision not go with him to the center. Mark my words, Santa’ll go to his grave camped out there on the edge of his collapsing fantasy. And the closer he thinks he’s getting, the more it’ll suffocate him.’ Job looked at me somberly, ‘What Santa should do – and it’ll most likely never happen – is look up from his microscope one day to the opposite horizon. He’d see that the islands where he spends all of his time are a lot smaller than the ones where we spend *ours*, out here on the outer rings.’

I nodded my head, ‘Yeah, well, good luck telling *him* that. He thinks that anyone out here on the outer rings is nothing more than a prosaic voyeur.’

‘Well, our project *is* larger than his, and the lineage of this place,’ Job said gesturing at all the stacks, ‘goes back much deeper into the depths of time. While Santa chases his tiny little fantasy, we’re looking for the most expansive vantage points a man can get. *We’re the ones* locating the biggest islands there are,’ he said with his eyes flashing at me. ‘His entire project fits into our charts, but his charts can’t include ours.’

‘But your explorers’ charts are so big that they totally miss him,’ I responded. ‘I understand that *in principle* your charts *could* contain Santa’s, and his could never contain yours. *But practically*, it’s a moot point – neither contains the other.’

Job seemed to ignore me. He led me on, flanked by stacks and stacks of books. The noises that I’d heard when I first began making my way down the stairs were drawing nearer. ‘An unfortunate consequence of our project is that most of the explorers that have set out to make the star charts that I’ve just shown you have been unable to find their way back home...’ he said, trailing off.

‘Not so different than what happens to guys like Santa,’ I mused.

I changed the subject to something that was growing increasingly difficult to ignore, 'what are those sounds? I've been hearing them ever since I came down here.'

'Mostly it's the junior librarians, but some senior ones too,' Job replied.

'What's going on?'

'All sorts of things – the hum of some printing presses, the sound of typewriters clicking away. But up here, most of what you hear is the cacophony of copulation, and all the arguing and annoyance and inconsequential pettiness that goes along with it.'

'Aren't you guys supposed to be busy preserving god?' was all I could offer as a response.

Job corrected me, stammering slightly, 'We preserve *the recorded words of god*.'

'Then why aren't your guys busy doing that? Steada hooting and hollering and copulating?'

'Listen boy, whenever you get a group of people together, that's what happens. This subterranean sanctuary is no exception. There's lots of, shall we say, *atypical*, sexual behavior that takes place anywhere. Put people in a dark underground fortress like this, and it becomes even weirder. It's been that way for a long time. *god himself* ordained it to start this way, ever since he took a fancy for fresh young virgins. Him whose words and actions we go to such lengths to preserve, is the original weirdo.'

The commotion was intensifying. I could hear the sound of frustrated shouting, a door slamming, and the patter of feet as two shadows flitted across our path, scampering through the aisles of words. A young wiry man was chasing an old, fat man, yelling something about peace and quiet and all that damn racket coming from his room all the time.

Job was leading me toward a small archway that I could just make out in the distant darkness. 'Please excuse those two,' he said, 'They've been having problems for awhile now.'

'I'm sick of all that noise you're making! It's a real disturbance!' one of them shouted.

'I've been doing it that loud for years down here and I'm not gonna stop now, so you better get used to it, you little twink!' the other shot back.

'Yeah, well if you're gonna do it so loud, then I'm gonna bang on your door like a crazy man till you simmer down!'

'You better not!' the other shouted back. 'It'll ruin the mood!'

The sound of their argument was getting further and further away, until I could barely make it out anymore. All I heard was, 'Well, it's an eye for an eye then! I'm not gonna sit back and let you disturb my studies! I'll teach you...' they both trailed off.

'This kind of thing is normal?' I wondered aloud.

'It takes different forms,' Job said. 'If it's a public noise, then it's a public nuisance, so it's a public discussion – that's the motto we've adopted up on *these* levels. Believe me, it's much more democratic than what goes on in the deepest chambers.'

'Is it all men in here?'

‘They’re the only ones with any real power, unburdened with procreation.’

‘So it’s run by a bunch of gays?’

‘Well, there’s all manner of interesting behavior in here. For the purposes of this tale, it’s probably best to just leave it at that,’ he winked at me.

I followed him as he strode forward silently with the tail of his robe dragging behind. In the periphery of my vision, a glint caught my eye. I turned my eyes to see a smallish statue. It was a gold cow with eyes made of rubies. It stood silently chewing its cud.

We arrived at the door and descended down, down, down – flickering torches again cast dancing shadows on the walls as far as my bandaged eyes could make out below. We reached a landing where there was a heavy cast-iron door. The knob was smack in the center of the door, and above it was a brass plaque emblazoned with an upside down number “2”. Job ignored the door, and silently padded his way across the landing to the next set of stairs, continuing our descent. I asked him where we were going.

‘We’re going to the core,’ he paused, stroking his beard thoughtfully. ‘Is that OK with you?’ As he said this, his teeth glinted at me. ‘We have access to much deeper and more expansive magic than the trivial roads that Santa treads, stalled out for years on the difference between a lake and circular river.’ And then he turned to me quizzically, ‘You’re not another tourist, are you? Cause I don’t generally make a habit of leading them where I’m about to take you.’

I didn’t know what to say to Job. All that came out was, ‘I’m a guy that cares about the core, but doesn’t want to get stuck there. How deep does this place go?’

He didn’t answer me, but seemed satisfied with my answer. We carried on with our descent.

‘You’ve heard of Moses?’ I heard Job say. I couldn’t tell if he was rasping at me or speaking with me. Weird how much his tone seemed to change with our descent. He didn’t wait for me to respond, ‘Moses’ problem was that he wasn’t protected. He went up to meet god on top of a mountain. But on the top of that mountain – the wind blowing violently, sharp mountain passes, snow storms popping up all over the place, not enough oxygen to breath, and the ever present threat of avalanche – god could have his way, in all his glory and power. Moses was gone for so long on the top of that mountain to get god’s commandments, Moses’ people got restless waiting and wondering where he was.’

We silently padded over another landing, with an upside down “3” emblazoned on the door.

Job led me across the landing and continued, ‘They got so bored waiting around that they went and ordered Moses’ helper Aaron to build for them a different god. So Aaron ordered the people to bring him all their most valuable symbols of commitment and holiness and devotion. Aaron threw the whole mess of gold and jewels into a huge fire that he had the people build, and behold, another god emerged – one which had been forged from the raw material of their own sacred symbols. You can imagine what transpired: they got so excited that they engaged in all manner of drinking, sucking, sinning and fucking. Moses up on the mountaintop, mortal as he was, couldn’t see it. But god, in all his might and splendor, saw it very clearly, and filled Moses in on all the details. Moses was distraught, and pleaded his people’s case for

days, telling god not to overreact. Eventually god relented, gave Moses the commandments, and told him to get the hell out of there.’

We padded over the next landing – an upside down number “4” on the door this time.

Job continued as we stepped onto the next flight of stairs, ‘Up on the mountain, Moses secretly suspected that god was exaggerating, but when Moses finally made his way down, he found the situation to be pretty much just as god had described. He was so pissed off that he took the commandments, which were written on tablets of stone, and shattered them on the ground into hundreds of tiny little pieces so that they were forever lost beyond recognition. Then he ground into dust the god that had been forged in the fire, and made the people drink it.’

Another landing – an upside down number “5”. Job silently made his way across it, weaving between some old mops and cloths and things that some janitor must have left out.

‘Moses had to go back up to the top of the mountain to get the commandments from god all over again.’

We padded on quietly, and passed over yet another landing.

After we had crossed it, Job spoke again, ‘There’s a number of things we’ve improved on since Moses... First, never go to meet god in his element. Moses put himself at risk. We tame the risk by locating it in the depths of the earth where there’s no wind, no snow, no mountain passes, and no precipitation of any sort. Absolutely no surprises whatsoever. It smells slightly of mold, and it’s dark. They say that Moses’ face was glowing when he came down from that mountain, having been in the presence of god. Well, nobody’s faces are glowing when they come out of here. Even yours will go dim. The only light that gets down there is from our torches. We preserve god’s words better than anyone. Way better.’

We passed silently over another landing, and when we had again begun our descent, Job continued, ‘Second, we’ve recognized that instead of god commenting on *your* behavior, it’s much better if you can find a way to comment on *his*. I think that you’ll understand this better after you meet Father Friedrich.’

‘Who’s father Friedrich?’ I asked.

‘He’s the priest that manages the Holy of Holies.’

We carried on for awhile in silence, ‘The third thing we’ve got better than Moses is pretty much a re-emphasis of the first: avoid mountains as much as possible. They’re very treacherous, especially if god’s up there waiting for you at the summit. He’s capable of anything, he’s got a nasty temper, and he’s very unpredictable.’

‘And the last thing we’ve got better than Moses is this: if you are going to write down what god said, then use a less awkward material than tablets of stone. We’ve recorded pretty much everything that god has ever uttered, or even *dreamed* of uttering. And it wouldn’t have been possible if all we had were tablets of stone to chisel. Faith is memory, my boy. Memory is easier to remember with words, and words leave precious little space for the imagination’s flights of fancy – so writing them in quantities as large as possible is pretty important if god is going to be accurately preserved.’

We carried on down, down, down. We passed a door with an “8” written on it. Whether it was upside down or rightside up I couldn’t tell. ‘How many more levels are there?’ I asked

‘You’ll see,’ Job said. He took a few more steps down before he spoke again, ‘Moses went up to the heights. We go down to the depths. Much more sensible. Never be so bold as to go up to the heights and meet god. It’s a much safer option to be humble and keep him down on your level. If you can see *him* clearly, then it doesn’t matter if he can see you.’

We descended down more stairs silently, passing one more landing. Then more stairs, and we had finally arrived at the bottom. No more stairs. Job pulled from the depths of his flowing robes a tired pair of old keys that he treated like magic. He unlocked and opened a door leading into a room that was dark, silent, and just a touch damp.

‘Now let’s see how we do with a little light,’ he said, as he lit a few lamps that were mounted on the walls.

‘Now my son, tell me why is it that you have set out on this madness in the first place.’

My tongue was frozen.

He asked me again, ‘Why is it that you have set out on this madness?’

Still my tongue was frozen, so he answered for me, ‘Is it not because you have wanted to see the original immortal words of god, preserved for all time?’

My face was frozen, my tongue tangled, and my mouth motionless. There was a desk in the middle of the room. The shelves were full of codices and papyrus sheets. Scattered pages, bits of papyri, and larger volumes lay everywhere.

Job pulled a tattered codex from a shelf, dusted it off, and said, ‘Well, this is about the closest that you’re gonna get.’

He spread it out before me: ‘Here they are, boy: the words of god, of his messengers, of his prophets, of his miscreants, of his gangsters, of his redeemers, and most important of all,’ he smiled, ‘*of his recorders.*’

‘Have a browse,’ Job nodded. ‘Any idea what you’re looking for?’ I picked up a dusty volume, and turned a few blank pages till I arrived at the beginning.

So this was it. The original words of god. I softly began reading them aloud:

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‘Those are the words of the recorders,’ Job clarified.

Job didn’t know that I *hadn’t* actually come all this way to find the original words of god. I’d come for another reason, which I would eventually reveal to him, but for the time being, I was amused at these ancient words of the bum whose fist had touched my face. I picked up a different and much older volume, with very heavy pages. I turned to its first page.

So this was it. The original words of god. I softly began reading them aloud:

*TO THE MOST HIGH AND MIGHTY PERSON  
THAT IS IN CHARGE  
ALL POWERFUL, FEARSOME, DEFENDER OF THE FAITH, ETC.  
THE TRANSLATORS OF THIS VOLUME WISH YOU  
GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE*

I furrowed my brows just to check with Job, ‘Are *these* the words of god?’

‘No, those words are spoken by the *custodians* of the word of god, to satisfy whoever was in charge at the time.’

‘Does god ever start speaking first?’ I asked.

‘Not if *we* have anything to do with it,’ Job responded. ‘Before the word could become flesh, the flesh had to become words. If the word is going to save, it first needs to be saved – points which us recorders always go to great pains to emphasize *before* we let god start speaking.’

Through my bandaged face, I spotted a small cracked mirror lying on the desk.

‘What’s that?’ I pointed.

‘That’s how we used to keep god from going anywhere, so that we could interrogate him and write down everything he said. You might have thought that containing somebody as powerful as god would require a massive structure, but alas, it didn’t. All we needed to keep him down here was this little mirror. You see, he couldn’t get enough of people gazing at his image – but anybody who looked him in the face died almost immediately – which meant that the only person able to gaze upon god was god *himself*. He was never able to wrench himself away from staring at how great he was. And we were happy to keep him occupied looking into anything that wasn’t our faces. He stared at himself for aeons, answering almost anything we asked. All that we had to do was flatter him a little now and again. It was a dream come true. But it all ended very badly,’ Job said, shaking his head. ‘We should have seen it coming.’

I interrupted Job’s silence, ‘What happened?’

‘He was too hung up with how great he was for his own good. He was jealous, his vengeance was arbitrary and erratic, and the older he got, the worse it got. Slowly but surely, god put an end to every single one of the monks that came down here to record his words. It was always over small things – they would ask him to repeat himself, or they would read back to him something that he wished he hadn’t said, or they would ask to have one little glimpse of his glorious face. It got so bad that we couldn’t convince anybody to come down here and record his words anymore. And as the attention and questions grew sparser and sparser, all he had left to do was gaze at his own isolated image in the mirror.’

‘Pretty soon, he forgot how to think about anything other than himself. He stopped eating. He stopped drinking. All he did was comb his hair all day long and stare into this little mirror, looking at himself. Nobody was brave enough to come down and ask him questions anymore. He got thinner and thinner and his eyes grew more and more vacant as the days passed. One day, the janitor came down here to tidy up, and god

was nowhere to be seen. He was gone. We're still not sure what happened. Our best guess is that he became so slight, he evaporated straight into thin air – right through the cracks in the door. All that was left is his little mirror. And all you can see when you look into it is yourself. Thus it came to pass that god disappeared with a whimper, and not a bang. What an end.'

I looked at the mirror. Nothing particularly odd about it. Just an ordinary little mirror. I saw my bandaged face. I hadn't looked at myself since this story began, and the combination of my puffy eyes and the dimly lit room meant that I could barely see what I looked like.

I stood up and looked Job in the eyes, mustering all my energy to remember why I was down here: 'The reason for my bandages is because the fist of a bum called god was planted on my face after I bought him a beer. He told me that he was imprisoned for years down here and that it sapped the life out of him. He hinted that he might come back to visit. I'm on his trail, cause I wanna find him and show him my face, in all of its mangled and infected glory. And maybe give him a taste of his own medicine...' I trailed off.

Job responded thoughtfully, 'god's a senile nut these days. I'm sure that you're not the first person whose face has touched his fist. He spouts all kinds of nonsense, and the fact that he's usually drunk means he can't remember half of it.'

There were a few moments of awkward silence, with Job able to sense that this wasn't perhaps the dramatic climax I'd been anticipating since this story began. He said, 'Boy, you're making me kind of nervous sitting here staring at me like that. I don't know what to say to you. You're likely looking for something that's not there. If you want to find god, then it sounds like you already did before he decked you. If you want to see more of him, then you can try to go up to the mountaintop like Moses did, and tell god that you want to see his face. But that's risky business, and usually ends up a doomed quest. If you can't find god where he found you in the first place – speaking right into your ear without any warning at all – then good luck on the mountaintop.'

'I haven't seen god down here for years, and you saying that he was gonna stop by – well, that's news to me. Nobody around here has seen him for years. We don't worry any more about finding him or recording his words. No new words of his have been recorded for aeons. Nowadays all we do is preserve what we have. Old Friedrich's the only one around here that says he still sometimes bumps into him. All I can offer you is that we go and see him.'

We both stared at the floor silently. I took a last survey of the place. Time was drawing to a close.

Job got up and he silently led me through a small room with the printing press. Small metallic letters were scattered all over the floor, and the place was littered with pages. Job glided across the mess in his flowing robes, 'Father Friedrich is just about ready to perform the sacrament. You can ask him whether he's seen the bum you're looking for.'

In the corner of the room housing the press was a small door. Job pulled a key out of his robe, put it into the lock, turned it smooth as silk, and opened the door so as not to make its rusty hinges tremble too much.

## The last homily

From where we were standing, looking through the open door, we saw lots of backs – all clothed in the same dark flowing robes that Job was wearing. All attention was directed toward a man who was stood at the front.

Job turned to me. His silent gesture communicated what I suspected. Friedrich.

His homily was underway:

‘In the early days wherefore the youth of our god transpireth, never did god planneth on having to plan. Mostly didst he occupieth himself labouring alongside his father. Together didst they toileth many days and many nights, and thus there cameth forth one day an enormous big bang, whose very clamor didst shaketh the foundations of all that was. And so it was that his father’s tongue was forthwith severed, and only later didst they succeed to reattacheth it unto his mouth. Never again couldst young god discerneth exactly what the hecketh his father say unto him. In the aftermath which didst follow the big bang, silence grew, and so did god. And all the time didst his family shower him with remarks about how much older he didst look unto them.’

‘As time moveth on, god didst leaveth in his wake the years akin unto milestones. Never saweth he as 10 didst approacheth. Likewise 14 didst passeth him by, like the comets that hurtleth through the night sky.’

‘As 18 didst appear unto god upon the horizon, his family didst softly begin to murmur unto themselves that the time approacheth wherefore god shouldst shoulder the burden of the germinating humans left thereunto him by his father, who didst not have a working tongue.’

‘No sooner was it that god heareth these murmurs, wherefore didst he resolve to ignore them. However, so loud unto him didst the murmurs grow that no longer was god able to avoideth the inheritance left unto him by his father.’

‘Shortly thereafter god didst begin to bear the responsibility of the humans left unto him by his father. Thus didst god learn that his father, in the time whenst his tongue yet remaineth, had given unto these humans the name Israelites.’

‘A troublesome bother unto god the Israelites wouldst have been, had not the Egyptians looketh after them. However, soon didst it come to pass that the Egyptians tireth of the Israelite people, and relinquisheth them unto god. Thus did god findeth himself increasing in levels of stress and irritation.’

‘The years moveth on like beacons, and so did the face of god. Thus didst it wear thin with trials, cares, and tribulations. And god did muse thereunto himself that the pace at which time moveth seem much faster now than it didst in earlier years long since passed.’

Father Friedrich suddenly stopped, catching everybody off guard. Even Job seemed surprised at the change in Friedrich’s tone.

‘My children, I have some unexpected news to pass on to you: god passed away. He had a number of health problems in his waning days, and it all proved too much for

even him to overcome. Not many people turned up to old god's funeral, but those that did – they all agreed on one thing: god was a tough old coot. That's why his death was such a surprise.'

Friedrich's homily was over. Nobody was really sure of its point. My mind was wandering, and he was up there now carrying on with the rest of the ceremony, turning the bread into meat and the wine into blood, just like he'd done so many times. But then something snapped.

He put the bread and wine down, and shouted venomously at the docile congregation, 'Does anyone remember how old god was when he died?!'

Nobody still awake and listening to Friedrich cared much how old god was when he died. It was immaterial so far as the bread and wine ritual was concerned.

For some unknown reason, Friedrich cared, and when he didn't get a response, he broke ritual. It was unprecedented, and everyone in the congregation was shuffling nervously, even Job. Right there on the altar, Friedrich abandoned all the instruments required for turning the bread into meat and the water into wine, and stepped into a wooden lectern at the side of the altar.

'A reading from the curated volumes recorded by me,' he began.

'Jesus Christ walketh through Galilee, speaking unto the people of love.'

'A man cometh up to him and sayeth,'

'Jesus Christ, what must I doeth so that I shall be saved?'

'Jesus perchanceth to look upon the man who asketh this question unto him.'

'All manner of riches adorneth the man. His watch shineth. His robes floweth forth, his hair was heldeth in place like rivers of black stone, and he drinketh naught less it be expensive unto him.'

'Cigar smoke poureth forth from his mouth, which he henceforth did bloweth in the face of Jesus, and also into the face of a woman clungeth to his arm.'

'And thus did Jesus consider to himself in the depth of his own thought, 'What words shall I speak unto him who asketh this question of me?'

'Jesus knoweth not immediately what response to render forth. Thus didst he muttereth to himself the name that the man hath only just spoken unto him:'

'Jesus Christ ...'

'And then did Jesus grinneth to himself and feeleth relief. He looketh at the man's robes that floweth forth, his hair like rivers of black stone, his beverages of great expense, the cigar smoke that bloweth forth from his mouth, and the young woman clungeth to his arm.'

'Jesus pauseth, to clear forthwith his throat, and sayeth the following proclamation unto the man, which had becometh unto Jesus clear as day: 'I shall speaketh forth unto you what you must do. Goeth forth, and sell every possession that bindeth you to the present form of this world so that you riddeth yourself of it. For such burdens shall be too tiresome to bear.'

Friedrich continued. Everyone was mesmerized.

‘Forthwith didst Jesus Christ findeth himself in the garden at night, and eateth of the pomegranate, which fruit didst constituteth his favorite amongst the vast plenty of the gardens.’

‘Spenteth was he from speaking unto the people of love in the heat of the day.’

‘And hark, the peace of Jesus was broken by a man who spieth him in the garden and walketh up to him and asketh, ‘Jesus Christ, say unto me the key that shall unlock a mystery wherefore you have spoken. Tell me, how shall I be born anew, if I cannot re-entereth into the womb of my mother?’

‘The beard of Jesus streameth forth with the rivers of his beloved pomegranate.’

‘He gazeth into the eyes of the man, to discern his spirit.’

‘The man’s robes floweth forth. Even the emblazoning upon his collar didst stinketh of gold. The man concealeth his eyes with dark glasses even though the sun be not shining forthwith. But the eyes of Jesus poureth forth like the sun, and he again didst muttereth to himself the name that the man had uttered unto him.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘And sayeth forth Jesus, ‘the manner of your rebirth shall be as this: ye will go up unto the mountain, and your descent shall make your face shine as one reborn.’

Friedrich stopped reading, and looked over the entire congregation. Then he instructed Job to bring forth the guest.

Job gently prodded me toward Friedrich, indicating that I was to make my way up to the front. Alone. Friedrich beckoned.

I stepped up to the altar and he motioned for me to kneel on some small red pillows lying at the side of the altar. As I did, I could see the hooded faces of the entire congregation, riveted by the fact that something unprecedented was about to happen.

Friedrich looked at me and said, ‘And now shall you be dealt all possible answers and all possible questions.’

He led me to the book that he had just read from, and instructed me to read the words on the page. The recorded words of god, he had said they were.

I looked upon the massive pages of the enormous bound volume lying open on the lectern, reading out the first words that my eyes fell upon: ‘ye will go up unto the mountain, and your descent shall make your face shine as one reborn.’

Friedrich waited for me to continue, but I didn’t.

He waited some more, but I still didn’t continue.

He waited a good long while, like he was expecting something more.

I was silent.

Friedrich nodded, ‘so it is. And so it shall be.’ He crossed himself, and held a red sack in front of me. He waited. I stared at him, unclear what the sack was all about. He pointed at the sack on my back, and indicated that if I wanted this story to go on, I best empty out whatever contents were left. Santa had warned me that these guys would clean me out. I took the pack off my back, untied the top of it, turned it upside down, and out fell the few loose bits of cash that were left. Satisfied that I was totally

cleaned out and there was no more hiding in my sack, Friedrich placed the red sack behind the altar.

He crossed himself again, and flung a little bit of holy water at me. He picked up two torches, and drew them nearer and nearer, till they were touching one another right in front of my bandaged face.

As he did so, the dim light in the room began to fade, until the place was pitch black, and I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. I couldn't see Friedrich, I couldn't see the altar, I couldn't see any sign of the congregation, and I couldn't see any sign of Job. No lectern, no volume, no pages, no letters, no torches, no nothing.

Too dark to see anything. Just darkness darkness darkness.

## The mountaintop

One by one, the thick darkness in which I suddenly found myself immersed was pierced with what at first looked like flickering candles, but which I soon determined were the dingy yellow glows of sodium street lamps.

A dark skinned black guy on a tiny little bicycle rode past me. His bike was so small that he had to have his butt off of the seat to avoid his legs banging into his chin.

‘You up here lookin’ for da stars, mon?’ he said to me with a thick accent.

‘No, I’m fine. Thanks though.’

Another black guy on another small bicycle passed by, wearing a hood, and narrowly missing banging his knees into his chin with each pedal stroke. Out of the darkness, with a quiet urgency, I heard, ‘you up here lookin’ to finda stars, mon?’

Wherever I was – wherever Friedrich had transported me – all I could see of these black guys besides the glint of their little bike frames was the glint of their white teeth.

‘No, I’m fine. Thanks though.’

Slowly my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I looked around. I was sitting on a bench in a small tree-lined park. Here and there were scattered other people on benches. The little bicycles combed the park, their riders’ knees-a-circling.

I could hear somebody approaching my bench in the dark. As he drew nearer, I was able to make out a little bit of him. Another black guy. And he was sauntering – his hands were in his pockets, and a grin was on his face. He was decked out in his finest: a black silk shirt, a leather jacket, pressed black trousers, and shiny black shoes. And he was saunt-er-ing, strutting like he planned on being looked at. As he approached, he stopped at a bench with some people on it, one up from mine. It was a sauntering strut of a stop, a brief conscious interlude to his glorious ensemble. He looked at the people sitting on the bench and they looked back at him. He smiled to himself, and then he let it go...

‘BINGO’ he said loudly but with no exclamation point at the end.

And they made sure not to look at him – a combination of confused and scared and thinking to themselves, if we just ignore this nut he’ll leave us alone. If they talked to each other and pretended not to be interested in his BINGO, then it would go away.

Bingo man didn’t hang around and wait for them. He moved on, continuing on to the next bench. Which was mine.

He put his hands casually into his pockets, like he knew he was sweeter than any symphony you ever heard, and rattled his coins in time with the pace of his approach. He stopped in front of me, and took his hands out of his pockets. The sound of rattling coins stopped.

Then he started eyeing me up. He opened up his mouth, and it ushered forth from the depths of his stomach. He'd managed to tame another one and send it on its way, guided toward me with a point of his saintly finger: 'BINGO.'

There was nobody else around for me to ignore him with.

I looked back into his eyes, and waved my hand toward him, expelling it with the same simultaneous control and gusto that he just displayed,

'BINGO back at you, *man*.'

He let out a coy smile, and muttered, 'Good dat you call me *mon*. I like dat,' and put his hands back in his pockets. He disengaged my eye contact, and continued on down the line, heading toward the next bench. Unexpectedly, he stopped, turned, and looked at me. He opened his mouth.

I was preparing for another BINGO coming my way. Oh boy. Here it comes.

But it didn't come. Instead, he said slyly, chuckling to himself, 'Kin I buy you a beeah mon?'

'Don't worry about it,' I said.

But he insisted 'No, no. Let me buy you a beeah mon. Fo a very long time I been saving ta buy you a beeahh.'

I stammered a little 'Well... ok. If you insist.'

'Well den, if I'm gonna buy you a beeah, you gotta tell me how much is a beeah.'

He pulled a coin out of his pocket. It fell to the ground with a dense thud. He picked it up and put it in my hand.

'Is dat eenuff mon?'

I looked at the coin, looked at him. To buy a decent pint of good beer, I needed more than this.

'I'm going to need at least two more coins,' I said.

He pulled them out, and flipped them over to me.

'Ok den, buy yo-sewlf a beeah, mon. Do dis inda remembrece of me. Bingo,' he said.

'Bingo,' I replied.

He smiled slyly at me again. He had a Star of David tattoo on one hand and a snake swallowing its tail on the other.

Looking into my eyes and winking at me, he said, 'If you wanna show me yo face, my son, den heeah's yo chance. Up heeah on da moutain. Bingo.'

He didn't let go of my gaze. He held it, held it, held it... The glint on his white teeth was fading. And he opened his eyes wider and wider and wider. They got bigger and brighter and bigger and brighter, till I couldn't bear it anymore.

I tried to look away. But I couldn't turn away – they'd grown so large that they surrounded me. I found myself looking into them even when I tried not to. I couldn't stare at the bench. I couldn't pretend that he wasn't there. I tried to pull my bandages over my eyes, but they gave no shelter from his luminance. I felt like I was being suffocated by the brightness of those eyes. Like my eyelids were being consumed by

white-hot purifying fire. Everything was radiant. He'd managed to open his eyes sooooo wide – wider even than any child – that everything was shining.

I didn't manage a very long glimpse, but in those eyes, I saw all kinds of things. There were symphonies blaring, couples marrying, horses neighing, donkeys braying, suns blazing, cows grazing, plants growing, roosters crowing, moons shining, lovers pining, galaxies expanding, trees standing, planets turning, fires burning, dreamers dreaming, children screaming, rivers flowing, winds blowing, mountains shaking, artists making, species reproducing, wise men deducing, grown men crying, people dying, clouds forming, hail storming. There were babies moaning, birds chirping, stars twinkling, seasons changing, lovers loving, lightening cracking, fruits ripening, flowers blooming, tides ebbing, train horns tooting, progress moving, particles colliding. There was rain dropping, avalanches falling, waves rolling, bees buzzing, sheep bleating, corpses sleeping, mothers nursing, energy vibrating, horns blaring. There was drinking, brawling, cavorting, singing, hooting, screeching, talking...

Bingo man opened his eyes so wide that their shining radiance infused everything, and I got lost.

His pupils were long gone; all had given way to the illuminating whites of his eyes. It doesn't happen everyday that someone manages to open their eyes as wide as he managed then and there, standing only a few paces away from me. The radiance of his eyes dissolved into nothing all the circles in this tale, binding them in cords as strong as light. It was rest at infinite speed. It was movement so simultaneous it didn't need to go anywhere.

His brightness had me nearly paralyzed. But I knew that this was my chance – the time of reckoning for my quest had arrived. I began removing my bandages to reveal my face.

Suddenly the brightness ceased, and I crashed out with a dull thud. I was overtaken by a deep darkness that shrouded everything, spilling into the vacuum left by the brilliance. My brain was bleached so white – stained with the radiance that had just poured in through my pupils for who knows how long – I was like a blind man, and couldn't see anything. Not even the dim glow of the street lamps.

But I *could* still *hear* bingo man as he carried on in the distance, casually sauntering down the path, stopping at each bench:

'BINGO' ... saunter, strut, pause, jingle...

'BINGO' ... saunter, strut, pause, jingle...

'BINGO' ... saunter, strut, pause, jingle...

I didn't hear him get one single BINGO back.

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I wasn't sure what happened – but one thing was for certain: after that radiance had slipped away, I descended farther and faster than I'd ever managed to do before. I couldn't move, and I don't know how long I laid there crumpled like a heap.

I was growing cold and I was struggling to breathe. Each breath was a gasp. And unlike shitting, where I cross my fingers and go for it, breathing had never been anything other than a smooth process that I'd taken for granted. I tried to move my

body – to roll over, to wiggle my torso, or make any feeble movement that I could manage. No movement. No nothing.

I caught a quick glimpse of my arms. One was a piece of spaghetti, and the other was a coiled viper, flicking its tongue at me, and ready to strike.

How I had ended up crumpled up like I was now, I had no recollection. I remembered the radiance stopping, but what happened in between – and left me in a heap on the ground – was entirely unclear. My brain must have shut itself off somewhere.

I was really struggling to breathe. It was getting bad, and showed no signs of getting easier; I could feel each breath battling against what felt like liquid pooling in my lungs. Breathless as I was, from somewhere I kindled the strength to emit a weak cough. It was a juicy one, and immediately flooded my mouth with the unmistakable taste of blood.

Consumed by darkness, I had premonitions that I was on the outer horizons of a deeper and more restful sleep than I had known for a good long while.

Somewhere way out there, I could hear people. They sounded like they were trying to contact me, but there was nothing in me able to muster up the wherewithal to respond. My brain was busy preparing itself for a gentle transition into the great beyond – probably a typical ending for most of the tales that begin with the fist of a bum called god.

In what sounded like it might be the faraway distance or my head – I wasn't sure – I thought I could discern the sound of sirens. I retreated back to the dark peacefulness and I drifted off... getting ready for a gentle departure on a journey that would last for an unspecified period of time.

But I had a premonition that maybe the ending for which I was preparing had been cancelled. Backup plans, long since eroded from the memory of most, were being hastily executed.

## I warned you

I woke to find myself lying in a laboratory. The stillness that I had experienced looking in those eyes had been replaced by all manner of beeps, humming, and buzzing. The dangerous radiance of those eyes had been replaced with a pasty white sterile light that stained everything the color of safe.

I was still struggling to breathe, but my lungs were being helped out by a machine that connected some gas canisters to a mask strapped over my mouth. Both of my arms were pierced with needles attached to tubes that were connected to bags of clear liquid suspended over my head.

People off to the side were discussing me. Two men wearing lab coats walked over. Removing the white sheet that lay on top of my naked body, one grabbed my left elbow, and the other grabbed my left hand. Then they had a tug-of-war, YANKING in opposite directions, throwing all their weight into it. It would remain to be seen whether my mangled arm would still look like spaghetti when they finished. Through the breathing mask, I heard myself yelp some feeble expression of pain, and then I sank back into darkness.

A little while later, I awoke to find a woman with a lab coat standing over me. Like she had popped the hood of the car to have a look at the engine, she had pulled aside the sheet that was covering my legs and thighs, and was intently trying to jam something up the hole where my urine came out – a sensation I didn't much enjoy. She jammed harder. It's a tiny hole, but it wasn't a tiny tube – so it was a struggle for both of us. I writhed with pain, which found utterance in another feeble expression. She stopped what she was doing, and shouted at me, 'you know that you're not making this any easier!'

I stopped writhing. She was fed up. She grabbed the penis firmly in one hand. She grabbed the tube in the other. She looked down at both of them, and in one quick motion, she finally managed to JAM that fat plastic tube right into the penis hole, like she was plugging in an extension cord. This time she'd hit her mark. She gave the tube a few tugs, just to be certain that it was anchored in there and wasn't going anywhere. It wasn't. That tube was a good quarter inch thick.

The tube was connected to a bag that I could urinate into all day long. It worked fine as long as the bag didn't get too full. When that happened, pressure built up in the overstuffed bag, resulting in too much urine with nowhere to go. Eventually, the real bladder would win and find secret little passages to leak urine out, leaving me soaked and stinking until somebody happened to check how full it was and empty the bag.

Listening to the people walking past me and standing over me, I began to understand how broke up and busted I was. I'd shattered both my arms, cracked a few ribs, split my clavicle, crunched a vertebrae, and fractured my hip. I had severe lacerations on my back and my legs, and blood was leaking from my heart into my lungs.

I lay in the laboratory for weeks. Every night it seemed like an eternity for the morning to arrive. I dreaded the departure of the sun. The only thing that I could hear at night was the occasional beep of machines attached to bodies, and the murmurs of

hospital staff working the night shift. The only thing I could see at night was watery hospital light flowing through the crack in the door like weak powdered milk.

The other people laying in the laboratory with me somehow managed to snore their heads off all night long. I spent most of the night deciding whether to meditate on their snores or resent the fact that their injuries were tolerable enough to let them sleep. I never actually got around to doing either.

Every morning, when the sun did finally rise, it was accompanied by the morning staff. They'd march right in with their refreshing night sleeps and give me all kinds of shots. Because my shattered arms were fully bandaged, they had to give me the shots in the ass, but they soon filled my ass with holes and ran out of space. So they had to start giving me shots in my feet.

Every night, the juices flowing out of my lacerated back adhered it to the sheet upon which I was supposed to be sleeping. And each morning, the nurses would peel away the sheets like gigantic back-sized bandages. The tearing sound made as the sheet peeled away was always accompanied with the smell of juices as the back and the sheet expressed their sadness at being separated from one another.

Along with the morning shots came the question, 'Did you shit last night?' The only time they didn't ask me this question was the time I had shit the bed overnight.

Every other morning, the answer was 'No'. And that would mean an enema, which was a jolly, four person affair.

All four would turn me over. Two would manage the cheeks – each holding one firmly in place. One made sure the cheeks stayed spread open, and one jammed the irrigation bottle in and squeezed. The whole time, they'd be laughing, chatting, and telling jokes. It was the most happy-go-lucky-crew I'd ever seen. After the bottle was emptied out, all four would turn me back over, and put a pan under my anus to catch whatever managed to leak out over the next 20 or 30 minutes.

I remember one time I was laying in the laboratory bed after having been prodded and poked all morning long with fingers, needles, questions, looks, and hard plastic bottle tips. The enema crew had forgotten to cover all of me up with the sheet after they removed the pan. Sprawled on the bed, my genitals were uncovered and exposed to the sterile laboratory air.

It wasn't the first time that somebody had forgotten to cover up my genitals. And it wouldn't be the last. Broken, unable to move, and with a big fat tube connecting my penis to a urine bag, I had nothing to hide. There were no illusions here. It wouldn't be long before somebody came back to prod or poke me, and with any luck it would be the enema crew.

But I wasn't discovered by the good humored and likeable enema crew. Instead, it was some middle aged nurse that I'd never seen before. She glimpsed me as she walked by the open door of my room. Her stern face was emblazoned with the meticulous strains of propriety – burned into her face like so many tiny little square rivers. She was so tight that the jolly four person enema crew would have struggled to get so much as a toothpick up her butt. It would have done her good, though.

She silently entered the room. She didn't say hello, and she didn't look me in the eyes. I didn't know who she was, but she was nothing close to merry enough to be an enema lady. Those enema people weren't afraid to look into your eyes. For them, eyeholes were just another hole, just like all the others, and sometimes in need of a

good cleaning. The nurse kept her distance from the bed, reaching toward me like I was a leper. She grabbed a corner of the sheet between her thumb and forefinger, careful not to contaminate herself with anymore of my impropriety than her chiselled face could handle. She sharply and silently jerked it over my exposed genitals. Before she left the room, she scrubbed her hands in the sink near the door. Never looked me in the eyes one time.

If I could have moved, I would have jerked that sheet back off. Even better would have been if I coulda hung my genitals and the misplaced sheet from a plaque on the wall – another hole for her to avoid looking at. She didn't have the guts to look me in any of my holes. Not like the good enema folks.

Not long after, a different nurse entered the room and asked me if I wanted a visitor. I had no idea who it could be, and I didn't care who it might be, so I said yes.

She left the room, and a few minutes later, Charles walked in. He was still shaking his head in disbelief. He looked me over, and the first thing he said was, 'I told you that you shoulda thought twice before you wasted your money buying that crazy nut a beer.'

With a seasoned I-told-you-so compassion, he said, 'you don't look good. You woulda been better off directing those beers my way.'

'Charles, what are you doing here?' was all I could manage.

'I came to see how you're doing after that fall you took,' he said matter-of-factly. 'I'm the one who called the medics to come and get you.'

'What are you talking about?'

He shook his head, 'I told you shouldn't spend so much time talking to that nut.'

'What are you talking about?'

Charles' face was overcome with disbelief, 'You don't know what I'm talking about?'

'What *are* you talking about?'

'You don't remember falling out of that tree?' he said.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'It's a good thing your head was wrapped in those bandages, cause your skull hit the ground so hard when you came down, you woulda probably emptied your brains out on the pavement. Woulda been a mess. I don't know how the hell those bandages got tied around your head, but it's a good thing for you that they did.'

'Charles, what in god's name are you talking about?'

Charles was confused, 'what the hell you talking about asking me what I'm talking about?'

'I managed to track that stupid bum all the way across the water just so that I could show him my face. And when I finally found him on top of the mountain, I drowned in his eyes trying to show him my face!' I shouted.

Charles looked at me not very differently from how he looked at me the first time he saw my fat lip, the fresh puffy shiner growing around my right eye, and the blood leaking down from my nose toward my lips. 'What the hell you talking about?' he said.

‘What the hell you talking about asking me what I’m talking about?’ I said.

He began slowly, ‘No wonder you bought beer for that nut. You’re as crazy as him. I don’t know how the hell you *think* you ended laying here even more busted up than before, but I’ll tell you what *I* saw.’

‘After you bought me that beer and stumbled off toward the park, I thought you were gone for good. But then I heard a commotion, so I walked over to the park to see what was going on. Sure enough, there you were with your head wrapped up in a buncha bandages. I don’t know how you got hold of those bandages, but mark me, those things saved your life...’

He trailed off, shaking his head.

‘And that nut was chasing you around the park. The whole time he was yellin’ how much he liked your watch and how he was gonna take your shoes and your hat and all your clothes too. Finally, he chased you up the fig tree, and you didn’t come down. He was too drunk to follow you up, and he got tired of waiting. So he wandered off. When he *finally* staggered back, he had another beer that some other sap musta bought for him. I think he forgot you were still up in the tree. As soon as he walked under where you were perched, you yelled out, ‘Bingo! I got you now, you son-of-a-bitch!’ Then you started trying to take those bandages off your head, but soon as you did, you lost hold of the branch you were holding. And you fell right out of the tree. Just missed falling on top of him. You scared him so bad, he spilled his beer all over you. When he saw you crumpled in a heap, he moved in to steal your shoes and clothes offa you. That’s when I came out of the shadows and told him he better be moving on, and get the hell outta here cause I didn’t want to see him again. Soon as he was gone, I called the medics.’

Charles looked in my eyes with more I-told-you-so compassion.

‘Charles, check the pockets of my trousers. They’re laying over there.’

He went and picked them up. They had been cut up and removed from my broken body when I was first laid down in this laboratory, so they were less trousers than patches of fabric. Charles picked through them and found a pocket. Nothing inside. He picked through the patches of fabric till he found another pocket. Inside were three dense coins. He pulled them out and showed them to me.

‘Beer money,’ I said. ‘For you.’

He looked puzzled, so I explained, ‘Right before I fell, that crazy nut bum gave ‘em to me. He said he’d been saving for years, told me to buy to use ‘em to buy a beer for myself and drink in remembrance of him. But I got no use for beer now, in this state. I can’t even move.’

And with a million trillion possible endings to draw from, Charles smiled the biggest smile he’d smiled since this tale began. Winking at me, he turned to leave the room, and said over his shoulder, ‘you know, all this might not seem so good, but it could be worse. At least it was quick. Most of the people laid up in this place got back pain so bad they can’t move an inch – all cause they’ve rotted away inside tiny little boxes. For years and years and years. Whole lifetimes. And if you think it takes a toll on their backs, you can imagine what happens to their brains. And their eyes. The way you ended up in here is a lot less boring.’

‘It starts with a beer. It ends with a beer. And it’s got a tree in between. Could be worse.’

Charles paused thoughtfully, ‘you know, all those people probably need a beer more than me. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’m gonna take these coins and buy me one, in remembrance of all of them.’

He adjusted his backpack. And with that, Charles was gone.