

**50%
LUCK**

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PROLOGUE

It's not my fault. Or rather, it's not all my fault. Maybe it is. Things just ... got out of control. Often I'm not sure. My career counsellor compared me to a butterfly, flitting about, landing briefly in a job, tasting it's nectar, then, ever so gently, moving on to something new.

What he didn't understand that with each glancing touch I was nudging the world towards a cataclysm. I suppose that given the limited training he received in the one year diploma program at the local community college didn't exactly prepare him for my particular skill set. Career counselling seems to be the most meta of all jobs. A person doesn't know what they want to do with their life, or how to achieve those goals, or why any of it all matters, hits on the idea that they would be great telling someone how to plan out the next sixty or so years of their life. I wonder, when they meet the truly feckless, the absolutely useless, unfocused, unmotivated individual, do they look at that person, and seeing themselves, suggest to that person that they have a career awaiting in career counselling? And then, realizing that it wasn't the abyss that they feared staring into, but rather the mirror, in the form of the applicant sitting across from them, excuse themselves, walk out of the interview and into oncoming traffic.

I was hoping for all the usual things; a job, a family, Christmas dinners, long walks on a drizzly beach, grandchildren, and then, if I had my way, after an afternoon of drinking grappa and playing cards at the local

bar with a couple of friends, a massive heart attack a ticket to heaven before I slipped off the stool and hit the ground.

But that didn't happen. Now I'm standing in the middle of a snow covered field. Stubble poking up through the small drifts. It's very quiet. Except for the explosions.

Chapter 1

THE BEGINNING



“Look, this job is simple. We get an order, yeah? We pull the proper disks, the manual, the warranty card, the quick start manual, and we put it in the box, like so. Then you print up TWO copies of the shipping label, put one on the box, put one in the book, and make a note on the work order that it’s been shipped.” Brian said all this, but I already knew how to put things in boxes. What kept my attention during his unnecessary training orientation, was how short his neck was. I can’t remember seeing another human who didn’t seem to have a neck. It was quite disconcerting, but the enormity of his head, combined with an extra 20 kilos on his frame meant that his head began below the line of his shoulders. He was built like you would build a snowman, a series of ever smaller balls smooshed on top of one another.

Brian mistook my staring as rapt attention. “And when you’re done the orders for the day, go see Tony in support to see if you can help out there.”

“Okay, thanks. And thanks for the job!” I’ll admit that I was not enthusiastic about being a shipping clerk in a software company, but then I was equally unenthusiastic

about being kicked out of my apartment, so it was a trade off. The shipping area was a repurposed hallway that had been dead-ended in a previous renovation for the office, it was lined on both sides with shelving for the product, so while it was comfortable for one person, it was tight for two. Brian made a move to leave, but as I was between him and the entrance, mental chess ensued. Did we want to suck in our guts, brush fronts, squeeze front to back, or back to back, essentially missionary, doggy style or he said she said postures but in the vertical. Eyeing the situation I chose to back out, leaving the pathway clear.

“Yeah, whatever. Don’t fuck up. Oh, and bring your own coffee cup.”

I surveyed my new domain, looked at the stack of orders waiting to be filled, adjusted the bar stool, and changed the radio station from the country channel to the local public broadcaster.

“Did you see the new guy in production?”

It doesn’t take anytime at all until the corporate rumour mill gets grinding out new theories about changes. Jennifer, one of the only female programmers at the company, and Theresa from technical support were standing too close for a conversation about work and glancing furtively in my direction as I wandered out to the coffee station. I’m a realistic guy, so I knew they weren’t checking me out, and I could only guess that some of the, what’s the best word here, stories? rumours? mythology? had started to circulate.

Did he survive that plane crash without a scratch when everyone else died? Was he the only person that wasn’t

shot by the bank robbers? How did he survive in the ocean after the cruise ship sank killing everyone else?

Not all the stories are true, and the ones that are true are only true-ish. The stories about me took on a bit of a life of their own, partly due to the glamorization of the press, and partly due to the nature of truth versus fact. It's a fact that I survived a plane crash that killed 87 other people. It's not a fact that I came through without a scratch. I was pretty banged up, with a gash that required a hundred stitches across my chest, a broken rib, and a couple songs on autoplay in my head, but when the reporters filmed me a day or so later, I was cleaned up and sitting in a hospital bed, with all the wounds under bandages and hospital gowns.

Compared to the mangled and burnt corpses strewn across the mountainside that had been played on auto-repeat by the news channels, I looked positively unscathed. The reporter, new to the job, asked a bunch of questions, I told her the truth. I'm a nervous flyer but there were no warnings, I'd gotten out of my seat and headed to the bathroom at the back of the plane. I got in, locked the door, and the next thing I knew, the plane hit the mountain. The rear of the plane was sheared off and it, with me inside, rattled down the snowy flank of the mountain while the rest of the plane came to an abrupt halt. When the tail section stopped, I opened what was left of the bathroom door and walked out. There was blood and screaming. The blood was mine, the screaming was the ski patroller that had just seen a plane explode on a mountain. I'd've bled to death if she hadn't had the presence of mind to tape me up and get me off the mountain.

The reporter had been thorough, and talked to me and the doctors about my injuries and recovery, but by the time the editor had performed surgery on the facts, the headline was The Miracle of Flight 296 - How One Man Walked Away Without a Scratch.

It didn't help that I bought a lottery ticket the same day.

“You certain lucky, all those people died on the plane...”

Consuela, the nurses aide, became my best friend in the hours after the crash. Newly arrived from Guatemala, she was grateful for the hospital job, grateful to be out of Mixco, a cartel-ravaged hell hole. She knew that her worst day in Revelstoke was better than her best day dodging bullets and car bombs on the mean streets of Guatemala. She was short and a tad rubenesque, but her smile lit up her face and she was gentle when she changed the dressing on my stitches. She was the most beautiful person and seemed to have a glow around her. It might have been the drugs.

“I do feel lucky,” I said, “can you do me a favour?” I asked her to take \$5 from my wallet and go buy a lottery ticket. “I'll split the winnings with you 50-50.” I looked at the nurse, Mabel, who was everything that Consuela wasn't, and made sure she witnessed the transaction. Mabel was older, angular, unsmiling, unhappy. “I'll hold you to that.”

The draw was that night. Consuela had finished her shift, but I persuaded her to order in some fish tacos from the local Mexican restaurant and watch the drawing with me.

“We no gonna win.” She said.

“Maybe not. But the tacos are good, and the beer is cold.” She laughed, and elbowed me. In my broken ribs.

“ Oya, omagodimasosorry!” she blurted. I waved my hand, indicating that it was okay, but that I couldn’t speak through the shards of pain. She sat on the edge of the bed while we watched the balls roll around the sphere and drop, one by one into the tray. When the third ball matched she grabbed my hand and started to squeeze. When the fourth matched she started speaking quickly in Spanish and slapping my arm. When the fifth matched she jumped to her feet and bounced up and down yelling. The night nurse thought someone was dying and ran into the room. Another nurse came peeling around the corner, pushing the crash cart.

There was a commercial break. The room was silent. We all watched the detergent ad as though our lives depended on it. The show began again. The sixth ball. The sixth ball was a 17 and did not match. The excitement left the room like people out of a fart-filled elevator. A sense of resignation that our luck had run out was palpable. The seventh ball was 42. Our number was 42. There were shrieks, and shushes and hugs, and a stream of Spanish laced with expletives. Everyone, well, except me, started jumping up and down in unison and laughing.

We hadn’t won the main prize, but the \$190,256.34 was enough to split. And of course it made the local news and the lottery corporation, knowing a photo op when they saw one, sent two big checks to the hospital the next day to be presented by the mayor. The newspapers across the country had a field day: ‘Lucky Man Strikes Again’, and the somewhat darker ‘Second Near Miss for Lucky Man’.

I took my \$95k, donated \$5,000 to the Revelstoke Hospital Children's Foundation, and took a Greyhound home. Consuela was killed a couple weeks later by an inattentive snowplow driver. The internet, the beast with no face but a thousand tongues began wondering if being next to me was a curse.

Small wonder then, that the first couple of weeks at the software company I had a lunch table to myself.

“You’re brave.”

At lunch time on my third Monday at Zynergery Software Corporation, Jacqueline sat down at my lonely table, opened a Tupperware container of something steaming and vaguely food-like. She placed her napkin next to her food, dug a stainless spoon with a coloured plastic handle out of her shoulder bag and looked at me, her head just slightly askant. Fun fact: pigeons don’t see movement until they have a refresh rate of 75 frames per second. Normal films look like slideshows. That’s why pigeons don’t move when you are driving towards them because they think you are moving too slowly. Jacqueline was the same. She was sitting still, but everything about her indicated that some piece of clockwork in her was ticking over at double speed.

“What do you mean?” She edged backwards almost imperceptibly.

“Since I’ve started working here, no one, not even perky Andrea from HR, has sat down at lunch with me. At every meeting I have a whole side of the board table to myself. When I head to the john, I can be assured that I’ll have the

place to myself. So either you don't know the stories, or you don't believe them."

"I choose to believe in coincidence. You don't look dangerous. Besides... everyone here is massively boring. I imagine that you're not."

"I'm not so sure about either statement. Coincidence implies that there is no causality. I have the dark premonition that there is some unseen force that causes the 'coincidences' that seem to follow me. And as for the boring thing..."

I didn't get to finish. Tim, a gelatinized mass of humanity had lost a dollar in the vending machine. It must have been his last dollar because he was enraged at the machine, his pudgy and delicate programmer hands firmly gripping the sides of the machine and giving it a proper shake.

"Give me my goddamn coke, you motherfucking pile of shit! Fuck you!" His voice was rising, the machine was moving, and then, in what can only be described as a break in normal newtonian physics, Tom shimmied his porky hips, kicked the machine and somehow lost his footing. Clutching his drink dispensing dance partner he fell and pulled all six hundred pounds of a fully loaded vending machine down on top of himself.

The crash was deafening. Screams from people at the other tables, a shattering of glass, the ceiling lights flickered as the plug was ripped from the socket causing a momentary power surge. Shouts. Calls to 911. The initial wave of people reflexively moving away from disaster reversed and bystanders rushed forward to pull the machine off Tom.

I'd like to say that I jumped up to help. I'd like to say that in a herculean surge of adrenaline-fuelled super strength I single-handedly lifted up the killing machine. I'd like to tell myself that that's what happened. The fact, or truth, whatever, was that I sat there watching the franticness of the crowd, the disarray, the blood, the glass, and I took another bite of my sandwich. Jacqueline had jumped up and spun around to see what had happened. Then looked back at me, accusingly. A liberated can of coke rolled and stopped against my foot. I picked it up.

"Coke?" I held it out to her.

"Eeww, no?" She said looking disgusted at me and shaking her head as though my thirst had somehow been the cause of Tom's death. Oh, yeah, forgot to mention that Tom was one of the 3 vending machine deaths that year. Did you know vending machines kill more people than sharks every year? I didn't know that. The guy that came and replaced the vending machine the next day was pretty chatty.

"Ok," I said, as I pulled the tab on the can and took a sip.

The paramedics were quick to arrive, quick to spring into action, and quick to pronounce Tim dead. The office was stunned. There were muffled cries. The curious surrounded the EMTs. I wasn't sure why they were there. It's not like anyone would be able to help. Poor, fat, unshowered, socially awkward Tim was dead. Clearly the paramedics had the situation in hand. It wasn't like any of the staff was going to be able to offer any advice. There were a few surreptitious attempts at photo taking, and then Kraig knelt down, as if to offer a benediction at poor, obese,

fascist leaning, sausage munching Tim's side, when he swung his phone up at a good angle to get a selfie with Tim - well, Tim and the glass and the cans of pop and snacks that covered him.

I felt bad for Tim's equally socially awkward Christian wife, especially since Kraig posted the picture on his Instagram, and Karen, Tim's wife, had 'mistakenly' followed Kraig after meeting him at last year's office Christmas party and thinking he was sort of hot. By the time the police had knocked on her door, her world had already collapsed and all of her friends had been forwarded the picture, and everyone was just so upset by the sudden passing of Tim, and there were thoughts and prayers, but it took a couple hours for the officers to arrive with the shocking news. Well, it was shocking two and a half hours ago when Kraig posted the picture. Now, at four in the afternoon, with the first just-to-steady-my-nerves gin and tonic becoming the fourth well-fuck-him-anyways double gin and tonic, Karen had progressed from shocked to sad to pissed off to just pissed and quite frankly the idea of a life without Tim was starting to dawn gloriously on her. No more pilgrimages to his hometown in Moosejaw, Saskatchewan to see his skeletal mother and her cats and her smoking. No more Sunday dinners with Tim's Dungeons and Dragons teammates. No more pretending that his manboobs were just relaxed muscle. No more "oh come here you big cuddly bear" bedtime whispers.

But it was perplexing for the officers who knocked on the door, and stood there with their best somber faces that they had been told were appropriate for these kinds of situations, ready with the Kleenex, to be greeted by a loose-

limbed woman, her blouse untucked, a glass of gin in her hand, her bangs falling into her eyes.

“Wassup, occifers?” She was holding the doorway for stability, gravity being a bitch and all.

“Miss Karen Blomeister?” Office McLaren asked, her dress blue service cap clutched somewhat defensively in her hands.

“I is she,” Karen laughed, her gin filled hand, finger extended and pointed at herself, a slosh of gin dampening the front of her shirt.

“Ma’am, we regret to inform you that your husband, Timothy Lintlaw Blomeister was killed in a work related accident at 1:30 this afternoon. You have our condolences.”

Officer Widgate, the more senior of the two, glanced sideways at his partner that had just delivered the news of a loved one's passing with a sense of relief and pride. He'd rehearsed it with her on the way over, and she'd done it perfectly. Such a small thing, the show of empathy, comforting for both for the messenger and for the bereaved.

“Old news, sister! I've known for hours and hours and hours that Ol' Butterball had kicked the bucket. Killed in a flash by a pished off vending thingamabob. I talked him -- no” Karen paused, took a breath and restarted, “ TOLD him, “ she paused and smiled to herself having mastered that bit of English,” I told him that one day that all those sugary treats was going to kill him.”

“Yes ma’am. Again we're truly sorry for your...”

“Haahahahahahahahahah”

The day after the vending machine mishap I was once again sitting alone at the lunch table. People were avoiding me, and I'm not sure why, exactly, it wasn't like Tim's need for sugar was my fault. Today's sandwich was egg salad on sourdough bread. I'd made it with homemade mustard and thinly sliced spanish onions. I figured if no one was going to sit with me, I might as well enjoy my food. The killer was back to standing up, but was "x"ed with CAUTION tape to keep people away from the sharp edges and bad karma. Floyd, the vending machine service tech, had come in, and after securing the killer with straps and tape, loaded it on an electric dolly and wheeled it away.

"I'll be back tomorrow with another one, don't you worry! Gotta keep your energy up for the job!" He was clearly taking the piss out of my nerdy colleagues , despising them for their physical weakness, their ghostly pallor, and especially for the gobs of money they all made for what looked to Floyd as 'just typing.'

He disappeared out the door, and Xiaoqing, one of the accountants, came into the lunch room, just barely, and pointed at me, which I thought was sort of rude, but she was an accountant, and good with numbers and bad with english so I didn't take it personally. On several occasions I'd watched her get on the elevator with her co-workers and pretend that she didn't know any of them. I didn't know if it was haughtiness, or shyness, or perhaps she just needed glasses.

"You. Shipping boy. Boss wants see you." Her eyes were dead, but I thought I detected a smile, which left a little cube of ice in my chest. I don't know her, and perhaps it's unfair to judge, but I imagine that if she had had a butterfly

collection as a child, they would all be formaldehyded and pinned to the substrate just as they started to break free from their pupae.

“NOW!”

I pointed to my half finished sandwich and gave her a quizzical look. I mean, it was a good sandwich, it was my lunch hour and I didn't want to stop. She crossed her arms, and staring at me with an intensity that I can only describe as predatory, prefaced her insistence with a stream of Chinese invective that even I knew was swearing.

“NOW!”

Murray Hander was the only person in the office that wore a suit. In a software company that set him apart, as the rest of the staff could pass for homeless. He wore it to distinguish himself from the riffraff, and to impart an air of experience and business savvy. He was short, and the suits were invariably brown. It looked like he cut his own hair and his voice had a touch of nasal. Don't get me wrong, I liked the guy. No one gets to choose how they look, and right now he didn't look especially happy when I came into his office. I looked for the client chair to sit down, and it had been removed, four little dimples in the carpet were the only remnants. My spidey senses started tingling. This was going to be a short meeting.

“Sit down,” he said out of habit, motioned to the spot where the chair had been, remembered that he'd had it removed because he really didn't want to be having this meeting anyway. “Sorry... I'm, ah”

I know that nicer people would attempt some small talk, but I'm not that guy. I stood there, stone-faced and watched him wallow about in the shit hole of his own making.

“Look, I’m sorry, but we’re going to let you go.” He picked up an envelope from the table and passed it to me. “ This is your termination notice, and three months salary, because, well because, uh because.” He stopped and looked at me as though I’d just understand.

“I don’t understand. I’ve only been here three weeks and two days. I thought I was doing okay. Packages were going out, there was no backlog,” I was just warming up with a bunch of reasons of how I was a good worker when Murray held up both hands and motioned me to stop.

“Look. It’s about the Tim thing. You and I both know you had nothing to do with it, but people are nervous and you have this thing...” he looked at me as though I was going to touch my nose knowingly and say ah.

“This thing? You mean the thing where people die, and it’s not my fault? That thing?” I was warming up. I could feel all the rage starting to bubble up to the surface. I’d been trapped in guilt and despair from the plane accident, and add to that poor Consuela’s snow plow accident, the photos of the candy stripe of blood and brains blown into the snow banks for two blocks still haunted me.

“Wayne will see you out.” Wayne, a security guard that had been hired especially for today, appeared silently behind me, handed me a bankers box with my coat, shoulder bag, and coffee cup. I took the box and he grabbed me by my upper arm and steered me to the elevators before I could protest. I swear he’d practiced that move. He was a dismissal and removal specialist. I didn’t hate him for it. He’s just a cog of the fascist capitalist machine. He took my goober card, cut it in two, rendering it useless for access and let the top half of my head still

attached to the lanyard, fall back on my T-shirt and smirked as I got into the elevator. The smirking was a personal flourish.

2

NEW BEGINNING



I was down and out.

Down the elevator and out the front door as fast as possible into a passable spring day. In places like Edmonton, spring rushes at you; one minute you're up to your waist in snow, and three days later the snow is gone, and the sidewalks are a hopscotch of dog feces that owners had lost in the snow and just couldn't be bothered to dig too deeply for. In Vancouver, spring comes gently, almost sneaking up on you. One day you're wearing a fleece coat and a slicker, and the next day you're not, and you look up from your phone and realize that all the trees are budding out and the air has a tinge of warmth.

I didn't miss the job. I didn't want the job in the first place, but it always stings for a couple months when you are told you don't stack up. The self doubt, the recriminations, wondering if you could have been a better team player. It's like getting dumped. Having a person tell you that it's not them, it's you, always sets you back on your heels. Nah. I'm kidding. I was glad to get out of there,

and I had three months' pay in my pocket. I had a feeling I was meant for bigger and better things.

I threw the bankers box and the coffee cup out in a dumpster, and was heading wherever the wind blew. I started heading east on Alberni Street, changed my mind, and spun around, and blasted into Jackie, knocking the coffee out of her hand and tipping her pad thai onto the sidewalk. I grabbed her shoulders to make sure she didn't fall.

"Let me go. Fuck. Why weren't you watching where you were going. And you've ruined my lunch. Goddammit."

"Oh, shit, sorry about that. I..." stammering a bit. "Look, let me buy you lunch. I just got fired, and I."

"You got fired? What for? What did you do to deserve that? Shit. Who do I have to kill to get fired ..." she caught herself and realized that the idiom was a tad insensitive. "Tim, right. Sorry. But it wasn't your fault."

"Yeah, I know, but people were talking and nervous. Murray did the right thing, and honestly, three months pay in lieu of notice, shit, I'll take that deal six days a week."

"Okay, sure. You can buy me lunch. If you're Mister Moneybags, you can even buy me a beer." She scooped up the mess off the sidewalk, dropped it in the trash, gave her hands a cursory wipe with a napkin and off we headed, back to the Thai restaurant around the corner.

The restaurant was noisy and crowded. A table opened up just as we walked in. The owner recognized Jackie and looked perplexed.

“Lady really hungry today?” he said, a big beam of a smile on his face, his hands making a shoe horning motion to the table.

“Thirsty too. Ow bia sawng kra-ppong”

“Impressive. You speak thai?”

“Nah, I travel a lot, so one summer I decided to learn the three key phrases in as many languages as I could. I’m up to 15 so far.” she sat back and puffed out her chest a little.

“Test me”

“Okay, but first what are the three phrases. Obviously beer is one of them...”

“Yup,” she took a swipec of her Singha, “ Please can I have two beers, where is the bathroom, and” her eyes widened and she pointed behind me “what the fuck is that?” The last bit was sort of a scream which seemed an odd phrase to choose. And I wasn’t sure why it needed to be screamed until I hitched my chair around to look out the window.

People had immediately rushed to the window to see what was outside. We all stood up to try and figure out what had happened. I stood on my chair, not wanting to lose my seat or my beer. In the middle of the road a Honda Civic was pinned down by a menacing reptilian claw. Godzilla! Literally the first thing that popped into my brain. This day was awesome! A double take. No scales, but maybe a mechanoid Godzilla? Half machine, half reptile god? The car wasn’t too damaged, a little squished, but the lady inside had been forced to watch her life flash in front of her eyes, and she was clearly disappointed with her progress so far. An average house, a couple of average kids, a husband that was going through the middle management

motions of respectability. The screaming was deafening, and it was only when she took a deep breath, that she realized she was the one doing the screaming. She stopped. The car was silent. She took another deep breath, unpeeled her clenched french manicured fingers from the steering wheel and sank back into the curve of the seat. She stared out the window through the talons of the claw and the lacing of the cables.

The claw was not Godzilla, a bit of a disappointment, it was a demotion claw used to pull buildings apart, the broken cable that should have held it to the crane was severed and had swirled around the car like honey off a spoon. She was lucky; the claw had protected her from several tons of steel cable. She was trapped, but in no real danger. Our lunches arrived. Jackie stared at me.

“You,” she was hyperventilating. “You can eat? Now?” Her voice was shrill. I looked at her, then my shrimp in green curry, then back to her.

“I can eat. The situation is in hand. I can’t help the woman, and she doesn’t appear in immediate danger. The food smells delish and I’ve been fired and I’m hungry. I think you should sit down and join me. What’s that old bromide? God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can... blah blah. That’s how I choose to live my life. There is one woman out there that almost died. Was it my fault? Clearly no. Do I have a crane to lift the claw off her car? No. Will my rushing out there stop anything bad from happening? No, and I’ll just be in the way of the first responders. They’re literally called that for a reason. There are three million people starving to death in North Korea because of an

incompetent and corrupt kleptocracy. I can't help them either." I picked up my spoon and chopsticks, and paused to savour the scent of basil and lemongrass and coconut that was carried nostril-ward by the steam from my lunch. Jackie plopped back down into her chair, stared at me for a few seconds, shook her head in, uh, amazement? amusement? then took her beer and threw her head back.

There was general panic in the restaurant. There were interminable sirens and flashing lights. Our little table in the back of the joint became an island of tranquility. We clinked our longnecks, and dug into our lunch. We had to lean close to one another to be able to be heard over the commotion, but that seemed welcome and somehow a bit conspiratorial, or even, maybe, intimate.

The claw situation had not been resolved when we finished our lunch, which had extended to an extra beer, and a shared mango pudding for dessert. We left the restaurant, the claw and the cable and the fire trucks and the rushing people all just background. We were a bit tipsy walking through the crowd and it seemed like there were way too many trucks and personnel for the accident.

You know how you get when you stop seeing someone as a friend and start seeing them as a potential umm-friend. As in. 'Who's this? Oh, this is my... umm, friend, Jackie.' Not an unrequited attraction, but a mutual one. One where you know that in an hour or so you'll be entwining fingers as you walk along the seawall much slower than your normal pace. That feeling where a glance or a jinxed word will make you both look away, embarrassed by the seeming connection? That's the kind of day it was. The day had warmed and we brushed bare arms and I found myself

smiling for no real reason. We got to the end of the block by the bike rental shop, turned the corner and stopped.

I was right about the number of fire trucks being overkill. They weren't there for the lady and the claw. Well some were. The rest? They were there for the crane. The crane that had collapsed on the world headquarters of the Zyzerger Software Corporation. The crane with 15 metric tons of counterbalancing concrete strapped to its underbelly like possum joeys. The crane that had sliced the building in two and then pancaked the concrete floors one on top of the other, the contents oozing out like hot butter and syrup, sending debris and glass into the street. Electricity arced and sent showers of sparks. Water poured out through the rubble. The fascia of the building had sheared off and crushed a few cars parked in front. We walked in stunned silence up to the yellow tape.

Xiaoqing was sitting up on a gurney behind an ambulance. She was dazed, blood on her face, her arm in a sling, and a paramedic getting ready to give her a shot of something to keep her from going into shock. She saw me and started yelling in Mandarin. Pointing. Accusing? Swearing a death oath?

“YOU!” Okay, I understood that. “YOU FUCK BASTARD!” Her English was improving.

I tried to stop. I bit my tongue. I clasped my hand over my mouth. But I couldn't control it. It just came out. I felt horrible. I'm sure when they autopsy me some pathologist is going to look at my brain and say, 'ah, yes, there is a missing bit, right here.' That missing bit is the filter between my broken brain and my mouth.

“You were wondering who you’d have to kill...” I kept staring straight ahead at the smouldering pile of building that until an hour ago had been my office. Our office. It was a horrible thing to say. I felt gut punched as soon as I said it. There was dead silence. I imagined that Jackie was staring at me and then she was turning away, running just as fast as she could to be away from a heartless, cruel individual who had a seam of darkness running like coal through the hellfires of his soul.

Alone again. Somehow these events, the plane, the cruise ship, Consuela, Tim, were connected to me. Not my fault. But connected.

“You know, if I were you, I’d be hightailing it to the bank to cash that cheque before they freeze the accounts.” Jackie winked. “Race ya!”

My bank was a couple blocks away. Jackie had started out in full race mode, but stopped a half block away complaining of stomach cramps. Too much beer and pad thai. We walked the rest of the way to the bank.

“Did you want to deposit this, sir?” asked the teller. She didn’t look up from her typing and flipping and aggressive stamp pad smashing. You could tell that she would normally have been more stylishly dressed for work, but had been forced? coerced? peer-shamed? into wearing a bilious green t-shirt with ‘Ask Me About A Line of Credit’ on the front. She had paired that with a string of pearls. I never thought I’d see pearls used as an upraised middle finger against the man.

“No thanks. I’ve got some plans. I’ll take it all in cash, if that’s okay?” She honestly couldn’t give a fuck if I took it in

goats. She handed over the stack of \$20's and clicked her 'Next Teller' barricade in the gap, shutting off her faux interpersonal friendly operating status. I had been dismissed.

Jackie was loitering out front. She was stopping people and asking them if they had found their own personal Jesus. People were looking away from her and giving her a wide berth as they walked by as quickly as they could.

"Interesting hobby. What would you do if you ever caught one?"

"You know, I don't know. I've tried begging, shilling for a cause, singing show tunes, doing the god thing, I mostly just do it as part of a multi-year psychological investigation into people's stress levels vis a vis uncomfortable street people. I expect to get a Nobel prize when I publish." The sentence was finished with a gestural flourish and a bow, miming holding a bouquet of roses and biting a gold Nobel medal for the photographers.

We started walking up Robson Street towards the Vancouver Art Gallery.

"Do you feel anything? We were almost killed, all of our co-workers were squished like bugs, you just got fired. But you don't seem shaken. You don't seem affected at all." she stopped, put her hand on my arm and turned me to face her. "I could have been killed too." She looked down, and took a step back.

"Let's find a place to sit."

There was a small park at the intersection of the no through road we had just crossed. We sat under a ginkgo tree that was just budding out, and were far enough away

from the noise from the cars on Robson that we could have a chat. We sat in silence for a minute or so.

“Look, the beer and adrenaline has worn off, and things are starting to get real. I get it. And I know it’s going to be tough for you to get through. I’m sure there is grief counselling available to help you. You had worked there a lot longer than I did, and I’m guessing you had some real friends there. I’m betting that there is some sort of emergency employment benefit you can apply to to tide you over until you get a new job. As for me, this is the third major catastrophe that I’ve lived through. I’ve already done all the soul searching and have come to peace with things. I’m glad you didn’t get squished though...”

I turned to look at Jackie. I was expecting, I don’t know, some tears, some shaking. Maybe a little lip quivering. She was just staring intently at me.

“Hmm. Interesting.”

If this was a movie, the next four months would be handled with a montage - a carefully edited cut of picnics on the beach, sunset walks in Stanley Park, shots of two people, heads tilted together with Kleenex dabbed eyes in a movie theatre. Clips of people lying together in bed. Wandering through the markets on Granville Island. Eating dough noughts and laughing when someone got some icing sugar on their nose. The music would be Take My Breath Away by Berlin, or Unchained Melody by The Righteous Brothers. The continuity crane shot would be the same two people, on the same bench, under the same ginkgo tree, it’s leaves no longer green buds but yellow and drifting down on the two lovers. Those always seemed artificial in

movies, but that's exactly how I choose to remember that summer.

3

A NEW HOME



It was fall in Vancouver. A combination of brilliant sunny days and torrential rain showers. Reality had set in on our summer idyll. We were unemployed, our cash reserves were running out, and it was time to figure out stage two. Jackie had a few credits left to complete her B.Comm and decided now was the perfect time. Her parents were happy to see her back in school, and were more than willing to cover tuition and incidentals. I was going to find another job in tech, and see where that led.

Our bench had a perfect view down Bute Street. It was the golden hour. We could see the north shore mountains frosted pink with a fresh dusting of snow. We sat in the quiet and just held hands.

“NOW!”

I had no chance to react. A black van sped towards us, from behind a black bag was yanked over my head and I was pushed to the ground. Handcuffed. Grabbed roughly by the arms and dragged and thrown into the back of the van.

“Jackie!” No response. “You fuckers! Jackie?” I thrashed around on the floor of the van. I tried to sit up, but was pushed down.

“Stay down, dipshit.” a man’s voice. “ And shut the fuck up.”

The van didn’t speed or do anything to draw attention to itself. I tried to be the secret agent, counting the turns, trying to smell the air, trying to listen to anything that would tell me where we were going.

“Next turn is for Airport South. The chopper is warmed up on pad number 3.” These guys made it easy. But I still didn’t know where we were going. Or why? And why me? “The professor is waiting. We’ll get paid when we drop ‘Disaster Boy’ off.”

‘Disaster Boy’? Seriously? Boy? If I was going to be stuck with some bullshit super hero (villain?) epithet I sure wasn’t going to be Disaster Boy. That’s Captain Mega Disaster to you, muthafucker!

Remember that thing about the missing brain bit that a coroner was going to show off to his grad class? Turns out that last sentence was said out loud.

We had stopped. There was dead silence. Except for the planes in the background, and the helicopter warming up to take off. So relatively noisy, but no one was talking. Okay. Fine. They weren’t talking because they were all laughing their asses off at my Captain Mega comment. Whatever. Seems weird to say but I was sort of glad I had the black hood on. They couldn’t see how much I was blushing. It also made it very easy to ignore everything going on, and gave me a chance to think.

“Seriously. Do you think any of you is going to survive this trip to this professor guy? Is whatever Professor Moriarity is paying you going to be easy to spend from a six foot deep hole in the ground?” I was clearly riffing now, just working off the cues I’d gleaned from almost zero information. “If you were smart, you’ll uncuff me, and tell the good professor that you couldn’t find me.” I was hoping that some of this was working.

It wasn’t. I felt a jab in my neck, there were lots of colours and sounds and then I was out cold.

I was cold when I came to. Cold and wet. Great, I thought, they’ve started to torture me and I wasn’t even awake for it. I still had the black hood on. Shook my head. On closer inspection, it was off, it was just really dark. I was cold and wet, and handcuffed, lying on my side on some sand in the dark. I wiggled everything to see what had broken this time and was glad to see that the inventory had come up clean. Too early for celebrations, I was still handcuffed and as I took in my surroundings, it seemed as though I was lost on the edge of a lake at night, in the middle of the British Columbia backcountry. Fun fact. British Columbia has an average population of 5 people per square kilometre. The problem with averages is that they don’t reflect the reality. It’s the difference, I suppose, between truth and fact. The fact says there are 5 people per square kilometre. The truth is, 99 percent of the population is urban, and 99 percent of the land has no one living there.

I was alone.

I resolved to wait until morning to try and figure out why my kidnappers had abandoned me here. I mean, it didn't seem like very good thuggery to drop a valuable cargo on the side of a lake. How were they going to get paid? Where was the professor? What happened to Jackie? Why did they cancel Quantum Leap? Why is my middle finger longer than my pointer finger?

Breath. In. Breath Out. Repeat. Breath in through the nose. Breath out through the mouth. I sat there in the dead silence of the Canadian wilderness and breathed. I organized my thoughts. Evaluated the situation and tried to formulate a plan.

I was freezing. I looked around to see if I could make out a more comfortable place to sit instead of on the wet sand. Things were still all just black shapes set against other black shapes. I tried to stand up, tripped on something and came down hard. Fuck. Okay. Sitting works. I started to shiver. Shivering is controlled from the very darkest regions of your lizard brain as a way to try and get you warmed up from the inside. I was worried about hypothermia. Sitting around in the dark of a Canadian fall morning in the back woods in soaking clothes is a pretty good way of dying from exposure. Why, oh why, did I live in a country where the weather can kill you? 'A polar vortex has rolled in. Make sure to cover up! Exposed skin will freeze and fall off leaving you horribly disfigured in just three minutes!' You gotta love weather forecasts from Canada. I knew I needed to get some blood flowing so I pitched onto my knees, rolled up, and managed to get standing. I started to march in place, hoping that the extra calories expended would be

enough to keep me warm enough so my body wouldn't stop working.

The sky seemed to be getting lighter. I carefully turned around to establish where east was, although, when I thought about it, knowing a cardinal direction is pretty much useless when you are totally fucking lost. It's not like I had a map of the area that I could reference and sort things out. I turned around in place a few times to see if I could figure out anything, power lines, a road, but it was still too dark. The shapes looming around me started to take on threatening shapes. My imagination was starting to run amok. I saw a moose, and giant sloth, and a steam shovel. Silly mind, making up stuff. I closed my eyes. I knew they weren't real. I just had to maintain a sense of self. Soon it would be light, and I'd figure out where I was, and how to get out of there. I opened my eyes. Mistake. Things were just weirder. Closed my eyes.

Breathe.

Just breathe. I could hear the wind in the poplars, the water lapping on the water's edge. Birds were starting their morning territorial calls. Faintly, a jingle of a small bell. It was getting closer. I opened my eyes and turned to where the sound seemed to be coming from.

I looked down. At my feet there was a pekinese dog in a yellow raincoat with a little yellow sou'wester.

Well that's just fucking great. My tenuous grip on reality had finally slipped and I was rocketing towards insanity...

"Hello."

A-a-a-a-and of course the dog talked. Not much point having an hallucination if you don't have animals talking to

you. This was seriously Alice in Wonderland territory, just without any of the satiric mathematical polemics.

I don't like hallucinations. I don't like yappy little dogs. I don't like being cold and wet and lost. I don't like dogs that talk. I don't like being handcuffed. Frankly, I don't get why people like the whole sexy handcuffs in the bedroom thing. If I'm going to be in bed with someone I don't want to be tied down. But I digress. Back to the imaginary talking dog.

"Can you hear me?" asked the dog. It's voice was soothing, and why not, this was the voice of my hallucination, it could be whatever I wanted it to be. "Hello?"

"Yeah, I can hear you. But you're only a figment of my imagination. Quite frankly, I'm not sure why I imagined an ugly little dog like you. If I'm going to lose my mind in the backwoods, I'd rather imagine you as a bigger dog." I closed my eyes tightly and imagined a Rhodesian ridgeback. I opened my eyes. Nope. Still a little shitty dog in a raincoat.

"I imagine that this is confusing." The dog was sitting down, tail wagging.

"So I've been adopted by a talking dog? Well why not?"

It was light enough to see my surroundings. I turned around. The lake wasn't very large. Just offshore there was the wreckage of the helicopter, partially submerged. That explained how I got here. It also explained the imagined steam shovel; the blades of the chopper were bent askew from the crash and I could see how my imagination filled in the gaps and came up with Mike Mulligan's buddy. The rest was just trees and rocks.

“Follow me. It’s a bit of a hike.” The little sailor got up and started walking away from the lake. I followed, because, well, because following a hallucination that talked and dying somewhere in the woods was better than not having anyone to talk to and dying by a lake.

The dog couldn’t walk very quickly, which was a good thing because walking through the woods handcuffed was slow going. Stumps and deadfalls make it tricky, and the moss covered rocks were as slippery as seal shit on an iceberg. It was an uphill slog away from the lake, but it was warming up, and I was glad to be moving. I was trying to get a sense of where we were, but it was a typical B.C. rainforest; cedar trees, poplars, tamaracks, blackberry. The rainforest in B.C. extends for 4,000 kilometres and you’d need to be an expert to look at the vegetation and determine where along that stretch you were lost in. I gave up. I thought I’d talk to my little imaginary friend instead.

“Where are we going?” The dog stopped mid stride, and turned to face me.

“There’s a logging road up ahead. There is a vehicle there that will take you to…” suspicious pause inserted here “... safety.”

Hmm. Safety. I guess that’s a relative term. Safer than dying in a helicopter crash. Safer than dying of hypothermia in a rainforest.

“Ok. Lead the way.”

The last bit of the hike was the most difficult. Easy for the imaginary dog, but climbing up a scree covered slope to the logging road while handcuffed is slow going. It was only 15 feet or so, but by the time I’d crested the hill I was bleeding, having fallen 8 times, and yes I counted, out of

breath, and sore. I laid back on the roads' edge to catch my breath and stare at the sky. I watched some clouds drift by. The forest had been dark and this was the first patch of light I'd seen in a while. My hallucinations could wait. My plan was to walk downhill; eventually the logging road would meet up with a highway, and then I'd find my way to a police station, explain what had happened, and get back to my life.

"The vehicle is just over here." Again with the hallucinated dog. I must have really whacked my head for that thing to still be around. I sat up, and the talking dog was not lying. There was a vehicle there, but it wasn't like a truck, or car, it was shaped more like an old VW camper; small, smooth, and with no clear indication as to which direction was forward. This has got to be part of my brain injury. I want there to be an easy way home, so I imagine a solution. Makes perfect reasonable sense. I got up, and hoping to banish this fever dream once and for all, walked quickly through the illusion.

Except for the part where I walked into the side of a very real vehicle and left a bloody, snotty face print on the super black window on the side.

"Fuck. Ow. Goddamnit. Son of a bitch." Just one more hurt onto the growing list.

"Did you think it wasn't real?" asked the little shitdog.

"I've been thrown out of a helicopter, half drowned, mostly died from hypothermia and I've been following an hallucination of a talking dog for a couple of hours. Of course it's not real." There was a click, a sound like a soda being opened in slow motion, and a door that didn't look like it should be there, slid open, revealing several seats

inside. “So, little shitdog, are you going to drive? Because I have handcuffs on!” My voice was rising along with my sense that something was grossly horribly wrong. The dog sat down and hung its head like I was going to beat it like a drum.

“Of course not. It’s autonomous. Get in.”

The air inside the pod was warm, with a hint of floral. It was serene, with shades of grey on grey. The seats were comfortable but vaguely utilitarian. Sitting was awkward with the handcuffs still on, and frustrating as the bottled water in the armrest was not an option. A chime. The door whispered closed with a click. I looked for door handles, but nothing broke the smooth modern interior. So I was trapped, but somehow that was better than being in a black ops helicopter blasted on some sleepytime juice.

Gymnopédie No. 1 by Erik Satie played in the background. I could tell that the super villain that had kidnapped me had money and taste. I still didn’t understand the dog. Why a talking dog? Robot perhaps.

The pod began to move. Without windows to gauge direction or speed, I had no idea what was going on outside. I was exhausted and warm. I felt myself slipping down the slope to sleep. I wedged myself into the corner where the seat met the wall of the pod and let myself fall. I had a weird dream about sitting at a coffee shop and seeing a pod of whales float by. Given the current circumstances, my dreams were going to get a whole lot weirder before I’d tell Jackie that I’d had a weird dream. Jackie. Shit. I hoped she was okay. I have no reason to feel guilty, but all the people that had died because I was around got me thinking that there was something fundamentally askew with my

chi. I fell deeper into sleep. No dreams. Just cold and fatigue catching up with me.

I have no idea how long the trip was. I was still asleep when the pod came to a stop. The door opened and a wash of fresh cool air chased away the sleep fairies.

“We’re here.” I looked at the dog and pointed out that it was not a person.

“There is no we, little doggy. You’re a weird abomination of nature, a hallucination, or a robot. You don’t get to consider yourself part of the ‘we’ thing that humans do.” I was having an irrational argument with a dog.

“Oh, you’re so right. Arf, Arf.” Sarcasm from a dog. I wondered how far I could kick him.

We were parked in an empty hanger. The pod glided away from the dog and I and suckled up to a charging station. The hanger was large. Large enough to contain a cabin, a dock for two autonomous pods, a half basketball court with hoop. The ceiling was at least 10 meters high and the roof panels were made of a translucent material that allowed the color and lightness of the sky to come through. In the middle of the floor there was one chair and a screen. On the chair was a set of handcuff keys.

You know how criminals always make it look like getting rid of handcuffs is a snap? How they effortlessly pick the lock on handcuffs behind their back all the while carrying on a conversation with police officers, only to escape. Well, it’s a lie. I gingerly perched on the chair, trying to pick up the keys. Dropped them. Got down on my knees and tried to reach them. Fell over. Rolled on them. Lost them under me. Rolled the other way. Oriented myself so I could slide

back and get them. Lost them again. After forty five minutes I was tired, sweaty, lying on my side breathing heavily and still handcuffed. It was less J. Bond and more J. Clouseau.

Dog sat and watched.

When it was obvious that I had been beaten. When it was clear that my resolve had been broken. When I'd started to dream of ways that I could live my life while handcuffed; Going to the bathroom wasn't going to be easy, but I could probably get a job in technical support. I'd just have to learn to press the 'accept call' button with my nose. Getting married and having kids was probably out unless I found a very unusual girl. When I started to cry, just a little, it was then, and only then, that the dog walked over, picked up the keys with it's little pin-like teeth, and dropped the keys into my hand.

4

CAPTIVE



“I fucking hate you, dog.” It still took some reverse 3D thinking to the key in the mechanism, but I managed, tongue sticking out to the left side, to get free of the restraints. I flung them across the glass smooth concrete floor and lay on my back, stretching out my aching shoulders. I stared up at the translucent carapace.

The screen flickered to life. I was sitting on the floor off to the side. I could see a face on the screen, but couldn't make it out.

“You need to sit on the chair, or I can't see you.” Hmm familiar sounding but a bit of an accent. I hoisted myself onto the chair, bending forward to stretch out my back. I breathed in and relaxed back into the chair. It was a nice chair, a Womb Chair by Eero Saarinen, one of my favourite designers. As a hobby I'd started collecting books on classic chairs. I'd never be able to afford most of them, but I had to admire the designers. Anyone can build a table; only the truly great can design a chair that is both functional and comfortable ...

“My name is Atifah Amir. I'm an Iranian scientist working on a top secret project. I have been studying you

since the plane crash.” She was very businesslike and professional, brunette ponytail, lab coat and glasses. “My specialty is hyperkinetic subneural force fields. It’s my supposition that you have a gift, or perhaps, curse if you’d rather, that causes disasters when you are under stressful situations.”

“I’m just lucky. It’s all just coincidence.” I protested.

“Well that’s what we’re here to find out.” she picked up a clipboard, settled back into her chair and continued “ I have many questions.”

“Forget it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said forget it. You’re going to poke and prod me and then you’re going to suck my brains out and examine them under a microscope. I’ve seen enough movies to know that this is how this works. I’ll be tissue samples and a scientific paper in no time. I’m also going to assume that there are a bunch of thick-necked steroid monkeys with sub machine guns placed at regular intervals around this weird hanger, keeping me here whether I want to be examined or not.” I thought to myself, fuck it. If they’re going to kill me, they’re going to do it. I realized that I was tensed on the edge of the chair. I took a breath and fell back onto the cushions.

“You’ll have to forgive me. I’m anxious to move forward with my studies. I haven’t been a very gracious host. Why don’t you go have a shower and something to eat. When you’re up for another conversation just come back and sit in the chair, and we can chat some more.” She seemed believable and real, but I was still not buying it.

“Ok. Yeah. I could use a shower. Before I go, a couple of questions.”

“I’ll certainly answer them if I can.” She put down the clipboard and sat back.

“What did you do with Jackie?”

“Your girlfriend? She was handcuffed to the park bench. She was released by Vancouver police after about 10 minutes. She was not harmed. She gave a description of the operatives, but as you know, they successfully completed the personnel acquisition.”

“You mean kidnapping. And it wasn’t really successful, was it. I mean what with the helicopter crash and the whole death thing.”

“That was unfortunate....”

“How much were they going to be paid for actually dropping me off in the parking lot outside?”

“I’m not sure that the budgetary aspects of our operation are any concern of yours.” She pulled herself up a little in her chair, and tilted her head back a bit. Small actions, but they spoke volumes. She was rattled by the error, and a bit afraid.... Of what?

“Well, all I was thinking is that I heard those bozos say they were going to get paid when they dropped me off. Given that they’re dead, that frees up a bunch of money. I think the least you could do is drop off that amount of cash for Jackie. It’s got to be at least \$20K because of the helicopter time alone.” I was fishing here a bit, I figured it was more than \$20k, but that number would be a nice going away present for Jackie.

“I’m sure we can arrange that.” Her shoulders relaxed a little. The 20 thousand was obviously chump change to this organization. At least Jackie could afford rent for another year or so.

“That’s good. I’m going to go now and grab that shower. I’ll talk to you when I’m ready.” I stood up, tripped over the dog, and swore. I’d figure out what his deal was tomorrow.

I walked over to the cabin in the corner, my still wet shoes smooshing as I went. It was nothing fancy, about 10 meters on a side, and I walked around the back to see if it was connected to the main hanger, and surreptitiously looking for any weaknesses in the hanger wall. Of course there were none, this being a classy villain organization and all. The cabin was on a frame with wheels, so there were three steps up to the front door. Inside, the space was 100% Ikea. It looked like a catalog photo shoot. A small open kitchen and living space in the front, bathroom and bed nook at the back.

It was a little depressing as I realized that they went to this amount of effort because they were planning on keeping me here for a while. A long while. I checked the bedroom for clean clothes and found a closet stocked with identical blue shirts and a row of black jeans. All, of course, my size, because I’d been under surveillance for 6 months. I was probably still under surveillance now, but I didn’t give a fuck. If they’ve been watching me for 6 months, I was sure that they’d seen me naked more than once.

I stripped off my stinky lake soaked clothes and dumped them in the garbage. I wasn’t sure how long it had been since I’d been kidnapped, and I was thankful for the shower. I stood there, letting the water beat the grime and sand off me. Looking down, I watched a swirl of detritus disappear down the drain.

I'd read somewhere that showers were a great place to formulate ideas and create solutions. Something about providing a dopamine high, and giving you a break to be able to disengage from a fixation on the ineffective solution. Ideas need time to marinate, bake, and form before they move forward. Showers provide the time that takes. At least regular showers do. I'd only just got some shampoo in my hair when a synthetic voice followed a chime and said "One minute left." The water temperature started falling, and I quickly rinsed off, the water temperature falling to ice cold.

I dried off, glad that I didn't smell like pond anymore, and sat on the edge of the bed. I laid back, and in an instant I was asleep.

5

DOLLARS



“Delivery for Jacqueline somethingorother sorry I can’t read it.”

It was seriously too early for deliveries, but the buzzer was insistent. Jackie rolled out of bed, pressed the door release on the intercom and leaned against the wall next to the door still half asleep. She had started to fade when the delivery guy rapped sharply on the door, jolting her out of sleep.

“Here you go.” She mumbled something that sounded like thanks. A padded envelope. No return address. Weird. Jackie pulled the open tab, lost control of the package and a white inner envelope slid out and plopped on the floor. She jumped back. She’d been on edge since the kidnapping a couple weeks ago, waiting for a ransom note, but never got one. And now a mysterious envelope. She carefully picked it up and placed it on the kitchen table. She listened. No ticking. No real smell. Slightly bendy. She put on her pink dishwashing gloves, took the kitchen shears and slowly and carefully slit open one end of the envelope.

She pinched the envelope so she could see inside. Laying her head on the table so as not to disturb the contents. Nothing but a brown stack of paper. About two centimeters thick. She tipped out on the table. It was a wad of \$100 bills, bound with a blue elastic band. It was more cash than Jackie had ever seen in her life. Except on TV, of course. On TV there were always sleek Zero Halliburton aluminum briefcases with carefully stacked bills and depending on the show it was either hundred thousand or a million, or five million. It didn't seem to matter how much money was involved, it always just fit the briefcase level with the top. I mean if you were a criminal did you walk into a bank and ask for exactly a million dollars in whatever currency fit this briefcase? And it never got all mixed up when it was carried upright. None of those thoughts crossed Jackie's mind as she pulled off the elastic and started counting.

Two hundred pictures of Sir Robert Borden, the eight prime minister of Canada, in neat ten bill stacks on the table. Now fully awake, she had to wonder.

Was it delivered to me by mistake? Was it meant for her sketchy drug addled next door neighbours as payment for a brick of heroin? Was she going to get iced by some hitman coming looking for his loot? If it was meant for someone else, why was her name out the outside envelope? Did granny die and her parents decided to send her some money? A quick phone call would solve that, but it occurred to her that asking her parents if they had sent \$20k would probably require her to explain a whole lot more than she was willing to divulge at this point.

She examined the white envelope closer. Nothing on it that would betray its origins. She retrieved the brown shipping envelope from where it had fallen on the floor. Carefully snipping all the sides of the envelope to expose the inside. There was a note!

Okay. This will solve the mystery!

*J. Had to leave. Hope
this will help.*

“That fucker.” Jackie leaned back in the chair and slammed her hands on the table. “That little chicken shit breaks up with me by getting fake kidnapped? What a fucking asshole.” She crossed her arms, turned her head to look out the window, and took a ragged breath. “I so fucking hate him.”

She picked up the phone and the constable’s card. The police were in contact every day after the kidnapping, but by the second week they seemed stumped, and Constable John Constable had given her a card and told her to contact him if there were any messages from the kidnappers. He was tall and too young to be as bald as he was. He was self conscious about it and kept his hat on most of the time.

She punched in the numbers angrily. It started to ring.

And then she hung up. If she told him about the note, she’d have to say something about the \$20 thousand. He’d have to take it for evidence and then she’d never see it. She started to pace. The apartment was big by Vancouver standards, but small by Calgary walk-in closet standards.

Pacing wasn't doing it for her. Coffee. Coffee would help, and increase her ability to think strategically.

There is a certain calmness in the ritualized making of coffee. Most people get up late, rush their morning, and then pay too much for burnt tasting takeout coffee from the closest Starbucks. She and the soon-to-be-dead fake kidnappee ex-boyfriend had created a civilized approach to mornings. Instead of getting up late to chase rats, they would get up with time to spare, and depending on who could be convinced to brave the ice cold floor, one of them would put on the kettle and grind the coffee. The coffee grinder was not a whining electric abomination, but rather a wall mounted antique. The hopper was ceramic glazed with a dutch windmill. The grinder was a steel burr mill set in a cast iron mechanism attached to a serpentine handle with a green wooden handle. At least the parts of the paint that hadn't worn off suggest that it was all green at some point. The receptacle was a square glass with protrusions that slotted into the rails of the grinder mechanism. The length of time it took to boil water was the amount of time it took to grind enough coffee. The amount of time that the coffee needed to swim around in the french press was exactly the amount of time it took to toast two slices of bread. It was the breakfast ballet. She missed him.

Coffee and toast and a couch and a calm think. She closed her eyes, and held the almost too warm cup in both hands. The morning was quiet. So quiet that when Jackie's cell phone rang, she jumped, spilling some hot coffee in her lap and dumping her toast on the floor.

“Fuuuuuuck!” she fished the iPhone out of her housecoat pocket, dried her scalded hand on her lapel and answered.

“Hey girlfriend! What's ya doing?”

It was Raceela Patel, one of her friends from the B.Comm program and a stalwart friend. She'd been the first person Jackie had called after the kidnapping. Ceela was the daughter of the Indian ambassador to, most recently, Kenya. She'd grown up all over the world and had settled on Vancouver as home, at least for the time being. Her call was perfect timing.

“Your call is perfect timing. I need your help. There's been a dot dot dot development.” It was a cruel in-joke from school, always spelling out unnecessary punctuation after Brenda Menskowitz did it when she was reading out a presentation in Econ 220. Brenda hadn't realized she had made the error and kept blithely on. No one, including the professor, remembered anything about the presentation after that, so in fairness he marked her a B+.

“What's up? I can be there in 15 minutes. Is this about your disappearing boyfriend?” sensing a juicy bit of gossip.

“Yeah, and a mystery envelope. See you soon.”

Ceela was there in ten minutes. Jackie poured her a cup of coffee and they sat at the small Craigslist treasure of a teak kitchen table. The envelope with the money returned to it sat on the table between them.

“Sooooo. Can I open it? Is it dangerous? Do I need a hazmat suit?” Ceela was bouncing a little in her chair, excited by the mystery. Jackie nodded slowly and did her best Vanna White hand sweep gesture. Ceela picked up the envelope, and the 200 bills, unbound by blue elastic,

spilled onto the table. The cascade was dramatic, the bills, fluttering down in seeming slow motion. Ceela's eyes widened. "Holy fuck. That's like a million dollars!"

"Twenty thousand."

"That's like twenty thousand dollars! You rich, bitch!" Ceela jumped up from the table, knocking over the chair, and made a pouty gangster face and goofy hand signal.

"Shhhhhh. I don't want my druggie neighbours to hear. Goddamit Ceela, shut up!" They were both laughing and shushing each other. Ceela picked up the chair and sat back down, grabbing a stack of bills and pretending to stick it down her shirt.

"I'll cut yo ho! Y'all put that green back or I'll cut you like a jigsaw puzzle. The popo will be findin' pieces of your fat ass all over town!" They were killing themselves laughing, then Jackie snort laughed and that was the end of any semblance of quiet.

They both turned away, knowing that if they were looking at each other they'd just carry on. Ten seconds. A couple deep breaths. They both turned. Both were making silly faces.

"Stop it stop it stop it! I'm going to pee myself!"

A few more heaving breaths.

"Do you want to see the note?" Suddenly the room was quiet.

"Yeah I wanna see the note. Hand it over." Jackie reached the counter for the note and handed it to Ceela. Ceela looked at the front, the back, held it up to the light like she'd watched police detectives on TV do. "Hmmm." She smelt it. "A faint paper-like smell....."

“Seriously? My asshole boyfriend breaks up with me by getting kidnapped and then sends me \$20 thousand? You think this is funny??”

“Whoa there smelly Nelly. First off, I understand you’re being a little stress puppy bitch in the situation, but that’s no reason to snap at me. I’m your friend. And second. He didn’t write this.”

“Sorry, I just lost it there, um, wait, what?” Jackie snatched the note out of Ceela’s hand. “It totally is his writing.”

“Nope. Remember how you showed me all those stupid little lovey-dovey notes he used to leave you? Go get them and I’ll show you what I mean.” Jackie disappeared into the bedroom and reappeared with a tin Christmas cookie box. “I can’t believe you kept them all. Anyhow.... So one summer when I was 17 I got totally into handwriting analysis. I thought it would help me find the ‘perfect’ man. It was total claptrap, the whole Cosmo ‘how he crosses his t’s says what kind of lover he’ll be’ nonsense, but it did teach me to look for consistencies and quirks in people’s writing. So look here. Here’s a note from a couple months ago...” Jackie began to tear up.

“Sorry, sorry,” fluttering her hands like butterflies in front of her face, “he wrote that when I was in the shower saying he was going out for croissants.”

“Oh, honey, don’t cry. That’s so deep. There, there. ” Ceela patted Jackie’s head like a puppy.

“Fuck off.”

“There’s the Jackie I know and love,” laughed Ceela. “So let’s compare the notes. If you compare the letters they look pretty close, like someone was tracing them. But if you

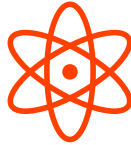
look at the incidentals, there are inconsistencies. See how in all of his notes to you he dots his “i”s with a small dash, not a dot like normal people? All of his periods look more like little commas? Like he’s not sure he’s done? None of that in this note. I’d say this was a note done by the people that have kidnapped him. The twenty thousand was some weird way of getting you to close this chapter in your life.” Ceela sat back and Jackie just stared at the notes.

“So what now?” It had been a rollercoaster of a day for Jackie and she was exhausted. And it wasn’t noon. She threw herself on the couch and pulled the throw up around her.

“Simple. We find him and rescue his ass.”

6

THE SCIENTIST



Doctor Atefah Amir had received her accreditation at the Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She spoke Arabic, English, French and a smattering of Italian. Her main focus was predictive fault detection in high energy electrical systems, but she had a side interest in the phenomena of near misses - people who fell into a manhole just before a bomb exploded, or bent to tie their shoes just as a truck rounding a curve lost its load of sheet glass. She reasoned that most of these occurrences were simple luck, statistically irrelevant, but she felt that some people were more than just lucky . Those people were the focus of her study. She postulated that those people weren't lucky, but that they exuded a force that caused accidents that they somehow escaped. She had trouble finding funding for the research as it was deemed too esoteric, until her advisor had suggested that she rewrite her grant application under the title of 'Advanced Catastrophic Prediction Modelling and Their Uses in Non Explosive Weapon Systems'.

She wasn't really interested in turning her research into a weapon, but funding was tight. When she sat before the military board to explain her project, she cast the project as a way to bring whole countries to their knees, without ever firing a bullet. Imagine, she told the taciturn generals, having the ability to take out the electrical and water systems of an entire country thereby causing a domino effect on all infrastructure just by having the persons with these gifts walk through the streets. The key was to understand the phenomena and then find ways to amplify and control the effect. They sat stoically and didn't seem moved by her presentation, and she left feeling as though it had been a waste of time. A few days later a newly minted private in the Saudi Armed Forces, all epaulets and gold braid, arrived at her closet of an office at the university and handed her a dossier.

A million riyals to further her research. Two hundred hours of time on the Shaheen 2 supercomputer at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. An office at the Ministry of Defence, and a free luxury apartment a few blocks away. Jackpot.

She hired a computer science doctoral student, moved out of her crappy apartment over the kebab shop, and set to work, scouring news reports in multiple languages for stories of serendipitous escapes and near misses. There were thousands of stories; people who missed a flight that later crashed, or ordered steak instead of dodgy salmon at a restaurant poisoning. There were quite a few possibilities in Russia but most of those involved massive amounts of vodka. A particularly lucky postman in Scotland caught her

eye but all of their misadventures paled by comparison to the man in Vancouver.

“You’re putting it on backwards....” there was exasperation in Dr. Amir’s voice as I purposely messed with her.

“Like this?” I asked innocently as I twisted it on sideways. This was the third day of EEG testing. The test was painless. It consisted of me wearing a weird 16th century looking cap studded with hundreds of sensors wired to a central cable that was fed up and through a receiver arm that was attached to a medical looking chair. It was painless, but the tests had been going on and on, and quite frankly I was still kidnapped. And bored.

The last two days of testing had been me sitting in the chair while the doctor flashed pictures on the TV. A bunch of cute dogs, then a picture of a dog that had been run over. A picture of some houses, then a picture of a tornado.

“So, I’m guessing that the picture association thing didn’t show up any abnormalities? I’m betting I have absolutely average responses to roadkill and hurricanes.”

“You are correct. You are normal.”

“Don’t you EVER call me normal!” I crossed my arms and pulled a pouty face. As much as I didn’t want to be kidnapped, and as resolved as I was that I was going to end up with my head floating in a specimen jar in some lab in Riyadh, I was hopeful that the bond I was building with Atifeh was going to buy me some time to figure out a way out of here.

“Ha ha. Very funny. Today we’re going to try something different. Sit back and relax, and tell me about the cruise

ship incident.” It was nice of her to call it an ‘incident’. The news called it the worst maritime disaster in Canadian history, including the SS Mont-Blanc, a French cargo ship laden with high explosives that exploded in Halifax harbour during the First World War, killing 1,900 people.

The Trident of the Seas, a flagship of the Royal Caribbean Line was on an inaugural run, with around 4,000 guests and 2,000 overworked and underpaid staff. I had hired on as the editor of the on-board newspaper. It was a pretty soft gig. Everyday I’d wander around the ship, find interesting people that were willing to tell me about themselves and write stories on a two page broadsheet. Most of the content was advertising for the ships’ extra (read: not free) activities, the art auctions and jewelry sales, and sales pitches for upcoming cruises, filled in with profile pieces on the captain and crew. Nothing about the thousands of Filipinos that slaved away in the belly of the ship cranking out 12,000 meals a day.

“Start from the beginning, if you don’t mind. The EEG is active. Anytime you’re ready.” The TV went dark. I leaned back in the chair.

“I was born in a little town in Alberta...”

“Seriously? I knew we should have put a shock collar on you!” I’ll say that it was said with humour, but it kinda seemed like a threat nonetheless.

“Just kidding doc.”

For the next hour I went into great detail about getting hired, about the job, about the spiffy little private cabin, about my own little print shop. I talked about all the people I met, how some had become friends, how a one had

become an umm friend, and how the first 6 days of my run up to Alaska had been clear sailing.

“We had left Skagway the night before, steaming north to College Fjord. The boat is huge, three football fields long and weighing a half a billion pounds. A miracle of modern marine engineering, with three pools, a waterslide, skate park, 10 restaurants, movie theatres, all intended to take your mind off the fact that you are stranded at sea with 6,000 strangers all leaving a snail trail of personal bacteria on every handrail and door. It wasn’t so much a ship as a giant petri dish. Anyways, I had some time off and decided to try out some of the sports on the upper deck. At one of the pools they were playing zorb soccer. Kellyann, the ships’ entertainment coordinator, was getting teams of two into these large inflated balls. The theory was that a rubber duck would be dropped in the pool, and then two people would coordinate their efforts to push the duck over a goal line while inside these human size floating hamster balls. She couldn’t find taker for the fourth ball, so when she saw me she used her microphone to goad me into playing. “Here’s the editor of the ship’s newspaper! Come and play! You can write about it too! Everybody give him a big hand!” She was on a natural cheerleader high all the time, and as much as I hated enclosed spaces, I really didn’t see that I had much of a choice at that point, so I gave my camera to a responsible looking adult and told him to take pictures. The camera wasn’t anything special, but it was housed in a floating waterproof case. Mostly because I had dropped my first camera in one of the pools and management wasn’t pleased. The guy with my camera was doing a surprisingly

good job of getting shots of me getting into the ball, making sure that Kellyann was in the frame as well.”

There are these memories that are called flashbulb moments. Moments that are seared forever in your brain, the edges hard, the shadows deep with contrast. People claim that they remember everything about a where they were when they heard the news of JFK being assassinated, or when the World Trade Center towers went down, or when they walked in on their parents having sex. I was glad that my spur of the moment photographer had the presence of mind to point the camera at the scenery as well. Those pictures were seared in everyone’s mind and exploded on every newspaper on the planet.

“I’d just gotten zipped into the ball when the side of a mountain let loose and belly flopped into the fjord. My photographer saw it, thought it was a glacier calving and started snapping pictures, telling everyone to look at the magnificence of nature. People turned and watched in awe at the landslide, not realizing that the displaced water from the rockfall was bunching up into a rogue wave headed straight for the boat. I was oblivious to this, as my team was already one goal down and I wanted to even the score. It was a massive coincidence of shitstormery between the wave, and the seafloor topology, and the orientation of the boat. When the wave hit it flipped the boat on its side, and with no warning to close the breach doors, the boat took on water from a thousand openings. The coast guard investigators said they’d never seen a boat go down so quickly. There was no time for life jackets or lifeboats, and the escaping air from the boat roared like a banshee,

blowing out windows and opening more points for the cold Pacific water to rush in.”

I’d told this story before. The newspapers had all wanted to hear how I’d escaped. They’d all ask the stupidest question, ‘How did that make you feel?’ Seriously, you’d think that journalism schools would train people better. I guess these days when every knob with a selfie stick and an iPhone thinks they’re a journalist, so there aren’t many barriers to entry. What I’d left out of all the other reports was this:

“I stopped playing when I noticed a shadow covering the pool. It was a bright sunny day, so it didn’t make any sense. I looked to the edge of the pool and saw Kellyann looking up and behind me. There’s a legend that people get a certain look on their face when they know they are about to die - a look of irrevocable sadness, a look that strips away the façade that they build to show the world, a look of regret and resignation. I looked at Kellyann and knew.”

That was my flashbulb moment. Not the wave or the sinking ship or the aftermath. The look on Kellyann’s face was seared into my memory. I was sure I’d seen the shimmer of her soul leaving her body as the wave hit.

“As the boat tipped everything was thrown sideways. It was like gravity had forgot to carry the one and time had hit the fast forward button. I didn’t have any control over the hamster ball and I was washed off the boat. The other people in the game made the mistake of trying to get out of their balls, and were lost. The boat went down so fast it created a giant suck hole in the water. I was being pulled down into the depths until the surrounding sea rushed in to fill the hole. The ball reversed the direction and I shot

straight up, clearing the roiling water surface by several meters. It seemed like I hung in mid-air forever before falling back down on the water. I sat in the ball and looked at the floating wreckage, inflatable pool toys, garbage and oil in the water around me. I'm not sure how much time passed, but I eventually stood up in the ball and started walking towards shore. In the end 6293 people died. I didn't even get wet."

I hated telling that story. No happy ending except for me. I'd convinced myself that it was inconceivable that I had anything to do with the rockslide.... I mean, how could I? It didn't make any sense, just a coincidence.

"So, Doc, any weird blips on the EEG?" No answer. The TV had only static. Oh. Okay. Don't talk to me. I pour my heart out and you sit there, wherever you are and don't have anything to say. She probably fell asleep. Speaking of which, it was getting late. I took off the electronic garden gnome hat and left it on the chair and walked back to my little homey piece of Sweden. The dog was lying in the middle of the garage floor twitching. Weird. Never liked that dog/robot. Probably out of batteries. I had a bowl of Cheerios and watched a DVD. There was no cable or satellite, only a collection of about 500 DVDs. Lot's of bootleg versions, ones filmed illegally in a theatre with someone's head just visible on the side, and an EXIT sign in the bottom corner of the screen. There were two seasons of Gilligan's Island. I felt a kinship with those stranded folks; here I was, lost and alone and stuck on an island surrounded by sharks with machine guns. I fell asleep on

the couch, dreams invaded by the Skipper's exasperatingly shouting "Gilligan!"

7

ROAD TRIP



I woke up. Stood up. Collapsed. My legs were still asleep. They hadn't gotten the wake up call from my brain. I sat on the floor waiting for a resericing of blood to my lower appendages, and checked my watch. It was 8:35. Normally the garage lights came on at 8:00 yelling something about get up it's morning. No lights. No thrum of the aircon system. Something was up.

I was still dressed in yesterday's clothes, and my mouth tasted like sock. Staggered over to the sink and rinsed my mouth out, and washed my face. It didn't really count as getting a good start on the day, but it dislodged some of the dust bunnies in my head.

I took a walk around the garage. The space seemed larger without the harsh lights, just the soft glow of the translucent ceiling tiles. The quiet was deafening. Dog had stopped twitching. The normal blue charging lights on the autonomous vehicles were off. When I'd had my orientation

to my kidnapping home, I was told that there was continuous power, and a double redundant backup system that powered everything, including the electronic locks and electric fence, and other electric things that would hurt me if I tried to leave. The demonstration included throwing a leg of lamb against the door. It fell to the floor in a shower of sparks, smelling like my favourite shawarma shop.

I took a basketball and rolled it from a safe distance to the door. No warning lights. No alarms. No zapping death sparks. I tried again. Same result. The whole Einstein definition of insanity, doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, didn't take into account a healthy dose of life preservation. I was expecting the next throw to result in a flaming ball exploding in a shower of blue death plasma. This time I threw the ball at the door. Aside from a bwangangang that echoed through the hanger, nothing happened. The ball rolled over to my feet, my sketched on version of Wilson's face peering up at me.

Okay. Well then. Better check the door before it kicks back on. I walked over to the door and pushed it open, fully expecting to see one of the Doctor's black ops mercs barring my path. I walked out with my hands raised up, hoping that everyone was as confused as I was at the power interruption.

It was still earlyish. And chilly, but being outside for the first time in a couple of weeks felt great. I walked out, expecting to be ushered back in, but there was no one. Dead silence. A smell like Hallowe'en in the air. I took a deep breath and stretched. I was guessing I was free? Somehow? A dirt road in front of the hanger. One way was

freedom, the other was probably into the arms of my kidnappers.

I wasn't sure how long I was going to be walking, so headed back inside and fashioned a cloak out of the Fjalliharve duvet, packed some food and water in a pillow case, pulled the head off the broom and headed out the door looking like Charlie Chaplin in the Little Hobo. I stood in the middle of the dirt road and mentally flipped a coin. I was indecisive so I did best two out of three. Right it is.

I was glad to put this all behind me. Right turn. I squared my shoulders. First step...

"Stop, please!" Fuck. Some great escape. My head dropped, and I raised my hands, turning around slowly.

"Don't shoot." I felt like I was back in grade six when I got caught stealing, or rather liberating, my tamagotchi from Mrs. Birnker's Drawer of No Return. Some teachers go into the profession because they love kids. Some? Not so much.

"Please, help me." Okay, that wasn't what I was expecting. Usually it's 'stop or I'll shoot', or 'move and you die', not 'please, help me.' I raised my head.

"Holy shit! Doc! What happened?" I rushed over to the doctor and caught her just as she collapsed. Her head was bloody, one eye was swollen shut, her lab coat was covered in mud. She didn't weigh more than 50 kilos, so I picked her up and carried her back into the hanger.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking why did you bother? You could have just walked away and left her to the coyotes. You certainly were well within your rights to let the criminal die alone in the woods. And maybe I should have. But I didn't. It's a Canadian thing.

I took her into the cabin, and laid her on the couch.

“Water?”

She nodded. I poured a glass, then switched the water to warm and soaked a cloth to wipe her face. When she was cleaned up I got a cold compress from the med kit and pressed it to her swollen eye.

“We need to leave. The Russians are coming.”

“Right. The Martians too.” I figured that she had taken a blow to the head and was talking nonsense.

“I’m serious. Last night our remote observation post was attacked by a small well armed force speaking Russian. They destroyed everything and killed all the researchers in the lab. I escaped. They were looking for our secret project. They took all the data. They’ll be coming for you next.” She was talking in staccato and grabbing my slightly grubby slept-in yesterday shirt for emphasis. I was a little embarrassed that I hadn’t showered or changed yet. Probably not the most important item on the agenda at the moment, but I like clean clothes. I could not have lived in the 14th century.

“Well, fortunately escaping was on my todo list for today, so I guess I can fit you in. Do you have a car or four by four we can hop into? Or are we going to walk?”

“The autonomous vehicles. We can take one of those. There is a manual mode.” She got up from the couch, still a bit woozy and wavered, losing her balance. I reached out instinctively and grabbed her arm to steady her. Our eyes met. Time shuddered to a halt for just a second. She was beautiful. Well, except for the cracked lip and the swollen eye. And the cobwebs in her hair from running through the

forest. Look I hadn't seen a real person in a couple of weeks, so yeah, she was beautiful-ish.

"The pods have a range of 100 kilometers, that should be enough to get us out of here to, um," and here was that pause again. I really wish she'd stop doing that, "safety." I threw the med kit, my comforter, my pillow case of water and food on the floor of the pod and hopped in. She pressed a small button, indistinguishable from the grey on grey tones of the interior and said "Manual override."

"You mentioned that. Yeah..."

"Security clearance?" asked the pod. She wasn't talking to me.

"Sitta, waheed, saba"

The windows snapped clear. A compartment slid open and Atifeh reached in and retrieved a standard xBox controller.

I sat back. Atifeh was my age, but had her PhD and two masters degrees. She was intelligent, skilled, trained and calm. Somehow we were going to get out of this. She sat in the forward chair, the pod lurched at neck snapping speed and plowed us into the charging dock. I was jolted out of my seat. Reverse. Not tentatively and carefully backing up, but R is for racing reverse. We slammed into the testing chair and tv. She screamed something in arabic, and we launched forward heading for the open door. The english idiom 'she couldn't hit the broadside of a barn' is meant to convey an inability to hit a large stationary target, which didn't, unfortunately, apply in this situation as we crashed squarely into the door frame. The pod spoke in measured tones.

"System failure. No motion possible. Please disembark."

“So I’m guessing that when you were getting your PhD you didn’t take a break and play a little Grand Theft Auto on the xBox?” I said this as I repackaged the water and energy bars in the pillow case and stepped out of the ruined pod.

“We’ll take the other one.” Atifeh strode off with purpose towards the remaining pod.

“Sure. But I get to drive.” She stopped, spun around, fire in her eye, finger pointed like a dagger at me, ready to reassert the kidnapper/victim hierarchy, when she saw that flames had started to engulf Pod # 1.

“Fine. Hurry up.” she made a hand gesture. I presumed it was a supplication to Allah for a safe trip, but I’m culturally ignorant so it might have been a rude gesticulation directed towards me.

Launch #2 was more successful. The controls seemed to be pretty standard, and it wasn’t long before we were moving at a good pace down the dirt road. The automatic scent misters kicked in, and Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata started to play. It was like we were in an elevator at a Howard Johnsons. I would have preferred some John Williams Star Wars music, more in character with the whole running away from Russians with guns thing.

“Where, exactly, or even approximately are we going? Do you have a plan?” It seemed to me like a logical question. She was the one with guards and researchers and the money and the backing of the Saudi military.

“What? I thought you knew where we were going!”

“I was the one that was kidnapped and brought to wherever the fuck we are in a blacked out space pod with a fucking talking dog after crashing in a helicopter! How am I

supposed to know?” My voice had gotten louder. The computer that controlled the music was compensating for how loud we were talking by playing music louder. It didn’t help. I pulled the pod to an abrupt stop. Dust from the road swirled up.

“You’re the one driving. You could ask for directions. But you just started driving like you knew where things are!”

“Who the fuck am I going to ask?! It’s not like there’s a gas station anywhere near.” This was every summer road trip when I was 9. Parents in the front seat speaking with very crisp enunciation and muted protestant finger pointing as we sat on the roadside with the windows down, beside some wheat field in the middle of Saskatchewan, crickets trilling in the summer heat, a Canadian Pacific grain train in the distance, great rafts of cumulus clouds scudding majestically towards the horizon. But, I digress.

Atifeh and I were at each other. She with exuberant hand gestures, me with more restrained anglo saxon hand movements. There was yelling. We were stressed and not handling too well. The music was loud, we had stopped paying attention to our surroundings, which, as it turned out, was a mistake.

Bullets make a lot of noise when they are shattering tempered glass. In an instant the pod was filled with an inch of street diamonds and the music stopped. Ten meters away stood a jeep. Colonel Anton Pleshenko was standing up, his hands, one with a still smoking revolver, were casually draped on the frame of the jeep’s windscreen. Next

to him, smirking in the driver's seat, was Boris (the Butcher) Ivanov.

“Not much good escape plan, nyet?” I’d like to say he wasn’t a cardboard cutout villain with a Russian accent, but honestly, sometimes stereotypes are there for a reason. “Where I take you, you can run for two timezones and never see a soul. Of course, you’ll freeze to death or get eat by wolves first.” He was acting a little smug, but I guess he did have the gun. Boris rolled his eyes, just a little, as if he’d heard Anton practice the standard villain monologue in the mirror one time too many. Boris was swarthy, with a flattop haircut and tattoos on his knuckles. He cultivated a look of savagery and control, but he was like chocolate covered nougat, all hard and dark on the outside and soft and sweet and squishy on the inside. He was the youngest, and his older brothers saw his weakness, and tormented him because of their complete lack of approval from an aloof father, who, they would find out after he died, liked to wear women’s underwear. Not a major transgression, but confusing enough that the elder siblings lost their way and turned to vodka and outdoor sports. When Boris was ten, they tied him up and threw him in a grain silo with the rats, in a well-meaning attempt to toughen him up. It worked, in a roundabout way, as Boris emerged from the torment with a whitehot hatred for his brothers, who, a few years later, died under suspicious circumstances. Boris made himself cry at their funerals by breaking one of his own fingers with a hammer.

“So, this is disaster man? You don’t look too scary. How you think you do to ‘disaster’ me? Your leetle pod is ruined, I’ve got gun, and there are no cranes to kill all your poor

comrades? Ha! This is stupid job, but the price on your head makes it worth it. Sorry Doctor, there is no price on head, so not joining us on trip to Motherland.” A point of order here. Why are some countries the ‘motherland’, and others are the ‘fatherland’. That never made any sense to me.

Anton raised his gun, steadied it on his left forearm and took careful aim at the Doctor just as he was hit in the face with the largest bird poo I’d ever seen. It covered half his face, got in his eye, and by the way he was retching and swearing I think he got some in his mouth. Boris looked up with alarm, but then fell into barely controlled sniggering. It’s not nice to laugh at your comrades when something bad happens to them, but when faced with the choice between karma and schadenfreude, sometimes it’s hard to choose. I looked up and saw a majestic pair of sandhill cranes , *antigone canadensis*, fly overhead. Hmm. Cranes. Ironic. I also noticed that, in addition to the airmailed poop, they’d dropped their lunch, a not quite dead, horribly frightened, highly agitated squirrel. It landed in Boris’ crotch. Their eyes met. It was love at first sight. Nah. It was a replay of the horror night he spent in the rat-filled silo when he was ten. He shrieked like a little girl, or frankly, like I would have shrieked if a rat with good PR landed in my lap. He swatted his hands wildly, flailing desperately to get the squirrel off his lap. The squirrel, used to being chased by much faster carnivores, evaded his slaps and dived for the floor. Boris raised his boot to kill the squirrel, missed and punched the accelerator with the multiplied force of every kilo of strength in his irrationally adrenalin-fired body.

If you've never been to British Columbia, you should try and make the trip. It is the crinkly western edge of Canada, a million square kilometers of rocks and trees and mountains. Beautiful, but you'll need to pay close attention to the topography as most of it is on a hillside, or in this case, a cliff. The jeep roared and disappeared over the edge, the sounds of it bouncing off boulders getting quieter until the rending of the calmness repaired itself and we were once again alone in the quiet.

Oh. Contrary to every Hawaii 5-0 episode, cars do not explode when they fall down cliffs. We walked over to the edge where it disappeared and looked down a hundred meters to a dry rocky stream bed. The jeep was upside down, and we could see the bodies of Boris and Anton making irregular angles that were going to make excellent, but difficult to explain, chalk outlines.

"Nice work." Atifeh's hand was on my shoulder. "I don't know how you do it, but you have to admit that was more than a coincidence." She brushed pieces of glass off the bench at the back of the pod and sat down. I pulled up the pillow case, pulled out a couple of Gatorades, handed her one, and sat down opposite.

"There's no way any of that was a controlled event, especially by me. It's not like I have a magic wand that makes shit happen." I took a swig of the Gatorade, and leaned back, staring straight up at the clouds. "It doesn't make any sense."

"You're right, it doesn't. I'll really need to have you wired up when something like that happens again. You see the dipolarity of the quantum..." I raised my hand.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa there. Stop. Hold it right there. You’re under the gross misapprehension that I’m still kidnapped by you, or that you have any say in what happens next. We’re done. I’ve escaped. You and your Russian mercenaries can fuck right off. I’m going back to my life, get a job, and learn how to play the dobro guitar. There is no ‘next time’. So. I’m going to see if this pod will still work, and when we get to civilization, we can shake hands, and you can go back to your Saudi buddies and tell them I quit.” I picked up the controller and was relieved when the pod woke up and started to move. The music didn’t work, which was a blessing, and the misters didn’t really need to be working as the smell of the forest and the fresh air were more than enough. We travelled for an hour in silence, the road winding in and out of copses of trees.

Atifeh moved the front of the pod and sat beside me.

“Can I make an observation, and extrapolate some possible outcomes based on heuristics and experience on this, uh, turn of events?” Her voice was even and restrained. I slowed the pod and turned to look at her. The swelling had gone down around her eye, and the wind had blown most of the cobwebs and twigs out of her hair.

“I’m betting that you don’t have a boyfriend. Extrapolate? Heuristics?. Sheesh.” What? I can be mean and catty too. Nevermind. I was looking forward to an Asahi beer and some Korean food. There’s this place not far from English Bay that serves donkas deopbap, like katsudon, but korean. My mouth started watering and my mind started wandering.

“The reality is this. The Russians found you because someone in the Saudi government is a double agent, and

sold the information about the project to the Russians. There are American and Chinese spies in the Russian government, who, I confidently assume, already have as much or more details about the project than the Russians themselves. All three governments will have been watching the botched raid by the Russians using spy satellites. I would be surprised if a UCAV hasn't already been given the coordinates of our little pod. You must realize that your life, as you knew it, is over. Your fears that your head will one day end up bobbing in a vat of formaldehyde are valid. Your only option is to change your name, learn a new language and live a singular life trying not to destroy more things with your somewhat unfocused power.”

I stopped the pod. Not because Atifeh's clearly thought out analysis of the situation, and not because I needed to stew on the logic she had presented. And not because we were out of charge, although that's always worrisome with an electric vehicle. I stopped because our way forward was blocked by a black van. The same sort of van the kidnappers-for-hire used when they snatched me off the streets.

I stood up. Bowed my head and raised my hands in surrender. This was getting to be a habit. The windows were blacked out. The doors opened slowly.

8

TEAMWORK



“Seriously? You expect me to believe you were kidnapped, by who, Miss Hottie Iran 2018? You’ve got some fucking explaining to do asshole!”

“Jackie? Ceela?”

There were indignant slaps, hugs of relief, bonding kisses, and awkward introductions.

“This is Doctor Atifeh Amir, a scientist from Saudi Arabia here on a, as it turns out, not so well kept secret mission to understand the thing I do, and find a way to control it. She and her hired goons kidnapped me, and brought me to wherever the hell we are right now. I was trying to escape, when I sort of rescued her. Then there were Russian assassins that were killed by a crane.”

“A crane? Out here? There is no construction for 500 miles.” Up until that point Jackie was willing to believe the story, as far fetched as it was. She had now assumed the hands-on-the-hips-I-don’t-believe-you stance.

“Actually a sandhill crane...”

“You want me to believe that a bird killed two Russians?”

“Well... there were two birds, and a squirrel.” When I said it out loud it did seem a tad farfetched. Jackie spun on her heel and paced back towards the black van. She snapped around, looked at me, and glowered.

“It’s true. I had your boyfriend kidnapped to do scientific research on him. I sent you \$20,000 in hundred dollar bills. I am from Saudi Arabia, not Iran, I am here on a secret” I coughed “okay, yes, not so secret” she continued “mission, (are you happy?) to understand the potential of his gift, curse, whatever. We were attacked by Russians, who ‘disaster boy’ here killed by using two cranes and a squirrel. It is impossible, true. But that is what happened.”

“Okay. Sure. Whatever. Let’s all get in the van and head home.” Jackie was always take charge and after the destruction of our office by the crane, this little episode didn’t seem that far-fetched. “This has been an exhausting couple of days. Ceela? You want to drive this leg?” We all moved in unison towards the van. For the first time since the kidnapping, I thought that things were going to be okay. I stopped and turned.

“Hang a sec, I’m going to grab the drinks.” I turned and took three steps back towards the pod when it was reduced in an instant to light and sound and heat. The explosion knocked me over and the pressure wave shredded the air around us. I stared at the space where the pod used to be. And then looked back at the van and Ceela, Jackie and Atifeh.

“Is everyone ok? Shit. What was that?” There was a shocked stunned silence. I ran up to Jackie. She was in shock and blankly staring but seemed to be okay. The other two were looking for bus fare, patting themselves all over to

make sure that they hadn't taken a hit. The windscreen of the van was blown out, but otherwise seemed okay.

"Did you do that?" Ceela asked?

"Fuck no." I pointed up. "Death from above. Look, you can see it there." A General Atomics Predator drone was overhead, wheeling into a wide turn. "I think it's coming back...."

Jackie yelled "Do something!"

I had to smile. The idea was absurd. I turned to look at her. "What? You think I can actually control any of this? I keep telling you it's all coincidence. Watch. I'll prove it to you. We're all going to die anyway."

I extended my arm, pointed at the drone, which was now clearly coming at us with intent, and aiming at the drone through the gap between my thumb and forefinger, made a little squishy pinching movement. The drone exploded in midair. Pieces of metal pranged off the trees, flaming jet fuel ignited along the roadway. I looked at Jackie. I looked at my pinching fingers. Ceela and Atifeh stood slack jawed. The rotating camera, normally mounted on the underside of the fuselage of the drone bounced down the road and rolled to a stop a few feet away, it's menacing eye, not so malevolent now, looked blankly at us. I gave it the finger and stuck out my tongue.

Jackie leapt up into my arms and kissed me hard. The air was redolent with pheromones, adrenalin, sweat and the smell of exploding jet fuel. She squeezed me tight, and put her mouth hot next to my ear.

"I've got a plan for those magic fingers of yours..."

BEFORE



My parents met in the emergency ward. Dad was there because a motor he was mounting in the fabrication plant had slipped and landed briefly on his finger, bursting it like a grape, and all the tissue inside had squirted out. Mom had a broken arm from being caught in a revolving door at Kresge's Department Store. Some people have a few drinks at a bar and meet someone, my parents were both jazzed on industrial strength pain meds when they met. By the time I was 5 all the nurses in the emergency ward knew me and would bring me treats while I waited for my Mom or Dad or both to get stitched up. By the time I was 10 I had my St. John's Ambulance certification and could administer basic first aid. The social workers came around several times to see if Mom was beating Dad, or vice versa, but realized, after listening to all the stories that these two people were very much in love, and very, very accident prone. They would often end up staying for dinner and listening to my parents tell the funniest stories about having things just happen to them.

On my sixteenth birthday we went to the Whitespot for a celebration dinner. Burger platters, triple "O" sauce, deep

fried zucchini sticks. It was a good night. Only one soda was knocked over, which was a record for us. The wait staff came over and sang happy birthday and took some pictures for us. When it was time to leave, I told them I needed to hit the john and would meet them in the car. They walked out to the car, holding hands, and I went to the back where the bathrooms were. The music in the bathroom is always louder than it needs to be, mostly to cover up the embarrassing sounds people make as they drop the kids off at the pool. Take the browns to the Superbowl? Bake a loaf?

I was washing my hands and singing along with Hall and Oates when I heard the sirens. I wasn't sure what had happened, but somehow I knew in the pit of my stomach that it was my parents. I pushed past all the gawking people that had jammed up the entrance to the restaurant and squeezing through the last of the throng saw that a cement truck had flipped on its side, the barrel had broken free, and rolled over my parents car.

After the accident I lived with my aunt Irene for a year until the wills and insurance were all sorted then I left, set up my own apartment, and got myself through university.

“That could be part of it, you know. There may be a genetic component. If your parents had both been piano maestros there would be a good chance that you would have been predestined for Carnegie Hall. But they were accident prone. Maybe the combo of their DNA? Some weird kind of selective breeding gave rise to whatever it is you... do? have?” I'd been telling Atifeh more of my life story as we sat in the back of the van bumping down the road in the direction of civilization. She was determined to

mine as much data out of me as possible before we parted ways.

“I guess you’ll want some blood or a swab?” I asked, ready to tell her to forget it, that she’d never...

“We have all the samples from you we’ll need. It was a closed system. We analyzed your faeces, urine, sweat, breath, mouth bacteria, and yes, blood, everyday. Didn’t you think it was odd you had a new toothbrush everyday? Or that all the clothes you dumped on the floor at night disappeared? Or that you couldn’t shave without getting a nick? Everything except the last couple days data had been uploaded back to Iran.” Smug. Yes, that was the look. Smug.

“You mean to the same place where the spy is?” Two can play at the whole smuggier than thou.

SPY VS SPY



“What happened to the feed? Get that camera back on line! We can’t fly the bird without visual!” Colonel Schatner, was standing behind the two drone techs that had piloted the drone on the search and destroy mission. Both corporals made yessirrightawaysir noises, but they both knew that there was no drone to pilot. They flicked switches, dialed knobs and then swivelled in their chairs to face their superior officer.

Truth to be told, they didn’t view Colonel Shatner in any way to be superior. He was old school, at least 56, and had no real grasp of the intricacies of flying a drone. Ivan and Britta had both graduated from MIT, with advanced degrees in aeronautics and weapon systems. They had only signed up with the military as quid pro quo to pay off their student debts. The plan was to work their stint, then start their own A.I. controlled battle drone swarm company and make some real money selling their advanced tech to anyone with bitcoin. When speaking with the Colonel, they tended to speak slowly, and use small words so as not to confuse

the colonel. He thought they were both addled because they both spoke slowly and had infantile vocabularies.

“The drone is gone. Poof.” Ivan was careful to make sure that the colonel had understood.

“I don’t understand. Drones don’t just go poof, unless they’re fucking unleashing a bunch of poof on someone else.” Shatner waved his hands at the control panel. “Show me the last bit of video transmitted!” He was very loud, and one of the reasons that Britta called him Colonel McShoutypants.

Ivan pulled up the video. The targeting camera picked out the pod and engaged missile lock. The missile fired and the pod evaporated. The colonel clenched his fist and growled yeah muthafucka under his breath. He really did enjoy his job. The camera view lifted and panned through the sky, capturing the distant snow covered mountains and some high cloud. As the drone wheeled around in a high arcing turn, it headed towards the black van and the group of four people came into view. Then the screen went black.

“Back it up to 5 seconds before the blackout, and zoom in and slo-mo.”

“Yessir.” Britta couldn’t imagine that it was going to show anything. Drones fail. Sometimes for technical reasons that are never fully understood. And this was cutting into lunch hour. The video started. Frame by frame they watched as the four people froze in panic, then the one male lifted up his arm, pointed in the direction of the drone, and pinched his fingers together. At the exact moment his fingers touched, the screen went black.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” McShoutypants was not shouting. It was barely a whisper. Ivan and Britta were both laughing. They couldn’t believe the luck.

“What an amazing coincidence! That guy is a real lucky bastard! He should buy a lottery ticket!”

A point if I may. Something has happened and you dodge being hit by a car, or someone drops something off the roof and misses you by a foot; everyone says, ‘you should go buy a lottery ticket’ as if there is some stickiness with luck, as though being lucky once will carry on for the rest of the day. That’s exactly how luck doesn’t work. It also didn’t transfer to Ivan and Britta. The colonel pulled out his sidearm and painted the control panel with their brains. He took out his cell phone.

“This is Delta Zero Niner. Visual confirmation of the anomaly. Observation site wet. Request cleanup on aisle 2. Out.” In the quiet sunshine, the Colonel stretched, snapped his military issue ball cap onto his head and walked back to his jeep.

ROOM WITH A VIEW



The public is led to believe that the great powers of the world have steel jockstraps around their private information. That they control the information that is important to them, and that a secret is a secret. The reality is that, like most jockstraps, firewalls and secret networks can keep out the large pucks, the big data hacks, but they have small holes to keep crotch itch to a minimum. Those small holes are the sieves that data escapes into the wild. So while you may be told that your governments' information is secure and safe, it's rather the case that it's 'mostly' secure and 'sort of' safe. Given a new found understanding of the reality of modern espionage, it won't come as a surprise that the transmission that the Colonel made to the Pentagon was picked up by the Chinese, Egyptian, Russian, Belgian, Iranian and Brazilian secret services. Everyone except the Belgians cared.

As we drove back to Vancouver in the black van with the shattered windows and shrapnel punctuation marks, six countries were readying diplomatic attaché missions, also known as mercenary black ops, to converge on Vancouver.

Each had worked out a plan to capture the asset, move it to some blacksite with the universal idea that they could use me as a weapon. None of them was interested in having a quiet conversation about my future, my hopes and dreams, or how I saw things working out. Even though the six were continents apart, the conversations at large tables in shadowed rooms by serious men were the same. Neutralize any other black ops. Acquire the asset at all costs. Do not fail.

“Can I make a suggestion?” We had stopped at Trolls for some fish and chips and a pitcher of beer. We were all ravenous and it was Atifeh’s first time with fine Canadian cuisine. She was sitting at the end of the table and was waving a fry like a conductor’s baton. The waitstaff had suggested that we would be happy in the booth at the back, mostly I believe because she thought we looked like a pack of failed treeplanters. I can recommend the halibut, and appreciated the homemade tartar sauce. We were all tired, a half a beer in, and glad for the room not to be bouncing. “I think we should check into the Shangri La hotel under assumed names. I don’t mean to be a pessimist, but I’m sure by now there are many people looking for ‘disaster boy’ here. We need some time to formulate a plan. And your apartment won’t be safe”

“We can afford to stay there for about 15 minutes. None of us have the kind of money that it takes to stay there.” Jackie wasn’t trying to be a downer, just realistic. We knew that we weren’t safe, we knew that this wasn’t anywhere near being over, and we knew that we were in this together.

“I transferred the budget from my research grant into bitcoin so it would be easier to move my operation into

Canada, and it has the advantage of being untraceable. We have plenty of money. My parents used to stay in the Orchid Suite. It's a penthouse and has a couple bedrooms, we should be okay there. I would suggest that we leave the black van here, and take the city bus into town. It will make it harder for whoever is looking for us to track us." Glances ping ponged around the table. Shoulder shrugs, nods and cheers with our second glasses of beer. It wasn't much of a plan, but better to die in a \$10,000 a night hotel room than in a \$10,000 a year apartment.

The tag in the housecoat said 100% Egyptian cotton, but I swear some animal had to die for this. There was no way that something so utterly luxurious could be created without something having to make the ultimate sacrifice. It wrapped around like a warm breeze, and was scented with magnolia blossoms. We had all had a shower, and were sitting around a Bonaldo Octa table drinking French 75s and eating room service. Our hotel room, no, suite, no, an fricking actual palace, was three times the size of our apartment, with two massive bedrooms, three bathrooms, a sitting room, huge windows, a terrace, a reading nook, and it had its own kitchen with a separate entrance so the hotel staff could do prep work and clean up without bothering us. You might hate the rich, but they do know how to live.

"So what's the plan? We are sitting here with a live nuke that everybody wants, and they've proven that they are willing to do everything illegal to get it. So far the Russians and Americans have been the most overt, but there are

probably other players out there right now, ready to make a play.” Jackie was leading the conversation. It had started out light, with a bit of joking around, but had quickly turned deadly serious.

“I vote we kill him. That way we can all go back to our normal lives. That’s how this thing is going to end up anyways. Better to kill him now, hand his body over to the Russians, and we can all go home.”

“Ceela, you know we can hear you, right?” Atifeh reached out and touched Ceela’s hand and seemed very concerned that she was losing her mind.

“Oh, shit. That was out loud? I thought I was just thinking that inside my own head. I’m so tired. I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean it.” She looked at me and started to cry. Obviously stressed and distraught, it was hard to hate her for wanting to kill me, but I sort of did. She did have a point though. As long as I was roving around free, all of their lives were at risk. If there was a connection between the events that happened, the people that had died, and whatever it was that was a part of me that I didn’t understand, no government or criminal organization was going to stop until I was either working for them or dead.

“She’s right. I’m not crazy about the idea of being dead, but it’s the only solution here. They, and we don’t know how many theys there are, are going to keep coming. As long as we’re together, you’re in danger. I need to disappear. You need to go back to your lives.” I wasn’t being noble, but I didn’t want their deaths on my hands. We’d escaped twice, but how many more times would things just magically work themselves out?

“Or... or we could go to the press and the internet and tell everyone your story, and how all these bad people are trying to kidnap you. They’d have to leave you alone then!” Jackie was nervously folding and refolding one of the napkins. She had a point, but I wasn’t convinced.

“Yeah, and then the whole airplane and boat disaster thing would be seen in an entirely different light and I’d be locked up for killing 6,000 people. Even if I wasn’t convicted, there would be a whole string of vigilantes looking to avenge the death of their loved ones.” I took a sip of my French 75, ate another spicy prawn, and continued “Given that sort of attention, I think I’d rather find a nice quiet monastery and learn how to control this, uh, thing.”

The French 75

The drink dates to World War I, and an early form was created in 1915 at the New York Bar in Paris—later Harry’s New York Bar—by barman Harry MacElhone. The combination was said to have such a kick that it felt like being shelled with the powerful French 75mm field gun.

Ingredients

2 ounces London dry gin
¾ ounce fresh lemon juice
¾ ounce simple syrup
2 ounces Champagne
Long spiral lemon twist (for serving)

Preparation

Combine gin, lemon juice, and simple syrup in a cocktail shaker. Fill the shaker with ice, cover, and shake vigorously until outside of the shaker is very cold, about 20 seconds. Strain cocktail through a Hawthorne strainer or a slotted spoon into a large flute. Top with Champagne; garnish with lemon twist.

It was late, we were a little drunk, a lot tired, and ready for bed. I guess that we had decided that I was going to part ways in the hope that they would be able to get back to a normal life. Jackie and I stood in the bedroom looking out of the floor to ceiling window at Burrard Inlet and the North Shore mountains. I may not be seeing them for a while, at least not from view like this.

“Come on,” she said, taking my hand, “let’s put those magic fingers to the test...”

12

STEEL RAILS



I woke up very early. Jackie was stretched across the kingsize bed, tangled in the sheets. I took a long last look, took half of the \$20,000, and slipped away. I'm not sure if she was awake, and didn't want to have a tearful goodbye, or not, but either way, it was easier leaving her there. Frank Sinatra was singing 'The Way you Look Tonight' as I walked through the lobby. I bought a newspaper, mostly to break one of the \$100 dollar bills for bus fare, and headed to MEC for a wardrobe upgrade. Where I was going, I was going to need to be a lot warmer than my current outfit.

I didn't have a cell phone or credit card, I was paying cash on public transport, and careful to keep my ball cap on when I thought there might be cameras that could be tapped into. After dropping a thousand on outdoor gear, I walked down to the train yards. My plan was to hop a train headed east to the interior of British Columbia. My only experience with this sort of transportation was a movie called Emperor of the North, in which Ernest Borgnine portrayed a sadistic railyard bull, a corporate security guard charged with the task of keeping hobos off the train. I expected that I was going to get a similar reception.

Getting to the yard was easy, finding a train that looked like it was headed out with a load that wasn't toxic was harder. Tankers with skull and crossbones, oil cars, and chemical cars were lined up ready to go. I was ducking in between the trains, keeping low and on the lookout for Ernest Borgnine's grandchildren when I came across the car car train. That sounds silly. Let's try the new car delivery train. The ground crew was loading the last of the cars and had stopped for a smoke. As quietly as I could I hopped aboard and hid between the cars while they loaded the last of the cars and closed and locked the doors.

There is no sound so lonesome as the sound of a train as you're leaving your town, your girlfriend and your life behind. I had no idea what was ahead. The rhythm of the steel wheels on the tracks, the gentle sway of the cars as the engine pulled the train up to speed. This is how people write cowboy songs.

The night was cold, and I knew that things were going to get colder so I tried all the car doors to find one open. I didn't like the idea of dying of exposure (again) so my search got more frantic as I came down to the last two cars. The first one was locked. My fingers were numbing into popsicles. The last one was locked as well. Fuck. I slumped down on my haunches, my back against the last car. Staring out at the moonlit fields through the slats of the car and wondering if this is it: Hobo Bill's Last Ride. They'll find my frozen body, my face in a grimace of death, when they empty the cars out in Calgary, or wherever, and with no I.D. they'll think I'm just another hobo wannabe in a thousand dollars of tactical outdoor gear.

I closed my eyes. It had been a crazy couple of weeks. I hope that I have kids someday so I can tell them these stories only to have them ignore me and play games on their digital devices. Little ungrateful bastards. It's a great story! Kidnapping, Russians, drones..... I looked down at my fingers. Drones? I stood up. Could it be real? Not just weird coincidence?

The last car was a Tesla seven seater SUV. I wasn't sure what to do, as they didn't have keys, per se, just fobs. So I pretended that I had a fob in my hand, pointed it at the car and pretended to press the open door key.

Nothing.

"Of course not. I was pressing the wrong button!" I shouted maniacally over the train noise and looked around at the laugh track augmented in-studio audience that was clearly not there and pretended to press the imaginary button harder. Because at the time, and given my franticness, and a strong fear of freezing to death in the Rocky Mountains, it seemed like the thing to do.

The door opened.

The cabin light swooned awake. I got in. I was so happy to be out of the wind and cold. I peeled off a layer or two, and focused my attention on the touchscreen. Heat? Check. Radio? Check. I reclined the seat, and sank back. I fell through the levels of consciousness and landed softly in a velvet soup of dreams. I saw my parents, on a beach somewhere. Then there were sirens and gunshots. I didn't understand. I looked around and there was my Vancouver apartment upside down. There were black crows sitting on

a barbed wire fence. A pair of inflated clowns walked down a street, holding hands and singing. I clawed my way out of the folds of nightmares that were pulling me down, gasping for breath and now awake.

Such a crick in the neck! Ten thousand years! Man, if they are going to make self driving cars, the seats better be as comfortable as a bed. The radio was just finishing a story.

“To recap, several heavily armed men from at least two warring gangs fought a pitched battle in Vancouver’s West End tonight. At least ten were left for dead, and the apartment building they had chosen for their battleground is now fully engaged in flames. Police don’t have any identification or gang affiliations for the dead men, but did indicate that they were dressed as paramilitary.” So we were right. They were coming for me, and they weren’t going to play nice. Jackie was still at the Shangri-La so I knew she was okay. She was going to be pissed about losing all our second hand treasures, though.

I needed a plan. I couldn’t run for the rest of my life. I didn’t want to end up dead or in a gulag somewhere. I had to figure what triggered my abilities and how to control them. I needed a place to lie low. Someplace that would be the last place the mercenaries and their handlers would never think of looking for me.

The miles clicked east. Long dark stretches through the mountains, then a whistlestop town, a few lights, and then the darkness. I sat back, closed my eyes, and replayed every origin story for every superhero that I could think of. Superman was an orphaned alien. Batman was an orphaned rich kid. Spiderman was a partially orphaned

genetic mutant. Green Lantern was given a ring. No word on the status of his parents. So I shared the orphan thing, wasn't bitten by a spider, and couldn't fly. I can't fly... can I? Something to test later. My nemesis is every government in the world. I've killed over 6,000 people, granted by mistake, but if you're writing an origin story, you can't just put in an asterisk and only mention that in the footnotes.

'Wracked by guilt and a quest to control his almost unimaginable power, Disaster Boy roams from town to town, helping weary sheep farmers and fighting greedy landowners, occasionally falling in love/bed with the local barmaid/prostitute/school marm, rescuing puppies and tousling the hair of little blonde childfolk who are searching for meaning and their place in the universe.'

Staying in one place was just going to invite trouble. Travelling like a hobo was getting old, and I'd only been doing it for half a day. I needed a mobile command center. I needed a motorhome. I had less than \$9,000 left, so that was going to be off the table, unless I picked up some old crappy junkpile with mice and mold. Then there was the problem of purchasing something and using my own I.D. That was going to be a red flag, or rather tiny red laser dot, for sure. So, I needed to get a lot of money, find an accomplice to actually buy, register and insure the motorhome, pay the accomplice (or kill him/her, a last resort, to be sure) and head for the hills. If you say it fast, it sort of sounds doable. If I did have the ability to influence objects and redistribute coincidence, then I needed to use those skills. And where better to redistribute coincidence than the casino.

Dawn was breaking and the train was starting to slow. The plan was simple. Get off the train, go to a casino, win some money, find a guy to legally buy a motorhome, and, well, the next part was pretty much up in the air. If the cars were being unloaded, I knew that they would be transferred to an intermodal truck, and then taken either straight to the dealer, or to a secure holding area. I had two options: sneak off when the train stopped and they were unloading, or hide in the car until it got to its destination and then sneak out then. I checked the maps on the cars' touchscreen and figured out that I was closer to a casino if I got off when the train stopped.

The brain works in weird ways. The brain, and the senses that feed it, are not so much observers of the world, but confabulists, a bullshitting intermediary between the world that we can't really understand, and the world that we've come to accept. The most common example of how the brain makes stuff up, is how it deals with your blindspot. The blindspot, the literal one, not the metaphoric one where your sister keeps on hooking up with people that remind you of your father, is a part of the eye where the neurons at the back of the eye come together to form a bundle of wires. The blindspot is where they exit the back of the eye on their merry way to the visual cortex. There are no sensors in the junction box, and as such, there is no image. And yet, our brain, in an effort to leave us with a complete picture, makes some stuff up. It 'paints' in the missing pixels of information, extrapolating from what should be there. The blind spot is roughly 7.5° high and 5.5° wide, or about 10 percent of your visual field. Some sources cite that because you have two eyes, they

cleverly cover the field of view and stitch things together in the processing lab of your brain. This is of course nonsense, because you can cover one eye, and your brain doesn't care. It makes up some stuff so you don't have to worry about the large grey patch of nothingness in your field of view.

A side note. Octopi don't have a blind spot. Their eyes are better than ours from an evolutionary standpoint.

Another phenomena that has been studied is the 'white coat/clipboard' bias. You've seen this in commercials, where the person that is trying to sell you dog food or hemorrhoid cream is a) wearing glasses, and b) wearing a white lab coat. He is not a doctor, just a struggling actor glad to not be serving chardonnay to weepy suburban housewives in the gastropub during happy hour. It's replicated in the person with the clipboard. You're not really sure of their role, but you know that they are kickin' ass and taking names. I decided that was my best gambit.

"Well, I guess it looks okay. I can't really see any damage. Not like last time. The shit we had to fix from the last delivery... Tony Bates" pause, held out my hand, "from the dealership." I continued to walk around the car, inspecting the trim, removing a smudge from the glass. "Yeah the boss sent me down to make sure that when they came off the rig in cherry condition."

"How did you get here...?" He was truly bewildered. He had just opened the door and I appeared.

"Same as you, through the door." Technically not a lie. "I guess you didn't notice. I move pretty quietly. My niece says

I'm like a fucking ghost. Only she's three, so she doesn't say fuck." I faked a laugh, and walked with confidence down the ramp. He started to come after me, but I took a phone call to the phone I wasn't carrying. He started to speak to me, and I held up a finger to pause his advance.

"Yessir, absolutely sir. The Tesla's in perfect shape. I just talked with" I pointed to the swamper and made a motion as though I was twirling a doughnut around my finger.

"Blake, uh, Blake Durmont" he stuttered, not really sure what was going on.

"Yeah, Blake Drummond," intentionally getting his name just a bit wrong, "wait, Durmont, here on the offload crew. He's a pro and won't let anything happen to this one." I gave him a smile and a finger gun and a couple cheek clicks and headed out of the train yard, still talking and guffawing with my imaginary boss on my imaginary phone.

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT



Edmonton is a town that no one ever moves to on purpose. It's a place you end up for work, or for school, but no one ever says, 'Hey! I've got a great idea! Let's move to Edmonton!', more like, 'We can't stay here, but we can always go to Edmonton.' Edmonton is a sprawling, poorly planned monotony of streets and avenues that stretches over ten thousand square kilometers. It has two seasons, forty below zero and death by mosquito. There are only three months a year that are guaranteed not to snow. If it wasn't for agriculture, they'd have no culture at all. Am I being harsh? No. I'll stick by my assessment, but it was a relatively nice morning. A bit cold, but not life threatening, sunny, with high horsetail clouds. The map said it was five kilometres to the casino, and I wanted a walk and breakfast, so I set out.

The walk took me through uninspired housing, a few strip malls, vacant lots, and some low rise light industrial estates. After an hour or so I came to Angie's Diner. It was either an ironically faithful reproduction of a 1950's diner, complete with arborite and chrome tables, or it was all

original and not ironic at all. I wasn't sure which was sadder.... The place was deserted, and the girl behind the counter told me to sit anywhere.

Now. I said girl. She was female, sure, but the girl in her had left town a few decades ago. Blondish, thin as a rail, boney fingers, with a sad look that told the story of her life. Bad choices in men, too many rye and cokes at the Legion, lost years, lost chances and lost hope. Gladys was written on her embroidered and sewn on nametag. This was not her temp gig while she worked her way through beautician school. She was a lifer. She came over to my booth once I'd settled in and shed some clothing, making the mistake that I always do of trying to take off my coat after I sit down. It was like I was wrestling an anaconda off my back.

"That coat just about won the battle." Laugh. Cough. Her smile a nicotined painted fence with some missing slats. "Waddleitbe, honey?"

I had their standard breakfast, thanked Gladys, tipped well, and headed to the casino. I wasn't sure how this was going to work, but I cashed in all my money, headed for the roulette table with my jacket pocket clinking with chips. I figured that was my best option for redistributing coincidence, and I felt that I wasn't going to be taking another person's money, just the ill-gotten gains of a faceless corporation.

I'm not a gambler, and what I know about playing roulette could be written on a cocktail napkin. I sat down at an empty seat and a hostess came over and placed a hand on my shoulder and asked what I wanted to drink.

"It's nine in the morning."

“Not in here, honey. Here it’s whatever damn time you want it to be.” Her voice had a tinge of ennui, a note of weariness. For all I knew this was her 10th hour of an eight hour shift.

“Any hints on winning at this? I’m feeling lucky.”

“The odds are printed on your cocktail napkin. And no one wins, except the house.”

I watched her admonition come true. People put money down on the green felt, and seemed genuinely surprised when their combination of numbers didn’t come up, the croupiers hungry rake scooping their money into the bank. I seriously doubted if I was going to be able to pull this off. I took five \$100 chips and put them on 27. The ball was in motion. It really is quite mesmerizing, the ball spinning counterclockwise while the wheel rolls in the opposite direction. I concentrated, pointed my fingers at the spot and the ball landed on 35. Like others, I stared in amazement that my number hadn’t won. I tried again. Loss. This was a nightmare. Again. Loss. Down \$1500. Again. Loss. It was a blur. I couldn’t stop. In ten minutes it was over. I was down to my last \$10 chip. I felt sick. I had blown the better part of \$9000.

There was not enough oxygen and I felt the room spin just a little. I stumbled as I got off the stool. There was a cocktail table close and I fell over to it and sat down shaking, my face in my hands. The hostess, having witnessed the debacle, came over and touched my knee.

“You ready for that drink now, honey?” She smiled, a cold dead smile. “It’s on the house.”

They say that it’s darkest before the dawn. They also say tomorrow never comes. The problem with wise sayings is

that there is a corollary to each one. For example, The pen is mightier than the sword but actions speak louder than words. Or birds of a feather flock together paired with opposites attract. And perhaps my favorite: ‘Hold fast to the words of your ancestors’ and it’s opposite ‘wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them’.

My loss was nothing special. No one was going to console me, or tell me they were kidding, here’s your money back. I was not the first nor the last poor sap that had spent his rent money looking for that big win. The temple I was in was to the god Mammon, and each screw and nail had been forged in the furnace of greed, hammered straight on the anvil of dashed dreams of the foolhardy. I hated them all. I hated myself for thinking that this was a plan. I hated everything that this shithole second rate backwoods shadow of a Las Vegas casino was.

I had no money. I had no plan. I had no home. At least I was warm. I could at least sit here for a while. I had a free drink. The chair was comfy. A chance to think.

“Excuse me sir. This isn’t a lounge. You’re either playin’ or payin’.” Willy, a 150 kilogram black clad security guard was standing over me with his arms crossed, well, as crossed as his expansive chest and belly would allow. He wasn’t exactly fat, let’s just say that he would winter well. I was going to make some excuses, or ask for the manager, but realized that he was right. You’re either playing or paying. I sighed, stood up, grabbed all my belongings, and patted my pockets, for, what? I’d spent all the money, and didn’t own a car or have a phone. Ah, yes. There was something left. “Rough night, sir?” Small talk. Excellent. Something to pass the time as he walked me to the exit.

“Tell me William. I’ve got a \$10 chip left. What’s the biggest bang I can get with my last ten dollars.

“Honestly sir, I’d probably use it to take a taxi to the closest mens’ shelter. But if you’re going to spend it here, your best bang is the Century Megabucks Slot Machine. Last time I walked by the total was up to \$275,000.”

“Lead the way.” I figured the difference between having ten dollars in my pocket, and having zero dollars in my pocket was moot. “Tell me. Is this your full time gig? Or have you got other, bigger plans?” The place had begun to fill up and we were serpentineing our way through the throngs of marks. It couldn’t have been more than 10:30 in the morning, but as there were no clocks, I really didn’t know how long I’d been wallowing in the chair.

“Um, actually sir, I’m going to beauticians school at night. I want to be a hairdresser, maybe for the movies?” he answered with a question, which was a little confusing. I could see the Megabucks slot machine looming ahead.

“That’s great Will, it’ll be less soul destroying than having to throw bums like me out on their ear.” It was as though I was the first person to ever see him for something other than an angry meat locker in black. I felt as though he probably sensed that I wasn’t from this hayseed backwoods town, that I had an air of coastal sophistication about me. We had bonded in some small way.

“Thanks,” he said. “I knew one of your kind would understand.”

Ah. So not so much coastal sophistication. To be fair, not the first time I’d pinged somebody’s gaydar. Oh well. Frankly in Edmonton, anyone with a good haircut and all their own teeth was probably tarred with the same brush. I

walked up to the machine. We had a staring match. I mumbled to myself that this was it. I kissed my last chip, which upon reflection seemed pretty stupid, given the number of people that had held it in their sweaty desperate hands before I held it in my sweaty desperate hands.

“Get the fuck out of the way, it’s our turn! We’re going to crush this mother!” A barrage of cheap aftershave, gold chains, spray tan, polyester suit, white shoes, dragging along a woman half his age and a third his weight. He rushed the machine, pushing me and knocking my off balance. I fell back, backpedaling, arms windmilling, and the only thing that saved me from redecorating the floor with my brains was Will the security guy. For a guy his size he was remarkably nimble and he scooped me up before I hit the floor.

“Are you okay, sir?” I stood up, in shock. I was flabbergasted. This sort of thing doesn’t happen in Vancouver. Surrey, maybe. But not Vancouver.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. If this American asshole and his hooker want to go before me, that’s fine with me.” my voice was even, but I was starting to seethe. The asshole spun slowly on his heel.

“What the fuck did you say?” He lowered his voice to a growl. His neck and chest had started to redden, which meant that he was getting an adrenalin push. See, I was awake during Biology 200.

“Which part did I get wrong? You’re not an American, you’re not an asshole, or your ladyfriend here isn’t a professional?” I could see that multiple choice questions were going to be difficult for him, and as anyone that knew him would predict, he went from verbal to physical in a

heartbeat. He rushed me and was about to rearrange the order of my arms and legs when there was a whispered blur of black and what appeared to be ballroom dancing. William redirected the force of his onrush, swirled the attacker around, and calmly whispered something in his ear. For a split second there was a silence from the crowd, hoping to get a fight as part of their entertainment package, then as the situation diffused, the normal noise came back up to level.

“Come on, Marty, I want to play the game!” She was bouncing up and down, her dress not quite keeping time with her movements. And her voice! Her voice had the same effect on me as if I’d bit a piece of tinfoil. I sort of, kinda, almost, felt sorry for the guy. Ok. No. Not even a bit.

“Okay, bunny. Here you go.” He handed her a chip, and she pulled the lever. Lights flashed, the reels spun, it played a tune. And then nothing. It made a sound like a dying accordion. Then bing! ‘Better Luck Next Time on the Megabucks!’ recording.

“Oh well. Next time, sweetie.” she grabbed his arm and they started to walk away. Will ushered me forward, really just hoping to get this over with so he could throw me out. As Marty walked by smacked the back of my head.

“Good luck, loser.” Will moved to intercede on my behalf.

“Forget it, Will. Let’s just get this over with.” The back of my head smarted from the expertly placed cuffing. I dropped the chit, pulled the lever and then pointed my fingers at the machine. The first reel stopped on Megabucks, then the second. I could hear Will whistle

under his breath. The third wheel spun, and clinked to a stop.

Did you know that they allow fireworks inside casinos?

The next hour was a party. Then there was the payout and the offer of a room, which I took. People were coming over to pat me on the back, trying to rub off some of the luck. Again. Not how luck works. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Will. He smiled and gave me the thumbs up. The manager was walking me to the elevator, telling me how special the room was, which I apparently was getting for free, was and hoped that I'd enjoy my stay here.

The not so hidden message in all of this was his hope that I'd stay long enough to give most of the money back.

"Honestly Phil, I'm not sure what the plans are. I would like to thank William though. Have him sent up to my room. Cool?"

"Absolutely, sir. You have a good day, and perhaps we'll see you later in the VIP lounge?"

"You just might, Phil, you just might. I am feeling lucky."

The room was nice. It wasn't the Orchid Suite at the Shangri La, but it had a big bathtub, floor to ceiling windows, and a round bed. I took the shopping bag full of cash and arranged it on the coffee table in neat \$10,000 stacks. I thought about rolling around on it in the bed like Duck McScrooge, but again, it's not very sanitary.

A knock on the door. I checked the peep hole to make sure it was Will and invited him in. I'd seen too many heist movies.

“Come on in. I just wanted to thank you for your kindness today. Lot’s of other security guys would have just pitched me out.” Will was clearly uncomfortable. This small town boy was probably in awe of the penthouse suite. He stood woodenly and refused the offer of a seat.. Odd. “Did you want a coke or something? The minibar isn’t mini, and apparently it’s all free.”

“Look, mister. I know you’re a winner, and Phil said I had to come up here, but I’ve got a girlfriend, and I’m not going to have sex with you.”

Ok, this was awkward.

There was a long, long pause.

We just looked at each other.

The air conditioner hummed.

I actually sort of enjoy an awkward pause.

Especially one where I’m not the one that feels awkward.

“William. First off, I don’t want to have sex with you. My girlfriend wouldn’t like me stepping out. Second, I’m not gay. I’m from the west coast. I know that often gets confused. Thirdly, I have a business proposition for you. Nothing illegal.” I sat back on the couch, crossed my legs and draped my arms along the back and looked to see if he would take the bait. Will untensed, and sat in a too small chair across from me.

“So what’s the deal....”

I was impressed with Will. He didn't take my first offer. He wanted to know why I was on the run, so I told him that I had wrecked this guy's super expensive drone and his jeep, and now he was after me, which was technically true. The best lies are ones with a kernel of truth. I just didn't tell him about the Russians or the fact the drone was owned by the CIA. Or that I can sort of manipulate coincidence. We agreed that I would pay off his student loan, plus all the rest of his tuition. He agreed that his girlfriend would come and stay with me while he was out at the RV dealership with \$150,000 of my cash. I made a couple phone calls, found a unit that served my needs, and the wheels, as the saying goes, were set in motion. By the end of the day, I had a new ride, Will had his schooling fully paid for, and I was ready for the open road with plenty of gas money.

Will came back to the room, and dropped off the keys. We shook hands. Will looked at me, teared up, and gave me a hug that expelled all the air out of my lungs and lifted me just a little off the floor.

“Thanks. And you take care, man.”

“You too, Will. When you graduate, I'll come for a haircut. Maybe you can butch me up a little.”

“It's going to take more than a good haircut, bro.” Will winked and left.

The next few hours were a living hell. I went to Walmart to kit out my van.

OUTSIDE CHANCE



Not all of Alberta is as shitty as Edmonton. There are parts of Alberta that are truly majestic. Towering mountains, jewel green lakes, dark foreboding forests, and there is nothing to compare with Jasper National Park. My plan was to find a quiet back road to camp and come down from the excitement of the last week. The van was fully stocked, and I was looking forward to communing with nature. I picked up a map at the information booth, and headed away from civilization.

In the city you are surrounded by noise. Even in an apartment, there are sounds of the street, people talking, sirens, construction, and in the evening, when it's supposed to be quiet, there's still the hum of the streetlights, and the refrigerator cycling on and off. We all get used to it; we all think it's okay, that it's normal to be constantly bombarded with noise. Most of us don't really notice it at all. It's the price we pay for living in a vibrant cosmopolitan city or even a place like Edmonton. It's only when you get out of the city, away from the lights, and the

sirens and the constant thrum of traffic that you realize how fucking annoying it is.

This was the first time I had truly experienced quiet. The night was still. I was standing outside the RV, and was staring at the Milky Way. That's another thing you don't see in the city. The Milky Way, or really any stars. Maybe that's why people in cities have such inflated opinions of themselves. If you can't see that you're an insignificant person among seven billion on an insignificant planet that is lost in the 300 billion stars that make up the Milky Way I could see how you might think being promoted to senior cost accountant would be a big thing.

With a combination of scotch, a thick comforter and clean mountain air I slept well. The next morning, I set out to discover how my curse worked.

Sir Francis Bacon defined the scientific method. Every course I took in university, aside from economics, relied on the tried and true path to science that Bacon laid out 400 years ago. I couldn't really do double blind testing, but I could test and observe, and record. So that's what I set out to do. I devised a simple experiment, one that I could increment.

I set up the small camp table, and found two pebbles. I put one on top of the other, and stood two meters away. I pointed my fingers at them and concentrated, trying to knock the upper stone off. Nothing. I pointed both hands. I pointed both hands and made a pushing motion. I tried with smaller rocks. Nothing. I tried with bigger rocks. Closer. Further. Eyes open. Eyes closed. I yelled. Nothing. If anyone had been watching, they would have called mental health services. I was beginning to seriously doubt that I

had any control over things at all. Maybe everything that had happened was all just coincidence.

Judging by the position of the sun, it was noon. I took a break to make some lunch. Science gives you an appetite, I decided on bacon and pancakes.

There were only two burners, so I made coffee and started the bacon while I mixed up the pancake batter. The trick to great pancakes is buttermilk. Something about the acid in the buttermilk reacting with the baking soda to create lighter airier pancakes. Normally I would have done all this from scratch, but desperate times and all, I was using a mix. The pancakes had bubbled up and were ready to turn over. I edged the flipper gently under the first pancake.

“Smells great!”

It was like I'd been stung by a wasp. I flipped the pancake onto the ceiling and spun around to be greeted by a smiling lady in a Smokey the Bear hat.

“Park Ranger Debra Williamson. How're ya doin'?”

“Jesus! You just about gave me a heart attack. Don't you people knock?” I peeled the dripping pancake off the ceiling of the RV, wiping off the batter and threw the whole mess in the garbage.

“Well, yer door was open, so there weren't nothing to knock on!” No amount of pissedoffedness was going to put a shadow on this rangers day. I relaxed my shoulders, scooped some batter into the pan, and turned to the smiling ranger.

“What can I do for you Ranger?”

“Oh, nuthin'. I was just passing by and saw your sweet rig and wanted to make sure you were okay. I can see that

you are. Oh, by the way, there have been a couple grizzly sightings in the area, so I just wanted to warn you about them. They're mostly getting ready for hibernation, but they're always in the mood for a snack, so make sure you keep your garbage in the bear proof receptacles."

"Good advice. Thanks, Ranger." I had returned to normal blood pressure, and some of my manners returned as well. "Did you want a cup of coffee? Fresh made..."

"Nah, that's awfully nice of you, but too much coffee gives me the jitters, and then I find that I need to take a crap, and if I'm out in the woods, well, now, that's a problem, and I don't always have the TP in the glove box of the jeep, and then I've got to scoop it up in a doggy bag, because you've got to leave footprints, not garbage blah blah, and that always feels weird, not weird when you do it for a dog, but when you're scooping up your own poop, well that just seems a little weird."

I did not have an answer for any of that.

"Ok, then. Have a good day!." She was already walking back to her pickup truck and gave me a quick goodbye wave. I turned back to my pancakes, flipped them carefully, and closed the door so there would be no more surprises.

After lunch, I returned to my experiment.

And got bored, and a little tired. Nothing was working. The sun was shining, the air was soft, my camp chair was a deluxe model with a high back, so I turned it to the sun, and decided that ten minutes to think was just what the doctor ordered. I closed my eyes, and could feel myself drifting.

We get frustrated waiting for 30 seconds for the light to change at an intersection, and yet we sleep for eight hours and have no sense of the time that passes. Time has no meaning when you're asleep. When I woke up, it was colder, and darker. Man. That must have been some nap. I rubbed my face with my hands and looked up.

It wasn't nighttime. There were no clouds. The sun was being blocked by a grizzly bear.

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NEVER TWICE



The De'd Dog Bar and Grill was pretty quiet for a Thursday. It was shoulder season, all the Japanese tourists had left, and the snow hadn't brought the noisy American skiers into town yet. The original bar, named the Astoria, had been built in 1927 but renamed in 1995 to the De'd Dog. All the history had been stripped out or papered over, but it was a friendly place and they filled the beer to the rim, not the government certified line.

"I'm telling you the truth! Goddamit, why don't you guys believe me?" Debra exhaled back into her chair and threw her crumpled up napkin at Senior Ranger Bob McFarland. Bob was holding onto the edge of the table with one hand and covering his mouth trying to stifle a laugh with the other. She and Bob had worked together for 15 years, and both had a history of pulling pranks and telling yarns. Toshiki Mitikawa, the newbie, was staring intently. He was willing to believe the story.

"So... he killed the bear?" Toshiki was staring at Debra.

"No. I told you. That bear was hit with a bolt of lightning. It was so powerful that it split the bear in half! I

was across the cut probably a couple hundred meters away from where that fancy guy was staying in his brand new RV, a real nice one with a push-out. I had parked to check on one of the culverts, it had got plugged with some runoff debris, and had just finished when I looked across and saw the bear. I shouted a warning but I was too far away. I saw the guy wake up, you could tell he was scared shitless, the bear was about 6 meters away. It was up on its hind feet and it was making real aggressive postures, swinging his head around, bearing his teeth, making a racket. It was a good meter taller than the RV guy. Most guys would have run, or jumped for the door of the camper. This guy just looked at the bear and stood still. I thought oh my god he's going to get his head ripped off.

Did you know that a grizzly killed a moose here a couple years ago by hitting the moose so hard that it took its head clean off?! One hit! One dead moose. I thought for sure that's what was going to happen to the city boy. Instead he pointed his hand at the bear and made a chopping motion and at that exact moment the lightning blew the bear in two pieces, and knocked the guy off his feet. Somehow the lightning bugged up the electronics on the truck, and that's why you had to come out in the dark and get me."

"Oh, yeah. Great story. Next time don't leave the lights and radio on when you're catching some zees. Oh, and you're welcome, by the by." Bob was grinning ear-to-ear and was leaning back in his chair with his thumbs stretching out his red suspenders. "You can show us the bear barbeque tomorrow when it's light."

Debra's story was mostly accurate. I was however, only startled, not scared shitless. I was knocked over by the force of the blast. The bear wasn't cut in two: lightning isn't quite that exact, but it was in a couple pieces, pretty crisp and very dead. And I never used the phrase bear barbecue. What I did say, and I'm pretty proud of this, was this:

“Now that's the real Smokey the Bear.”

And no one was around to hear. Always the way. I looked at the dead bear. Looked up to crystal clear skies. Looked at my hand. I made another chopping motion. Nothing. So. Conclusions, doctor? It seemed that whatever it was that I had, was activated when I was in danger, or felt anxious, sort of a hyper adrenalin response. That explained why I lost at roulette; there was no danger trigger. But I won the jackpot because Mr. Goldchains smacked me when he walked by. All of these coincidence bends happened when I was put in a situation. The real question was whether I was able to get myself in a coincidence bending state.

I didn't want to stab myself. Or drop something on my foot. What could I do that would trick my body into being able to manipulate the reaction. Think. Then it came to me. I scrambled into the camper and came out with a Zap It™ bug badminton racquet. It was powered by a 9 volt battery, one of the rectangular flat ones, with both connectors on the top. I set up the experiment with the two rocks.

When I was seven, Joey Savage, one of my friends and neighbours, double dared me to put my tongue on a 9 volt battery. It was a Saturday and we were hanging out in the

rec room in the basement. There was a lot of ‘I will if you will’ and ‘You’re chicken’ back and forth, until Joey agreed to go first. On the count of three he licked the battery. His arms flew up, his legs went out from under him, he couldn’t blink, and he fell on the ground convulsing and foaming at the mouth. Oh shit, oh shit. I thought he was dying. I ran upstairs in a panic to get mom. I was balling my eyes out. Between sobs and breaths I told her what had happened, and how Joey was dead. ‘I see.’ was all she said. She continued to stir the pot of soup she was working on. Then she looked at me and winked. Then she said in her loudest voice ‘Oh my goodness, that’s horrible. Go, quick, get daddy’s jumper cables, we’ll wire him up to the 220 for the dryer, that should get him a good boost and start his heart again.’ Apparently Joey wasn’t dead. He came bursting into the kitchen, saw us both smiling at him, and nonchalantly as could be asked what was for lunch, and could he stay.

I hadn’t thought about him in years.

I stared at the rocks. I licked the battery. The current surged. I winced. I flicked my fingers like I was shooting a crokinole puck.. The top rock disappeared. So did the bottom rock, the camp table, and my coffee cup. I had no idea where the rocks went. I was really just expecting them to topple over. The table was 20 meters further down the road and my steel camp coffee cup was beyond that, the handle spiked into the trunk a big tamarac. I tugged on it, but it wasn’t coming loose. There was an hour left of daylight, and I spent it zapping myself, and rearranging the forest.

LISTEN UP



“Hey all my fellow campers and nature lovers out there, this is your man, Tosh the Ranger, up here in the beautiful Canadian wilderness. If you’re new to my channel, I’m all about the outdoors, wildlife, and great stories from the wild. Don’t forget to slap slap slap that subscribe button for more videos. You can check out past videos here and here, but today, I’ve got something special. A story I overheard in the bar up here about a guy that killed a bear with his bare hands!”

In 2013 Edward Snowden let the world know that the NSA and CIA were spying on everyone in the world that had a computer or a cell phone. Or a landline. Or a pulse. Once the organizations were outed, they immediately apologized, stopped all their spying, gave Snowden a medal for bravery, and closed Guantanamo Bay. Oh, wait. That’s what they should have done. None of that happened. Snowden lives in exile in Russia with his girlfriend, and will be detained in Guantanamo Bay or a CIA blacksite should he ever leave. The Americans like to pretend that they’re the good guy, but the reality is there are no white hats in the OK corral. All the big countries, and frankly, most of the

small ones, are ruled by horrible people. Putin in Russia, Trump in the United States, Modi in India, and Xi in China are all war criminals, and if you go down the rest of the list of presidents from around the world, there are darn few you'd invite into your house for tea. It's hard to believe from all the electioneering talk about equality and hope and fairness that every leader is a psychopath that would kill as many people as they thought they could get away with on their route to the big desk.

But I digress. I thought that being out in the middle of nowhere that I'd be safe. I'd used a fake name when I won the \$275,000, William had bought the camper in his name, and I'd only used cash in all of my transactions. What I didn't count on was Tosh and his Youtube vlog. And Google.

In 1995, the NSA and CIA funded two grants to a computer-science research team at Stanford University. The primary objective of the first grant was "query optimization of very complex queries that are described using the 'query flocks' approach." The second grant was part of a coordinated effort to build a massive internet based digital library. Both grants went to two graduate students who were making rapid advances in web-page ranking, as well as tracking user queries. You guessed it. The future Google co-founders Sergey Brin (born in Russia) and Larry Page (born in Lansing, Michigan).

Tosh was ecstatic that he got another few subscribers to his Youtube channel. He just had no idea who they were.

I'd had a good week. I had rearranged the forest, found I had some control over heating things up, and could

manipulate electronics consistently. Obviously I had no fucking idea how the physics worked, or even if it was physics, and not some weird mystical bullshit, but for now it didn't matter. The battery had worn out, but I found I could get the same effect just thinking about the battery, which was good because the end of my tongue had zero feeling after the first day. It's fine now, though, thanks for asking.

I had just grabbed my morning coffee and was sitting in my camp chair when I saw a plume of dust rising up. That could only mean I was getting a visitor. A white pickup rolled up, pulling a tail of dust behind it.

"Howdy! I'm a park ranger, just came over to see how you're doin'?"

"Just enjoying my morning coffee and this incredible view. Can I pour you a cup?"

"Well that would be mighty nice." her voice went up at the end, which has always bugged me as an affectation, especially when what is said clearly not a question. I poured her a cup and she sat opposite me, getting ready to engage in some chit chat.

"Look. I know this is your job..."

"Oh I don't mind, honey. I love getting out of the office and rolling around the backwoods. Best part of the job, actually. And this coffee is delicious."

"What I started to say was, I know this is your job, and you think you're doing the right thing, but you're working for a horrible, single minded, illegal entity that has caused misery everywhere it has stepped." I looked dead at her. She was flustered for a second, then laughed, not sure how serious I was.

“Honestly the Park department isn’t all that bad. We have to put out campfires and keep beer away from the kids...”

“I know you’re either NSA or CIA. Given that you’re running an illegal operation in Canada, it’s probably the CIA.” She put down the coffee on the ground and in the same motion retrieved her second gun from an ankle holster.

“Wow. So you’re a mind reader. I wasn’t sure what I was getting myself into.” She stood up. “Let’s go. People want to talk to you. And before you think about trying anything, know that there are two snipers trained on you.” I didn’t move. I took a sip of my coffee.

“Actually, there’s only one sniper. Your vehicle only holds two people, and you’re not out here on your own, so I’m not sure where he, or she, is going to ride on the way back. Besides. I’m not coming with you. I’m guessing that you found me with a satellite that is probably watching this whole operation. Am I right?” She began to walk towards me. “I’m also pretty sure that your fake name tag is a camera, and you’re comm’d into somebody higher up the food chain?”

“Well you’re a real live smarty pants, aren’t you. Get up.”

“No. By now he’s told you that the camera in your name tag has stopped working. Now you’ll have noticed that your comms are down, and the earbud you’ve got is starting to get very warm. In a few seconds the plastic casing is going to melt and drain into your inner ear, rendering you permanently deaf.”

She went from smug to uncomfortable to panicked in six heart beats. She started jumping up and down, screaming

and digging at her ear with urgency. The comm fell free on the ground and started smoking. She swung the gun on me, her face contorted with rage.

“You fucking mutant!” The Glock in her hand disassembled into its 34 components, and they, along with 15 rounds fell on the ground in front of her. “Shoot him! Fucking shoot him now! That’s an order!” She was screaming and waving her arms and looking over my shoulder. Really, not very professional. I put my hands up and turned around. The sniper was standing up, confused, but his rifle pointed at me. He fired. The gun jammed. Then every bullet he was carrying exploded. He sounded like a string of firecrackers at Chinese New Year. Amazingly all of the ammunition was pointed away from vital organs and he stood, bloodied, but not horribly injured, his clothes in shreds. A tree branch swacked him on the head and he fell unconscious to the ground. I turned back around slowly.

“The satellite is going to show that your gun failed, and that the sniper’s gun misfired. The satellite is offline now. (That was a bluff.) So. No one can hear you. No one can see you. You’re on your own, and you can make your own choices here.”

Millicent Moller was an only child of deeply religious, Republican voting, second generation German immigrants. Here grandparents had come to the states after the war as part of Operation Paperclip, a secret American program that imported more than 1,600 German scientists, engineers, and technicians, like Wernher von Braun and his V-2 rocket team, to work on the missile program for the United States. Most, like Millie’s grandparents, were former

members of the Nazi Party. They had adopted America as their home, but with a bias against Americans engendered from a natural superiority. Americans were fat and lazy and impure. Germans were pure, rigorous, driven, and efficient. Millicent's father married a pure German girl, who, it was later discovered through DNA testing, was actually one quarter Ashkenazi Jew. It was a dark secret in the household, never to be spoken of, until the lights went out and the 'Nazis Invading Poland' role play began.

Millicent, or Millie to her few friends, desperately wanted to be as American as apple pie. She excelled in sports, was on the debate team, and was the deans' pick for valedictorian, but the popular student vote went to Tiffanee McMaster, a pretty, popular girl who wore a purity ring, and had regular headboard-quaking anal (technically not) sex with her boyfriend, a senior who legally changed his name from Norman to Chad, because as he eloquently put it, 'Norman isn't a name for a winner.' After high school, Millicent got into Stanford for electrical engineering and was approached after her second year by the CIA. She fit the profile of the candidates that they sought, and she was flattered to be courted. She finished her degree and spent the next six months at Camp Perry, the CIA training facility in Virginia. For her, being in the CIA was the epitome of being an American. She had drunk the Flavour Aid* and was as gungho as they come.

*The expression actually uses the term Kool-Aid, a Kraft food product. Evidence at the scene of the Jonestown massacre pointed to the less expensive Flavour Aid. Kool-Aid executives have been trying unsuccessfully for years since the 918 people committed mass suicide to distance themselves from the expression. But Flavor Aid just doesn't roll off the tongue.

“I’m guessing you’ve got a knockout syringe somewhere? The plan being to get close enough to put me out, then drive me to a small airstrip and take me to a blacksite in Idaho?” I was still sitting down. “You might as well sit down and finish your coffee.”

“I’m taking you in. You’re going to do as I say, and we’re going to go to that airstrip and then the world will never hear another word from you again.” Glare. “You fucking mutant.”

“Honestly, there’s no need to be nasty. Before you came I was literally minding my own business. You’re in Canada operating illegally. You chose to work for an agency that seeks to control everything through any means necessary. American history is one long litany of countries you’ve fucked over for your bullshit ideals of national security. You already know I’m not going with you, so you have a choice; you can either knock yourself out with the drug, wake up in a couple hours, and tell your superiors that I overpowered you and the sniper, or, I can, I don’t know, find a less pleasant way to disable you.”

Her eyes narrowed and in a practiced move she deftly pulled out her main weapon from a holster on her waistband. She was pulling the trigger and wildly firing before the gun was even aimed at me. I’d been expecting this - I could tell she wasn’t going to take my easy way out. Go down shooting, that’s the way. I can understand it, though, she needs to write a report and she can’t say I bullied her into self narcing. She got off three shots. I’ll give her credit, she was deadly. Before she got to me I stopped her arm. She strained, using her free hand to help pull the gun towards me but it was no use. I spun her around like a

marionette and emptied the rest of the clip into her nice white truck, exploding two tires and puncturing the radiator. Then I disassembled the gun and cut the strings and she flopped back in the camp chair.

“Wow. How are you going to explain that to your handler? Sorry, Bill, I don’t know what came over me, I just thought the truck would look better with 12 holes in it.” I was being petty, but I’d lost my patience with this whole kidnap at all cost attitude of these people. “Where’s the syringe?”

“Fuck you.” Defiance. I like that in almost nobody.

“Ok. Let me put it this way. You and your sniper buddy both tried to kill me. In the grand old US of A there is a right to defend yourself with reasonable force. If a guy comes at you with a knife, you can have a knife. If someone comes at you with a gun, you’re allowed, no, encouraged to kill him with a bigger gun. Does that about sum up your philosophy, Miss CIA? So what do you think I should do?” A whitetail hawk flew overhead. It did not make a foreboding screeching sound.

“My name is Special Agent Millicent Moller. I have sworn an oath on the constitution to defend the United States of America against all invaders. I will..” I held up my hand.

“Look, Millie, a couple things. First your name is not Special Agent. That’s a label to depersonalize you, make you part of a machine, or impress people with. I bet knowing that you belong to something bigger is probably a great comfort to you, especially in these crazy times, what with God being dead and all, and people around the world no longer believing that America is the greatest country in the world, except if you mean the greatest asshole

imperialistic colonizing shithole backwards country in the whole world. I'm guessing that you were the smartest girl in your class, but not the most popular. You don't have a boyfriend as that would be a distraction from your career plan. Since you're a woman you have to be twice as good as the men in your organization to get ahead even a little. You don't take holidays. You're wound tighter than a ten dollar watch and you don't sleep well anymore. Second, you're in Canada, I'm in Canada, and I haven't invaded your country, you've invaded mine. So your beef with me is largely a product of some worst case scenario nonsense that guys back in the office played around with." I looked at her expecting a vociferous rebuttal.

"I'm just trying to do my job..." she said quietly.

"Said every SS officer at Buchenwald." The air was thin and quiet. The silence stretched. Another red tailed hawk flew over. Still no haunting screech. "Do you agree with all the directives? Interfering in other countries and changing their governments to suit US interests using mass murder, military coups, arming guerrilla groups, the abolition of democracy, systemic disinformation, and the imposition of savage despots. Your country regards it as a divine right, inherent to American exceptionalism. Do you think you're that special? At least the Nazis didn't use subterfuge, they just fired up the Stutkas and took Poland one weekend." Honestly, I tend to yammer on. This is why I don't get invited to parties.

"My grandfather was a Nazi. The Americans captured him and Werner and some of their buddies and whitewashed their records and brought them over to help build ICBMs. We don't talk about the Nazi stuff much..."

never, actually.” She was talking to me, but not looking at me.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN



I woke up with a ringing in my head and the taste of copper in my mouth; a sure sign of a concussion. I was sitting on the floor, my hands and feet bound and my head contained in a fine steel mesh cage. I looked around and saw that I was sitting on the floor of my camper, and Millie was sitting at the table with her gun pointed at me.

“Well look who's awake. Good morning sunshine.” She smiled. Not a real smile, more like an I got you now and you're going to regret it smile. “Hope you don't mind that we're borrowing your rig, seeing as my truck got shot up. That thing you've got on your head is a faraday cage. The boffins back at head office said it was the only way to stop your powers. How far are we from the border Alex?”

“About two hours out.”

“You're the one that hit me from behind, aren't you.” He laughed and flashed me the bird.

“Should've killed you motherfucker, I've got powder burns all over me!” He checked my situation out in the mirror and laughed again. I regretted not killing him. I needed to get over my misplaced sense of humanity, especially from people that point guns at me. I didn't like

feeling so dark. I really just wanted to have a sort of normal life. That obviously wasn't going to be possible.

“So this was your choice? You had the option to just walk away.”

“I'm the fucking girl that's going to get the job done, and no amount of voodoo is going to stop me. You're going to sit there in your little birdcage and I'm going to personally hand you over to Colonel Shatner and get a fucking promotion.”

“Okay. So this is about another four dollars an hour and a 'Senior' in front of your bullshit title? Wow, that's really pathetic.” She turned to share a laugh with Alex the sniper and while her head was turned I broke the restraints on my hands and legs. “Hey Alex, can you pull over, I'm feeling like I'm going to puke. That hit you gave me fucking discombobulated my head.”

What I didn't say was that this was your last chance to show a little humanity.

“Fuck you Tweety Bird, you can puke in your little cage. We'll open a window!” they both laughed at his bon mot.

Okay then. Enough of this bullshit.

The noise of cracking your knuckles is actually nitrogen bubbles bursting in your synovial fluid caused by an instantaneous change in the fluid's pressure. The same sort of effect is caused by the snapping claw of the *Synalpheus pinkfloydi*, a small crustacean that can kill by snapping its one oversized claw creating a cavitation zone. That sound, the muffled cracking noise, was barely audible over the road whine. I crushed every rib in Alex the sniper's body, piercing most of his internal organs and killing him

instantly. I slowed the van to a stop on the side of the highway.

“Thanks Alex, I appreciate you giving me a chance to puke outside.” Millie glanced at Alex who was motionless, and back to me, still sitting with my birdcage on, and my hands and feet still apparently bound.

“What the hell, Alex? We don’t have to stop for this fucking mutant. She got from behind the table and stood up. She was quick. She could tell there was something wrong and looked back at me in horror. She raised her gun. “You fucker.” I broke both her collar bones and yanked both arms from her shoulder sockets. Her arms dropped, the gun fell to the floor and she screamed in agony.

“I’m done being nice. I just wanted to be left alone. I didn’t kill Alex when he tried to kill me, and I didn’t kill you the first time you tried to shoot me. Or the second! I gave you both a chance to do the right thing. Your version of the ‘right thing’ is radically different from mine, and there doesn’t seem to be any way to change your mind. Congratulations. The CIA gave you all kinds of training but left out the ability to assess a situation and think for yourself. I’m sure they’ll put a plaque on the wall in some building, to deify you for your ‘sacrifice.’”

“Please, please, don’t kill me.” I stood up, taking off the birdcage. She was kneeling on the floor, unable to move her arms, her hands lying like dead birds in her lap, and crying. I pushed by her and shut off the engine. It was dusk. In another hour or so it would be dark enough for me to get rid of the two CIA agents and figure out next moves. I touched the goose egg on the back of my head. It smarted like the dickens, and was a little bloody. I got to thinking. In

every single movie the character with the upper hand monologues, mostly to clarify his motives to the audience, or brag, or fill in a twist in his backstory (Luke, I am your father...). And usually that gave the other character enough time to figure out a way to call for help, or undo their handcuffs, or jump down a trash chute to safety. Not today. I stopped her heart and never said a word to her. Then I went to the cupboard and made myself a sandwich and grabbed a Perrier. I was starving. And a pickle. And four oreos.

The ditch on the side of the road was deep and choked with marsh rushes. I took any I.D. I could find on the bodies and dropped them deep in the rushes. I took their weapons apart and dumped them in several places down the road on my way to Red Deer. I knew my vehicle was going to be a target so it was time to switch it up for something else. I knew that all the new cars had GPS and remote lojack features, and I didn't want anything like that. I needed an old car. One with no electronics, or fancy geegaws.

It was midnight when I saw the lights of Red Deer in the distance. Too late to make a legitimate transaction. This was going to have to be a dine and dash scenario. I flipped on the radio to find a local station, and rolled into north Red Deer on the hunt for the perfect vehicle. All the stations were either country or western. I clicked it off. There were all the standard dealerships with their brand new offerings lining the highway. Wheaton Chevrolet, Morrey Kia, Kip Scott GMC. Not what I was looking for. A block up ahead was a lonely tube man, languidly flopping this way and that, unconcerned by its lack of rhythm,

dancing to music that only it could hear. On the side it said Jackie's Used Cars.

I took that to be a sign. I pulled up in front of the lot and got out. A selection of used Corollas, a couple 3 Series Beemers, way too many pickups, but closest to the little portable office that served as the capital of this little kingdom, was the car.

A 1954 Buick Riviera Kustom. Why there was a K, I didn't know. The car was from another dimension. It had been lowered, had an all black paint job that light fell into. It had new red upholstery and a modified V8 engine with a supercharger. The grill was a six foot wide chrome grimace, the massive bumper had two Jane Russell-esque protuberances for speed? aerodynamics? Who could say? The key was that it was free of any sort of electronics that the CIA or their ilk could track or jam. It was also drop dead gorgeous. I disabled the alarm, found the keys, and left the keys for the RV. The car was only half the price of the RV, so I figured it was a reasonable swap. I bolted on the licence plates, and hit the road. I was going to miss the RV. It had become home, at least for a couple weeks, but now it was time to put some distance between me and the city. I headed east on Highway 11 and hoped for the best.

Away from the cities, the prairies have a quiet majesty. The sky is so large that it seems to have weight. A lack of people means that at times you can drive for a half an hour and not see a farm or another car. It was a cold night. The stars peeked in and out through high wispy clouds. The car had an AM radio and as the miles clicked east I tuned in a station from Juarez, Mexico, 50,000 watts, all in Spanish

chit chat and mariachi bands. The combination of the ionosphere and cool temperatures made it perfect for skywave jumps. I kept time with the bands, thrumming my fingers on the steering wheel. As I crossed into Saskatchewan my eyes began to lose focus, so I found a tree covered pullout along the highway, and stopped to catch a few zees. The back seat in my Rivera was huge, and I'd grabbed a couple duvets and pillows from the RV, so I was warm and asleep in minutes.

I slept longer than I wanted to, but not having a plan, did it really matter? I pulled the car back onto the highway and started looking for breakfast. My non-planned route led me to the town of Biggar. Biggar's motto is 'New York is Big, but this is Biggar. All two thousand and eighteen residents thought that was a knee slapper.

It was early, but for the people of Biggar, it was already time for coffee break. The people of Biggar were descended from a wave of hardy German immigrants that came to Canada when the Russians overran their original homes in the early 1900's. Lots of blonde hair and blue eyes. I found parking on Main street, and moseyed, as one does in sleepy towns, down the sidewalk to Kelly's Diner.

I could have been in any town on the prairies and found this exact same restaurant. It had been in operation for fifty years, passed down from the founder to his daughter, Greta, and her husband Gunter. The arborite table tops had been wiped so many times that the patterns were erased to just hints. Their daughter, Tiffany, had gone off to the University in Saskatchewan and having a taste of food that hadn't been prepared on a flattop or in a deep fryer, had decided that the restaurant business wasn't in her blood

and had studied Linguistics and Interactive Design Methods, programs that Greta and Gunter would proudly relate to the patrons of Kelly's, but had no idea what they meant or how it would be applicable in the little town of Biggar. Tiffany, it seemed, had other plans, and none of them involved Biggar or french fried food.

I found a booth to myself, and Greta came over.

"Hello there, honey. Coffee? Here's a menu. You take your time deciding." And then she stood there with an order pad and a pen poised.

"Um, ok." feeling the pressure, I scanned the menu, then thought I'd just wing it. I looked up, read her name tag.

"Greta, I would like your standard Kelly's Diner breakfast. If there are two versions, I'd like the one you would recommend."

"Alrighty then," she smiled back. "Won't be a minute, honey." She walked to the back pass through and talked to Gunter for a brief second. Lyle Lovett was playing over the loudspeakers in the ceiling. I sat back, closed my eyes and absorbed the calmness. Muted conversations at a couple of the tables. In the corner four retired farmers with Co-op green ball caps were swapping lies and telling tales.. I could tell by their posture and demeanour that that was their table, and this was their preferred restaurant. Greta stopped by with her coffee jug and topped them up, shared a laugh, then came over and poured one for me.

"Passing through, are you? Where you headed?" An innocent question, but given my recent run-ins with people with guns, it caught me off guard.

“Uhh ... I’ve got some relatives in Brandon that I’m planning on visiting, but I’m taking my time getting there. There’s a wedding next weekend, some shirttail cousin.” None of that was even remotely true, but it was plausible. “Taking my time, maybe hit Grasslands National Park.” That part was true.

“Sounds like a good plan. Excuse me, your order’s up. I’ll be right back.”

The breakfast was a complete meal, and enough calories for a couple days. Three eggs, sausage, bacon, fried potatoes, mushrooms, gravy, fried tomatoes, sauerkraut, and two slices of toast. I gave it my best effort, finished my coffee, paid, and audibly groaned as I left the banquette. I walked back to the car and started it. In a minute I was watching Biggar get smaller in the rearview mirror and was headed south.

18

FATE



If you're a city driver you judge distances by the relative sizes and placement of things. You can tell that building 'x' is in front of building 'y' and that gives you the visual clues of spatiality. Seeing an object in front of the building and your brain will decide if it's a car or a truck. On the bald headed prairie, there are no clues. You see a tree in the distance, and besides the fact that it's unusual to see trees out here, you have no idea if it is 100 feet tall and a kilometer away, or 10 feet tall and 20 meters away. And the prairies are not table flat - they undulate, an accident of their formation as part of a great inland sea. So when I saw a pair of black dots on the horizon I had no way of distinguishing them as bees or crows or Apache attack helicopters.

I became clear pretty quickly. A humvee was blocking the road, the two helicopters hovering beside it. I checked my rearview mirror and saw two more. I was driving up one of the waves of land, and let it coast to a stop. I got out of the car. The air was throbbing with the beat of the helicopter's blades. A tumbleweed blew across the road. An

early winter snow was falling. The humvee was a hundred meters away.

Colonel Shatner, his camo fatigues pressed to knife edges, his mirror aviators catching reflections from the cloudy sky, descended from the passenger side, and stood, akimbo, his feet in glinting black storm trooper boots spread at shoulder distance. Calm. In charge. He turned and said something I couldn't hear and pointed his fingers towards me. I thought he was giving the kill command, but instead, a wheeled battle robot with a grasper hand rolled towards me.

It stopped in front of me. Someone with a sense of humour had stuck goggly eyes on the front of it, but it still wasn't as cute as WALL-E. Its grasper hand raised up and handed me a cell phone. It rang.

"Look, I don't want to buy any insurance. I've told you guys a hundred times to quit calling me." I hung up. The phone rang again.

"Listen asshole. The only reason you're not dead is because I look at you as a science experiment, and you're not much good to me dead. I will kill you, though. That's why I've brought the most technologically advanced killing machines with me. You might be able to do your little magic voodoo but that is no match for the combined hammer of the US military."

"Sorry. Was that a question?"

"What? No! That was a fucking threat. Now, you're going to lie down in the road and my men are going to secure you, drug you and fly you to your new home. Do I make myself clear?" Shatner was very clear. I didn't like his plan, but I was pretty sure this was the end of the line.

“Ok. I was sure it was going to end like this. I don’t understand what I am. I just have one request.” It did seem like this was going to end badly. The helicopters were at a distance that I hadn’t had much success in controlling with any sort of accuracy. The servicemen in the humvee had painted me with a laser dot, and I could only imagine the size of the hole that would be left when all the choppers dropped their load at the same time. When the highway crew came to repair the road it would make the local papers as the second largest pothole in Saskatchewan.

“Since this isn’t legal, or even quasi-legal, I know I’m not going to get a lawyer. I want to phone my girlfriend. Just to say goodbye. See I keep on leaving her without saying goodbye, and then she thinks I’m being a jerk, and I just want one last chance to prove....”

“Fuck. Okay. Okay. I don’t need your life story. You’ve got ten minutes. Then you’re coming with me, in one piece or a couple hundred. Your choice.” He clicked off the phone. I dialed.

“Jackie, it’s me.”

A long silence.

“Fuck. Seriously? Are you okay? It’s been weeks. I thought you were dead.”

“Dead? Me?” I laughed, trying to put a brave face on my current shitty situation. “Actually, I think this is the end of the road. I’ve got the American army here with four attack helicopters pointing their missiles on me. They’re giving me ten minutes to phone you and then, it looks like you’ll never hear from me again.” My voice had lost all of its false bravado. Explaining the situation to Jackie made it more real.

“What have you been doing the last couple of weeks? I was worried sick.” And I told her the whole story, my life as a hobo, the casino, the RV, the lightning barbecued bear, learning how to move stuff, the CIA agents, but I left out the part about killing them, I just said I escaped. Funny, after the other 6,000 deaths, that I felt anything even verging on remorse about Millie and Alex, both who threatened to kill me. I gave her the password to my on-line banking account and told her to get the money out before they froze the accounts.

“They nuked our apartment. Where are you staying?”

“Ceela went to India to visit her folks, so I’m staying there. It’s nicer than our place, but I miss... shit, I miss you. I can’t believe how much.” A pause. Crying? Nose blowing? I looked up. I didn’t want to cry. Especially in front of the Colonel. The sun was just visible through the clouds, and appeared through my watering eyes to be throbbing. “You bastard. I love...”

The phone went dead. That wasn’t ten minutes. I turned to look at Colonel Shatner and gestured ‘what the fuck?’. I couldn’t get his attention. He was more concerned with his four apache helicopters that were gyrating out of control, pitching wildly like a breakdancer on crack cocaine, crashing into the rich loamy soil of southern Saskatchewan and exploding. Missiles caromed away, and confused by the lack of purpose, retching destruction. I dropped and rolled next to the car. In what seemed like an eternity, ordinance ripped through the sky, one of the explosions sent Shatner flying into the field.

Finally quiet. Still snowing. I walked over to humvee. Corporal Wiggins was desperately trying to restart it.

Nothing. Not even the click of a car low on battery. I went to look for Shatner. He was streaked with blood, lying in the wheat stubble, shaking, trying to unholster his gun as I came closer.

“You. You did this. I need to kill you now.” His eyes were wild. He was clearly going into shock. I gently took the gun from him.

“Look. It wasn’t me. I have no idea what happened, I was on the phone when it quit. And then” I gestured around “all this.” I dropped the gun a few feet away from him. Wiggins ran over with a report that the humvee was dead. Sir. Gotta love the way they drive that respect into the enlisted men. I looked at Shatner, then Wiggins. Shatner tried to speak, but nothing but the gurgling sound of blood filling his lungs came out. I looked at Wiggins. Clearly new at this, he’d not been prepared for seeing his CO die in front of him. Another piece of ordinance went off and we both ducked and cringed.

Silence.

I turned and pointed at my car. “So, I’m just going to be going now ... I’m sure some of your army buddies are going to be along in a bit to assess the situation and pick you up.” He was my age, maybe a little younger, but I put my hand on his shoulder. “Are you going to be alright, soldier?” He was staring at Shatner. He looked at me, confused and scared.

“Yes sir.” He stiffened, and tried to regain his composure. I didn’t want him shooting me in the back in some misguided attempt to be the hero in this situation, so I disabled his gun in his holster and doing a duck and twist motion, got through the barbed wire fence, and walked

back to the car. I circled the car to check for damage and was glad to see that all of the tires were good, and except for a little dust, the lightsucking black finish was still perfect.

When I was just six or seven my dad had a 1961 Chevy Biscayne. I remember it being massive, two toned blue, with restrained swoopy lines, mere vestiges of the wild fins and rocket ship design homage of the late 1950's. Dad was not a fan of automatic transmissions, as he thought they made the driver lazy and inattentive. Driving a standard meant that you had to have all your wits about you. 'I don't need some robot to tell me when the best time to shift. I can feel it. In my bones.' Or something. On this particular road trip he decided to show me another feature of the standard that couldn't be replicated on a car with an automatic transmission - the gravity start. We stopped the car at the top of a long hill, and dad killed the engine and launched into a detailed explanation of linkages, and gear ratios and distributors and sparking. Honestly listened for a few seconds then tuned him out. He was prone to complete, long winded explanations of the ephemera of everyday life.

He turned the key to 'on', not start, put the car in neutral, and we started drifting down the hill. He eased in the clutch, and moved the gear shift into second. He looked over at me, a wild grin on his face.

"You ready?!?" I nodded yes. He popped the clutch, all 1587 kilograms of the car stopped in mid air for just a millisecond, then the engine roared to life, and with the gas pedal floored, leapt forward. These were the days before seatbelts, or course, and me, being little with nothing to

hold onto, was thrown into the dashboard, then smacked back into the seat, mouth gushing blood, and screaming blue murder. Dad was in a panic. He swerved the car to the side of the road and grabbed me.

I got ice cream. Dad made up a story about narrowly missing a mother duck and her 12 cute little babies so that mom wouldn't lose her shit. I learned valuable lessons about cars and women. All in all, a memorable day.

And it was a handy lesson. I got back into the car and tried starting it. Whatever had caused the helicopter and humvee to lose power was affecting this as well. Only one thing to try. I pushed the clutch down, and did a wide sweeping turn so I was pointed down hill. Second gear. Waited. The car rolled ahead. I dropped the clutch. The car lurched and stopped. Fuck. One more try. This time I waited until the car had picked up some speed. For reasons that still don't make any sense to me, I crossed myself. Dropped the clutch, and the car roared to life.

EPILOGUE



At any one time there are roughly one million people in the air. In planes. Not just floating around. Obviously. At least there used to be. That day, that split second, changed everything. All evidence pointed to the mother of all solar storms, a storm so powerful that every single integrated circuit on earth fused and was rendered inoperable. Every plane that was flying at that time, suddenly wasn't flying. Every modern car, train, boat, stopped. Every computer stopped working. All of the memories, photos and data that was on hard drives or solid state drives evaporated.

That first hour was horrible. Three million people with pacemakers grabbed their chests and fell to the ground. A million more people in airplanes saw their vacations cut short. The six million people worldwide in hospital beds watched in horror as all the machines that go ping, stopped going ping.

The Buick was largely unaffected. No radio, of course. And without a starter, the only thing I needed to remember was to park on a hill. The trip back to Vancouver was surreal, hundreds of cars just dead on the side of the road. People confused, and staring at their dead cars. People

waved at me to stop, but I knew there was absolutely nothing I could do to help, so I waved back and kept driving.

I passed a horse and buggy.

That's where this was heading in a hurry. I was expecting that as I got further away from Colonel Shatner, that I'd see an end to the confusion, but it was the opposite. The trip to Vancouver took a day longer than expected, because I had to dip and dodge around all the stopped cars. In three days I was parked outside Jackie's place.

There's a scene in *The Life of Brian* where the commandos from the Judea's People's Front are discussing their plan to kidnap Pilates' wife. They're cursing the Romans, an occupying force. After much discussion, Reg, the leader of the troupe, exasperatedly asks: 'All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?'

Ask the same question, but substitute 'technology' for 'Romans' and the scope of the problem becomes obvious. Three days without information. Three days without the internet. Three days of government paralysis. Electricity. Sanitation. Water. All cities are black holes, a gravitational force that sucks food and everything else from around the world to serve its insatiable hunger. When everything is still flowing into a city it is a marvelous engine, but starve it of the fuel it needs, and it turns on itself, ripping itself apart, gorging on its own entrails.

By the time I'd reached Jackie, the world was already descending the staircase to the basement of human experience. Everyone's imaginary digital money had

disappeared in the sun flare, and commerce was over. Jackie said that the first night had been quiet, but by one in the morning you could hear the windows of the stores being broken, and people starting helping themselves to resources. Smart people took canned goods. The less smart took toilet paper. We took a longer view of the situation and checked out, stole, whatever, all the books from the library on homesteading and living off the grid. Then we raided the West Coast Seeds warehouse and took as many seed packages as we could fit in the car and headed for the hills.

What we didn't know at the time was that the whole world was in the same boat. And that boat was the HMCS Totally Fucked. In the months that followed, the world lost 80% of its population, pushing the number back to about a billion people.

To this day I wonder if I had anything to do with it. It didn't seem reasonable to think that whatever I had could have caused the solar flare. I still had my abilities, and they were handy around the farm, but I was sure they didn't include pulling the finger of a gazillion tonne flaming ball of fusion to cause a global wet fart.

On the bright side, it did solve global warming.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Duane Laird is a Vancouver based writer and professional gymnast. Okay, that last bit is a lie. But seriously, what do you expect from a fiction writer. In these post-truth times, it's easy to forget that there are facts and alternate facts. And if you think I was talking about you in this book, you were wrong. It's all made up.