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## Chaos Management

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Chaos Management

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
(with a concentration in fiction)

by

Terrance Gutberlet

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## What the Law Says

Pete had big muscles. And he liked exercising those big muscles. He liked using them to impose his will on things like weights and furniture and the lids of hard-to-open bottles and jars. And he liked to use his muscles on people. Pete liked to fight people. He was good at it. If he could have, he would've gone around taking whatever he wanted from whoever he wanted because he was bigger and more powerful than most people. But Pete can't go around doing that. It's against the law. The law says you can't go around imposing your will on people, harassing them, taking their stuff. Even if Pete worked really hard and drank a ton of protein shakes to make his muscles big and trained really hard in order to know how to use them, so that he could be in the position to take things from those people who have small muscles and pump their stomachs full of soda

and don't have the know-how to defend themselves, even then, Pete still couldn't go around fighting and taking stuff. The law says it's not fair.

So for most of Pete's life he was satisfied to fight in the boxing ring. He was no slouch. He had a 48-10 record before he bottomed out. Half of the losses were dives, but the other losses were to people born with certain physical characteristics that, no matter how hard Pete trained or worked out or fought, he just couldn't match. Pete consulted a lot of sources, but he found that any stretching regimen that guaranteed to make one's arms longer was a rip-off. And the Make Feet Fast Quick pills he found on the internet? A scam from head to toe. He had to accept that his competitors who had it better than him, who had the longer arms and the quicker feet, well, they had advantages that he would never have.

He fought for cash prizes. They weren't Caesar's Palace-sized prizes, but they were big enough to help Pete get by along with his steady job as a boxing coach at Pop Buford's Gym. But eventually the unsteady job, the fighting, got less and less steady. Pete wasn't getting any younger. It got to the point where he couldn't win anymore. And if you can't win a fight, then you damn sure can't throw a fight. He had to give up his liquid anodrol. His neon-colored muscle shirts weren't only wearing thin but looking pretty baggy. He trained like an Olympian but couldn't get his biceps over 15 inches – flexed! He had trouble keeping up with his bills and some months he couldn't even make rent. He had to take on extra students that he normally would have turned away or referred to someone else. A bunch of flabby-armed momma's boys, all of them. And, worst of all, he couldn't even afford to take out his girl, Jewel, anymore.

Pete had said a dumb thing, a mean, dumb thing to her and was sitting on a bench in the park, hunched over, with his big head in his big mitts, muttering about it, when Tommy Pirelli, a boxing promoter from the old days, showed up.

“Pete?” Pirelli said. “Hey, it’s me, Tommy Pirelli, from the old days.” He slapped Pete on the back. “How the hell you doing, big guy? Wait, don’t answer.” Pirelli’s windbreaker rustled as he crouched for a better look at Pete. “You look terrible. What the hell’s wrong?” Pirelli took off his half-tinted sunglasses. “Let me guess: woman troubles. Am I right?”

Pete sat up, narrowed his eyes, and leaned toward Pirelli. His face was an inch away. Pete pounded his fist in his hand. A few times. His shoulders bulged. So did his neck. But, just like his muscles, Pete shrank suddenly, went back to hunching over, putting his face in his hands, and picking up again with his mutterings.

Pirelli said he was an expert in the arts of love and told Pete to lay it on him. Pete had called Jewel a bad name that he didn’t care to repeat. And for no good reason. She said something about how he wouldn’t lose his bills if he cleaned up the mess in his apartment and it all went downhill from there.

Pirelli eyed the holes in Pete’s shirt. “I know you’ve never been no Liberace, but what, you some kind of deadbeat, some kind of slob nowadays?”

Pete said he’d been too busy training. Pirelli was confused, so he asked Pete a series of questions. Training? Is that all you’ve been doing? For what? Aren’t you retired? What the hell’s the matter with you?

“What’s wrong?” Pete said. “I could get up from this bench right now and take whatever I wanted from any one of these people in this park, including you.”

Pirelli held his hands in the air. “We’re just talking, Pete.”

“See that sucker over there?” Pete pointed at an old man sitting by the fountain who had a child, probably his grandson, balanced on his knee. “Even with an off balanced left I could shatter his jaw.” The old man’s shiny watch flashed in the sun. “Between the watch and his

wallet, I could get my HGH for the whole year. Take Jewel out for steaks every night of the week. I could get a maid.” The old man began to bounce the laughing child on his knee.

“If coldcocking Moses over there makes you feel better,” Pirelli said.

Pete admitted he was tempted, so tempted.

“I’ve got to think there’s something else you can do, though, Pete.”

“If I was an egghead,” Pete said, “I could use my noggin’ to discover something. If I had a big mouth, like you, I could promote matches or call a ball game or something.” Pete puffed out his cheeks a bit and shook his head. “But I can’t use my God-given advantages,” he said. “The law says you can’t take from others, but if I’ve got a big mouth and I’m calling a ball game, then aren’t I taking the broadcasting gig from some other big mouth?”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Pirelli said. “It’s how the world works.”

“Well, it ain’t right. You got winners and losers in fights of every kind. But they say I can’t even play the game, fight in the match. Everyone can compete except for guys like me.”

“Say, Pete,” Pirelli said, seeming to hit upon an idea, “how’s your math?”

Pete frowned at him.

“Do you know how to add and subtract and divide and multiply?”

“Are you trying to call me an idiot?” Pete asked.

“Like you said, you’re no egghead.”

“Of course, I know how to add and subtract,” Pete said.

“What about dividing and multiplying?”

Pete frowned harder at him.



“It’s a joke. Take it easy, big guy,” Pirelli said, massaging Pete’s shoulder. “You still know boxing, don’t you? Talking about your God-given advantages, why don’t you turn them into cash?”

“How?”

Pirelli sat down next to Pete. “Open a business.”

“A business? What do you mean? Like a store? With a cash register?”

“Yes, exactly,” Pirelli said. “Like a store with a cash register.”

“I don’t know anything about business,” Pete said.

“C’mon! You don’t need to know anything about business.”

“Do you want me to hit you?”

“This is no joke,” Pirelli said. “It’s simple stuff. Easy. Like coldcocking Moses over there. You get you some insurance. Rent a unit in some strip mall type of deal. Get your name out there. And then ker-pow! You’ve got business.”

“I don’t have any money for any of that.”

“Don’t sweat it. How’s your credit?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “Fine, I think.”

“Then you can take out a loan.”

“It’s that easy?”

“It’s that easy,” Pirelli said. “Then you’ll be on your way to getting that maid service you want, and the steaks, and your liquid whatever-you-call-it, the steroids and whatnot. Looking good, feeling good, making the little lady happy. You’ll be a champ again, Pete.”

“And what? You going to be my business coach or something?”

“My expertise isn’t free,” Pirelli said. “But why not?”

\* \* \*

So even though Pete didn't know the first thing about business, Pete decided to start a business. A punching bag business. Pirelli showed him how to get insurance, and Pete took out a loan. He leased a carpeted 25x30 foot strip mall storefront between a bail bond agency and a cell phone repair shop. He had decisions to make. He told Pirelli he wasn't sure what to buy first. A big sign for out front with a fist logo or the cash register? Pirelli said it was up to him. So Pete settled on the cash register.

By this time, Pete had brought Jewel aboard as a bookkeeper. The two of them were in Pete's brand-new empty storefront, standing behind the counter. Jewel had her arms around Pete's neck, pulling him toward her for a kiss.

"Whoa-ho!" Pirelli said, averting his eyes. "Is this a business or some kind of swingers joint?"

Pete turned from Jewel and straightened his blazer. "Hey, coach," he said. "I got the cash register." He patted it.

Jewel hooked her arm in Pete's. "Afternoon, Mr. Pirelli." She tugged on the blazer. "He's dressing the part," she said.

“You, Jewel,” Pirelli said before whistling, “are like a blonde Sophia Loren. A bit smaller in the bust, but, hey, we can’t all be perfect. Am I right? But, yeah, Pete, he’s alright. Like a young Ernest Borgnine. Hell of a couple, you two.”

“Fat lot of good looking the part’s doing,” Pete said. He then gently unhooked his arm from Jewel. “I got this cash register,” Pete said, “but I don’t have any money in it. And look at this.” He held his arm out and shook the sleeve. “See how baggy this thing is?” he asked Jewel.

“Oh, stop it,” Jewel said. “You look great. Much better than in your gym shirts.”

“The thing is,” Pirelli said, “you got to get more than a cash register, Pete. You got a name for this joint yet?”

“Do you?” Pete asked.

Pirelli laughed once. “Well, Pete,” he said. “That really should be your call. But whatever it is, you got to be creative. You got to make an impression, a hell of an impression. It’s the first thing the customer knows about your place. Think of it like the first punch. It needs to land.”

“How about Pete’s Punching Bags?”

Pirelli winced and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “Pete’s Punching Bags? You don’t have anything with a little more follow-through?”

“I like it,” Jewel said. “Is it really that bland? I think it’s cute.”

Before Pirelli could answer, Pete said it was settled. Pete’s Punching Bags it would be. After getting the sign with the fist logo, Pete bought the inventory. Punching bags mostly, but some other boxing equipment, too, that he and Jewel put in the display case of the counter.

“It’s all good to go,” Pete said to Pirelli.

“Good to go? Pete, big guy, c’mon. You haven’t even arranged your inventory yet. You got to put your best, most top-of-the-line, most expensive items up front in the window. And

what in the hell are those items anyhow?” Pirelli looked around at the punching bags in the shop. “There’s not a single item in here with a price tag on it, Pete. How’ll the customers know what they can buy?” Pirelli held out his arms. “And have you even given a thought to advertising yet?”

So Pirelli helped Pete work up some advertisements. Pete left some flyers at Pop Buford’s gym and at the other gyms in the county. He got in the phonebook. Then he got all the rest of the stuff one needs in order to sell things. Product tags and shelves and such.

Few customers came to the store at first, but then a few more came, and then a few more, and after a year or so Pete had a steady business going. He still wasn’t making much money, though. Pirelli told him not to worry. Most businesses don’t make much in the first couple years.

“The first couple years?” Pete had Pirelli grabbed by the collar. He pulled him halfway over the counter, almost bumping heads with Jewel. “You didn’t say anything about not making money for the first couple years.”

“Pete – “

“I can’t keep going on like this.” He was shaking Pirelli at that point. “I had to train a kid at the gym that pissed himself he was so weak and scared. And I had to clean up his piss! You know what that’s like?”

“Pete,” Jewel said. “Let him go.”

“No,” he said to her. “You let him go.”

“That might be the most childish thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“What say you calm down?” Pirelli asked. “Alright, big guy?” Pete let him loose and Pirelli put his hand on Pete’s bicep. “Listen, Pete, you didn’t build those guns overnight, did

you? Of course the hell not. It took time. Even with the ‘roids, it took time. Don’t worry about it. You’ll be bringing home the bacon soon enough.”

Pirelli was right. Soon enough Pete did start to bring home more bacon. He brought home enough bacon that he had to get some help. He hired a glasses-wearing kid from the gym, one of the flabby-armed momma’s boys, to work after school and on weekends. The kid was a good salesman.

“You can’t fight for shit, Noodles.” That’s what Pete called the boy. “But you sure can talk people into things.”

“Muscles aren’t the only things you can use to fight,” Noodles said. “You don’t need muscles to be a millionaire.”

“Don’t need muscles to fight? Listen to this kid.” Pete put Noodles into a headlock and flexed his biceps under his chin. “18 inches. 16.5 unflexed.”

New business strategies were suggested. Pirelli floated the idea that Jewel should put on her bathing suit and stand outside next to the road while holding a promotional sign.

“Like a ring girl,” he said. “Why hide this angel inside?”

“What do you say, babe?” Pete put his hands on her hips. “It’s a good idea, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely not,” Jewel said. “And I don’t think this is the kind of store where that sort of thing would work either, Pete.”

“Baloney,” Pirelli said.

“Why not?” Pete asked. “I would stop if I saw you.”

“That’s sweet, Pete, but people aren’t going to drive by and think ‘20% off punching bags? I should stop by and get one! Especially because there’s a half-naked chick waving a sign

out front.' I'm not trying to be mean, but only people who already want a punching bag are going to come here."

"Have it your way, babe," Pete said. "But you've got a lot to learn about business."

\* \* \*

Eventually, word got around that Pete had the goods. He could raise his prices a bit, take some vacations with Jewel on the weekends, leave the store to Noodles to look after. But it was not to be. A newer, bigger punching bag business came to town. And they sold more than punching bags. They sold boxing gloves. They sold entire boxing rings. They called themselves The Boxing Authority. They promised "can't beat prices", and held good on that promise. Pete, with his small, independent store, couldn't beat their prices. It wasn't long before Pete saw the changes in the store and Jewel saw the changes in the ledger. Fewer customers, fewer profits.

Pete called what he termed an emergency meeting. He was jumping rope, and still wearing his blazer, when Pirelli got there.

"What do I do now?" Pete asked, still jumping rope. "How do we beat them?"

Pirelli took a deep breath. "You don't know how to make a bomb, do you?"

"I don't know how to make a bomb," Pete said. "But I could kick their ass."

“We talked about this,” Pirelli said. “The law says you can’t kick the ass of your competitor. Not physically, at least.”

“I can kick their ass in another way?”

“We can try. Tell him, Noodles.”

Noodles removed his glasses. “In business. The law doesn’t say anything about kicking ass in business.”

“I don’t know if that’s the right way to think about this,” Jewel said. “I don’t like how we’re talking as if violence is the solution here.”

“It’s not violence, doll face,” Pirelli said. “It’s *legal*. How could something violent be legal?” The corners of his mouth turned up just a bit.

“It’s legal violence,” Jewel replied. “I don’t understand, though, why they had to move in right across the street.”

“It’s good business,” Noodles said. “How can a customer justify coming in here when right across the street are better products at cheaper prices?”

“How do we do it?” Pete asked. He sped up the pace of his rope jumping. “How do we kick their fucking ass?”

Jewel held her hand out. “Pete, stop for a second.”

He didn’t.

“Ugh,” she said. She looked at Pirelli and then at Noodles. “Now he’s ignoring me,” she said.

“If they want to undercut,” Pete said, finally stopping. “I’ll give them the uppercut!”  
Then he started shadow boxing.

“Well, you got two options,” Pirelli said. “And it depends on which ass you want to kick. The first option is to kick the ass of the competition.”

“Let’s do it,” Pete growled. He started jumping rope again.

“Not so fast, Pete. The first way you can try to beat them is by *lowering* your prices. You’ll get more customers, but less money. At first, at least. After a while, though, it *might* even out. But you do run the risk of going out of business if you go too low.”

“Going out of business,” Jewel said with one eye on the jump rope, “is not an option.”

“Well, the second option is to kick the ass of the *customers*. By *raising* the prices.” Pirelli crossed his arms and grabbed his chin and waited for Pete to respond. Pete was counting his jumps. “There’s a third option,” Pirelli said. “You could, in a way, take a dive and lose the fight by selling the store. And if you ask me, and you are, I’d say that’s probably best...”

At that point Pete was jumping rope at a psychopathic rate. The rope thwacked against the floor, and, raising her voice over the counting and grunting and thwacking, Jewel answered for him, saying that she wanted to help the customers, not kick their asses.

So in spite of the risks, they cut prices. And it worked. Word travels fast and the word was that Pete had the goods again. Customers came back. Noodles continued to sell them things they didn’t really want but couldn’t pass up. And Pete relaxed enough to take Jewel on another trip. He even bought a ring for her, a jewel for my Jewel he told Pirelli. Pirelli told him to keep the receipt, as once again the good times were replaced with bad ones.

“What do you want me to do about it, Jewel?” Pete asked, flinging his blazer on the counter. “There aren’t any fucking customers!”

“All I did,” she said, “was ask if you’ve seen the power bill. It’s important”



Pete responded by yelling. Not at her, though. At least he didn't think so. He was just yelling in general, but Jewel saw it differently and told him to stop.

"Last time you were complaining about me ignoring you," he said. "Now you're complaining about me not ignoring you enough. Which is it, Jewel? What do you want?"

And Jewel responded by yelling, too. But there was no question as to who she was yelling at. She was yelling at Pete. She yelled at him to "stop it!" Then she said he needed to get himself together. Then she left.

Noodles, meanwhile, who was taking night classes in business at the local community college by then, had been busying himself with Lee Iacocca's *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* He lifted his head up. "Pete," he said. "You're going to need to be nicer to her than that."

"Listen to the kid," Pirelli said. "Or you'll never get to give her that ring."

Pete didn't listen. "Look!" he shouted. He threw the local paper at Noodles. It was opened to an ad that compared the prices of The Boxing Authority and Pete's Punching Bags.

"Smart," Noodles said.

Pete finally crashed then. "They'll have bigger business muscles," he mumbled, slumping against the counter, "than I'll ever have."

Pirelli agreed. "Like it's God-given."

Pete got back to jumping rope. He would do it for days at a time in the backroom of the store. And that was it, just jumping rope. That's all he would do. Then, one afternoon, quite out of nowhere, he dropped the rope and went to the cash register. "Noodles," he said. "Get the label gun." He was panting. He proclaimed they were going to have to raise prices.

With prices raised, the fight continued, and they made some money again. And then they lost the money right back. Word travels even faster when the word is about bad things, and

though everyone knew Pete had the goods, they lamented that the goods cost too much. It was robbery, they said.

“Hate to say it, Pete,” Pirelli said, “but the next step is to start cutting overhead.”

“What does that mean?”

“You need to fire some people. And Noodles is your best employee.”

Pete nodded his head.

“I don’t think you understand,” Pirelli said. “You can’t fire Noodles.”

“What? Are you – I’m kind of in the doghouse, coach.”

“Well, you can ask Jewel if she’d rather starve to death or if she’d rather sit at home while you run the store. I’d sure as hell rather sit home.”

“Noodles!” Pete shouted.

Pirelli sighed.

It kept going downhill for Pete and Pete’s Punching Bags. At Pirelli’s prodding, Jewel agreed to walk outside the store by the road, wearing heels and a bathing suit and a frown, holding up a sign that advertised 15% off, then 25% off, and then 30% off. She eventually convinced Pete it wasn’t working, and partly out of good business sense but also probably to spare herself the indignity of standing half-naked in the fumes of passing cars, she came up with an idea to offer a free punching bag to anyone who could beat Pete in a boxing match. That, too, ended in failure, though. Pete left a man bloodied on the floor of the store, and that was the end of that promotion. He blew through whatever last few dollars he could scrounge on a boxing video game, a body fat analysis machine, and one of those machines that turned pennies into ovals. He started stocking protein bars and energy drinks and then potato chips and sodas.

Pirelli opened a bag of potato chips. “I think, Pete,” he began to say, “it’s time to throw in the towel.” He crunched on a potato chip. “You put up a hell of a fight, champ, but now you just got to worry about making it through the final round without getting KO’d.”

Pete was soaked in sweat, working a punching bag on which he’d written “The Boxing Authority” in black marker. The store was a mess, the merchandise all mixed up with torn open envelopes, bits of newspaper, empty energy drinks, and, most uncharacteristically, bags and bags of empty potato chips that Pete had eaten. And quite the opposite of looking smaller without his supplements, Pete actually looked a little chubbier from the junk food.

“You got to get what you can before you lose it all,” Pirelli said. “Hell, if you want, you can even start over. All the best have failed, gone bankrupt even, at some point. It’s the name of the game. But they pick themselves up from the mat, dust off their trunks, and fight again.”

Pete pounded the bag. The chain rattled sharply.

“I know better than to bore you with the details, but, you see, in the market they got these forces. They’re wild, like throwing haymakers blindfolded, and out of the businessman’s control. So, yeah, there’s some hope, a tiny bit at least.” Pirelli paused. “But your best bet,” he said softly, “might just be to focus on coaching again.”

Pete went into a rage, attacking the bag with bursts of quick punches. Over the racket of the chain and the thumping of fist on bag, Pete told Pirelli to come back tomorrow. “You’ll see,” he said. “I’m going to crush the competition.”

When Pirelli left, Jewel noticed something in the corner, a black velvet box stuck in a boxing glove. She picked it up. It was the ring Pete had bought for her.

“Is this...”

Pete kept hitting the bag.

Jewel walked over to him, stood on the other side of the bag. She put her hand on it so to try to get Pete to stop for a second. He did. “I know you’re embarrassed,” she said, fingering the ring without putting it on. “It’s okay, though, Pete. We can get through this.”

“Who?” he snapped. “You and Noodles?”

“What?”

“You heard me,” he said. “I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

“Noodles? What the hell –” Jewel struggled to find the words. She shook her head. “I don’t know where you got that from, but he’s just – You know what,” she said. “I don’t have to, I shouldn’t have to explain that to you. I have no idea how you came up with that. There’s nothing going on with – That’s it.” She put the ring back on the box and placed it on the counter. “I want to help you,” she said, “but I can only take so many...hits from you.”

Jewel waited for him to say something, but he didn’t. She walked out. And the punching bag rattled.

\* \* \*

The next day, at The Boxing Authority, Pete towered over the manager. He shook his fist at him, cursed him, told him he never backed down from a punch from anybody, not from Honey Bear Glover, not from Freddie “Sweet Feet” Sanchez, not even from Giant Joe Tolliver.

The manager frowned. “Mr. Knight will be right out,” the manager said.

The sliding doors opened then. Pirelli walked in followed by Jewel “Here,” Pete said.

“This is my –” Pete struggled for the term. “My money coach. Mr. Tommy Pirelli.”

The manager frowned. “Money coach?” Another man, in sweats and with a towel around his neck, who nonetheless looked as fresh as if he’d just come out of the shower, had made his way through the rows of punching bags and was standing behind the manager. “This guy’s insane,” the manager told him. The manager looked to Ponzi. “Are you going to calm your champ down or is this a job for the cops?”

“You better wise up, Pete,” Pirelli told Pete.

“This time it’s my way,” Pete said. “I’m going to crush the competition my way.”

“Peter, please,” Jewel said. “You can’t punch the –”

“Your way will land you in jail, Pete.”

The manager nodded to the cashier, and the cashier picked up the phone and dialed.

Mr. Knight stepped forward at that point. “I’m glad you called earlier, Mr. –”

“Pete.” He pounded his fist into his palm.

“Mr. Pete? Right. I’m Jim Knight, owner of the The Boxing Authority, and something of an amateur boxer myself.” Mr. Knight sized up Pete. “From one pug to another, I’m going to make you an offer for your store. I’ll tell you right now, it might not be fair, but it’s the best you’re going to get. And, as far as I can see it, you really don’t have any other options. And I can see far. I know business, and unlike with boxing, I’m a real pro, so you might as well come to the office in the back, I’ll get your signature, and you can move on with your life.”

“If you can take my money because you’re better at using business than me, then I’ll take it back because I’m better at using my muscles than you.”

Pete stomped past Mr. Knight toward the cash register.

Jewel tugged on Pirelli sleeve. “Stop him, Mr. Pirelli. Tell him something, please. He doesn’t understand. He’s so mad that he can’t distinguish –”

“The difference between business and assault?” Pirelli asked.

Pete started yelling nonstop by that point. The manager was blocking the register, still telling Jewel and Pirelli to calm this idiot down, and Jewel pleaded with Pete to please stop yelling, but he didn’t. He lunged at the manager.

When the police arrived, Pete had the manager in a headlock and was digging around in the cash register with his free hand while the cashier and Jewel were trying to free the manager. Pete started throwing elbows, knocking the cashier off him, and Jewel, too. His elbow caught Jewel in the nose. She was bleeding. And crying. When the officers got to him, they broke his hold with a couple smacks of the nightstick, and they put Pete in cuffs.

“They were going to take everything I had,” Pete said. “They were going to cripple me. I was defending myself! The law says I have the right to defend myself, doesn’t it?”

Mr. Knight had watched it all from a distance. “The law,” he told Pete, “does give you the right to defend yourself. But, unfortunately for you, you haven’t been given the right muscles, the right tools of self-defense. But me? *I* have.” He pointed to his head. “Business sense. The brain is the biggest, and best muscle. That’s what I fight with.”

“You should be arresting *him*,” Pete said to the officer. He pointed at Mr. Knight. “You hear him? He’s guilty! He admitted it. He fought me first!”

The officers asked Jewel if she wanted to press charges. She didn’t need to hesitate. She told them no right away. Pete told her to bail him out, but she didn’t need to hesitate here either. She nodded her head no.

The police had to drag Pete to the door.

Pirelli was tending to Jewel's nose. "He was punching way above his weight," he said.

"In business," Mr. Knight said, stretching his towel, "there are no weight classes."

## Chaos Management

Miss Denise Billups, the new history teacher, told us about  $x^3$  in the teacher's lounge. Then Mrs. Billups started crying.  $x^3$  called Billups a bitch, the second time this week, but this time she shouted the curse, head snaking from side to side to posture a menacing attitude, finger stabbing the air, an emphasis on the initial 'B' sound. *Bitch. As in Call my mom, I don't give a fuck, bitch!* I might've cried, too, but not over hurt feelings. Anyone at Xavier P. Cochran Math and Science Charter High School who's had  $x^3$  as a student can tell you how damagingly loud she is. That's why I privately nicknamed her  $x^3$ . The volume of a normal student was  $x$ . So the volume of  $x^3$ ... it's hard to imagine unless you've had her. Some might call it ear-splitting, but I'd find a better comparison in a shockwave. Or a concussion blast. Or a natural force.



$x^3$  was explosive, but, as Mr. Hammond, the chemistry teacher put it, she was only one of many volatile elements in the classroom, ready to combust at the slightest change in the environment. And those volatile elements, in my observations, reacted most often to one of the six following changes in the environment:

1. Source of Energy: Anything or anyone who acts to restrict the intake of sunflower seeds, chewing gum, and artificial cheese-flavored snack food is likely to provoke a destructive reaction and does so at their own risk.
2. Composition of Class Atmosphere: Methane flare-ups are unavoidable, but mold odor is not. Air fresheners are essential to maintain order and combat student comments about teacher hygiene.
3. Temperature: A broken thermostat is a day of classes lost.
4. Light: Even if the windows are frosted, a sunny day increases the potential for agitation, often manifesting in a plague-like avoidance of seats.
5. Competition for Resources: Much of the classroom theft is petty (a pencil, a worksheet, the teacher's stapler or paper clips), but at times more valuable items are stolen (cell phone charger, a binder filled with the semester's notes, a graphing calculator, all the way up to wallets (the shiftiest student in the school, -100, proves particularly adept at monetary theft)).
6. Living Space: The most important factor in determining the stability of the classroom environment is person-to-person interaction. Nothing was more likely to set off the destructive force of the students than people – other students, teachers, staff, whoever.

Most of the teachers had filed out of the lounge. Billups had been offered sympathy, consoled with humorous anecdotes that saw the return of her big smile to between her, I confess, charmingly rounded cheeks. She stayed talking with Mr. Khaki, which was not his real name but a nickname the students had given on account of his do-good, squeaky-clean manner and frequent moralizing; the faculty also thought it amusing, and in private they, too, addressed him as Khaki. I was waiting for my tea to finish heating in the microwave.

“So what made her call you that?” Khaki asked.

Billups started shaking her head. “The girl was messing with another girl about her crooked teeth, and I asked to her stop. ‘Be peaceful,’ I said. And she said, ‘Make me.’ I told her I was going to have to write her up and if she didn’t stop I’d have to call her mom. And then she called me a bitch and stomped out of the classroom.”

“Did you raise your voice?” Khaki asked

“No, I was nice about it, you know, like I’m-willing-to-let-it-go-if-you-stop kind of an attitude.”

Khaki considered this. For a moment, it seemed as if he might be reevaluating his assumptions about how to handle defiance, but he soon reassured himself of his pedagogical philosophy, no doubt wondering if Billups didn’t send the student an inadvertently aggressive, authoritarian, or provocative tone or gesture to upset the student. “It’s just terrible,” he said, “you know? What these kids have to deal with.”

Never mind what Miss Billups just had to deal with. Proving that she wasn’t without moralizing-bullshit-detection instruments, Billups ignored him.

“If I had another job ready,” she said, still shaking her head. “I’d quit. The not wanting to work thing, the constant talking, I can deal with that. It’s just the violence, man.” She was

looking at the corner of the room, twirling one of her dreadlocks. “The only thing left for them to do is to hit me.” She put on her glasses. “Just got to keep telling myself *peace and love, Denise, peace and love.*” Then she swept her hands from her feet to her head, indicating her petite frame. “And look at me. If I had to defend myself, I’d have no shot. Some of those kids are giants.”

Mr. Khaki smiled and nodded his head and agreed that it was tough, but he gently reminded Billups that these kids didn’t have a choice in how they acted. Some of them were even sabotaged by inadequate diets. He even went so far as to say that he’d find it hard to learn, too, if he was chemically unprepared for it by say, for instance, being drunk.

Mr. Hammond reminded Khaki that he was a chemistry teacher, and “an empty stomach,” he said, “isn’t the same as being drunk. Besides,” he added, “with 95% of the student body qualifying for school breakfast, hardly a kid here has to go hungry during the school day.” Hammond must have known that Khaki would counter with another cause for negative behavior, a cause that should be remedied in an ideal world, so the seasoned veteran closed the conversation, one that could go in endless circles, by saying that, “We’re not here to punish them for having challenges, you know, but we’re not here to excuse all of their choices, either.”

Khaki wasn’t only too kind and forgiving, he was also young. And yet, despite these two detriments in managing an Xavier P. Cochran classroom, it was probable he would *not* be one of the exiting teachers in the school’s 40% average turnover rate. Idealists like him usually lasted three years or so, giving him one more year, at least – unless they developed a healthy dose of cynicism – before conceding that they, and not their approach, of course, had failed.

“Mr. Dod,” Billups said, looking at me now, her voice having regained its girlish quality. “They like this for you, too?”

“They’re like that for everyone,” I said, turning my back to them and removing the tea from the microwave. “But if they sense weakness, which in these classrooms means showing warmth and kindness, then they’re worse.”

The bell rang.

“Well, how do you deal with it?” Billups asked.

Someone in the hallway shouted, “Don’t touch me!” There was laughter, then the sound of something banging into a locker, a student wearing a backpack judging by the diversity of noises and their pitch and volume, followed by a round of ooh-ing.

“I don’t smile, I don’t joke,” I said, lifting the tea bag up and down in the mug. “I don’t try to get to know them, and I most certainly am not their friend. I just try to teach.” I stood up and began to walk out of the room. “Some days it’s impossible. Then all you can do is go and sit at your desk and just watch to make sure they don’t kill each other or destroy the classroom.”

Khaki was frowning, a questioning look on his face. “You’re lucky they don’t have a merit-based pay scale here.”

I shrugged. “There’s a reason why they don’t,” I said. “If teacher retainment was left up to the test scores, they’d lose double the teachers that they lose already.”

“So you just accept the chaos,” Billups said to no one in particular.

If she had asked, I would have corrected her. The classrooms only seemed to be filled with chaos. Because the behavior of the students was so destructive and disorderly, and because most teachers equated disorder with chaos, they made the logical conclusion that there was, indeed, chaos in the classroom. This is a fallacy. Disorder is part of the natural order. It’s the way of the entire universe. It is not chaos. The universe is characterized by rising entropy, an ever-growing disorder. Stars and species and cells break down, are destroyed, and their matter sent

elsewhere every second. But this destruction and disorder is *ordered* – by *laws*. One can predict the outcome of anything. One only needs data and a way of calculating that data. Similarly, a seemingly chaotic classroom was, in my belief, an ordered environment, predictable and measurable.

The time of day or year, the facial expressions, the words, and the behavior of the students upon entering the classroom were all vectors one could observe in order to accurately predict whether or not  $x^3$ , or her yes-girl,  $\cos x^3$ , would insult the crooked teeth of a meeker student like  $\pi^2$ . One could predict whether or not  $\theta$  (Theta) or her friend  $\vartheta$  (Theta Alternate), who could admittedly be sweet and helpful, would make a scene if asked to stop talking, or if a subtler measure would be needed to refocus them (or if refocusing them was a hopeless endeavor). One could monitor  $2500^\circ$  - a relatively good-natured but maddening student so nicknamed because  $2500^\circ$  was the temperature at which steel melted – for signs of mischief that might result in an experiment with the pressure of the classroom fire extinguisher or a study in the velocity and number of molecules necessary for a pencil and its point to pierce and become lodged in the ceiling tile. If a lesser paper ball basketball player like 30%, named for his peak shooting average, succeeded in netting three shots in a row into the classroom wastebasket, then the competitive spirit of the most skilled player,  $\alpha$  (alpha), would surely lead him to unleash a torrent of shots in order to restore the paper ball basketball hierarchy; and if  $\alpha$  happened to experience an off day, then average shooters like \$.02, so named for his uninvited opinions, would feel encouraged to try and improve their standing by launching shots of their own.

The meticulous teacher, or the teacher with a good memory, would begin to see patterns emerge. The volume of paper balls one found on the floor would be the lowest in the fall months, during football season, and would peak in May, the beginning of the NBA playoffs. Similarly,

the trends for classroom fistfights saw a greater frequency of outbreaks in December and January, the months before and after Christmas vacation, and in the warmer months of August and May. Classroom shoving matches, inversely, occurred in greater frequency in months like November and February, months more deeply embedded in the school year and its nominal strictures on behavior (except for H, or Hydrogen, who I named after the element because of its extremely low boiling point). Shouting matches, however, being ever-present, were better measured by the week, averaging between two to five depending on the teacher and the composition of students in a given class (if one of the students was  $\varphi$  – phi or the golden ratio, which was used to explain the geometry of a spiral –that average would bump up by two because of his penchant for aggravating the agitated). In those arguments, and in normal speech, a class of twenty averaged fifteen “fucks” or variations thereof (“mother fucker”, “fuckhead”, etc.), ten “bitches”, and three “faggots” or “pussies” (used interchangeably). A class of twenty also averaged six failing grades, seven different suspended students, three expelled students, one pregnancy, and one arrest. The most troubling trend, though, pointed to a stabbing or a baseball bat-led beating of a student, or teacher, every two years. Last year we didn’t have one.

\* \* \*

At the beginning of the second quarter, there was little improvement in Miss Billups' situation.  $x^3$  was still a daily source of trouble. The other students had even tried to plant in Billups' file cabinet an unopened box of Phillies Blunts, which some of the students would strip of its tobacco and replace with marijuana, in an apparent attempt to frame her as a marijuana smoker herself. Wisely, she had kept a vigilant watch over her classroom and was able to catch the perpetrator, - 100, as he was dropping the object in a file cabinet drawer. Things being as tenuous as they were for Billups, she asked me to sit in the back of her classroom to identify the causes of her failures. I didn't have to observe one of her classes to know what she needed to do differently. I already knew, but my opinion, of course, would carry more weight if I could provide her with specific evidence.

"Hey, what's Dod doing here?" asked  $e = mc^2$ , a student who was rather intelligent but rather quick to cry foul over a perceived injustice.

Billups ignored him.

"Yeah, you lost?"  $30\%$  asked.

"This ain't science class."  $\theta$  said.

"Shh. Shh," Billups said, motioning with her hands to settle down.

"This is history, Dod."  $\vartheta$  said.

"Everyone, take out a piece of paper," Billups said over the rabble.

"Mr. Dod, you okay?"  $\alpha$  said. "Dude can't even find his own classroom."

"Maybe it time to retire,"  $\$.02$  said.

"Why doesn't she go to your classroom and keep an eye on you?"  $e = mc^2$  asked.

"Okay, that's enough," Billups said more firmly.

Then  $x^3$  said to Billups, "Mind your own business!"

Billups, in that peculiar type of enervated surprise that causes one to lean backwards, opened her eyes wide, her whole body seeming to ask how someone could be so obtuse as to question how this was her business. She put her marker on the white board ledge. “How is it not my business?” Her tone became indignant, but she caught herself and returned to speaking more deliberately. “If anyone continues to disrupt class, you *will* get written up and I *will* call your parent.”

“Fuck you!”  $x^3$  said. “And your stinky ass hair!”

Billups silently went to her desk and took a conduct referral form from the drawer. She began filling it in.

“What’s the matter, Dod? Can’t you answer – “

“I’m only here to watch,” I finally said. “Ignore me.”

Several of the students clicked their tongues. Some of them mumbled. Billups scrambled to finish filling out the conduct form and went to hand it to  $x^3$ .

$x^3$  pushed herself up from the desk as loudly as she could. She bumped Billups on her way out of the classroom, eliciting a surprised gasp from the teacher as she regained her balance against the board. A round of “oohs” and “damns” came from the class. Billups’ eyes watered.

“Damn, man. Look,”  $\alpha$  said. “She’s going to cry again.”

The students started laughing.

“Hey, she *is* going to cry!”  $\cos x^3$  said.

“You all need to shut up and let Miss Billups teach,”  $\theta$  said. She was talkative but generally a decent girl.

“Yeah, stop fucking around,”  $\vartheta$  added.



Billups was able compose herself, and she gave the write-up to another student, telling her to bring it the vice principal. I got up, too. I didn't need to see any more. Three minutes was enough of a sample size to tell her what needed to change.

"Everything okay, Miss Billups?" I discreetly asked.

The students were taking out their pieces of paper, bargaining with each other over pencils, opening bags of Cheetos and sunflower seeds, settling in if not settling down.

Billups dramatically exhaled in an effort to prove her composure by showing levity. "Yes, Mr. Dod. Thank you." And she picked up her marker and began to conduct her class. "We're going to talk about Colonel Custer and the – "

"He's the dude from KFC!" \$.02 said.

Miss Billups shook her head and grinned.

And H, with apparently strong feelings about his fast-food chicken, shouted "Man, fuck KFC!"

Billups broke in, trying to take back control, while endangering herself with another misstep. "Yeah, Colonel Custer, that's right, founder of KFC, fired the shot heard 'round the world at the rival Popeye's militia."

"Popeye's militia's is a bunch of bitches," \$.02 said.

"Fuck you! You don't know shit about..."

Later in the day, on the way to the teacher's lounge during my lunch period, I saw Khaki through the open door of his classroom. He was explaining his new reward system to the students. Students who met certain goals would receive a bite-sized candy bar. A percentage flashed in my mind – 10% – as to the probability of this working successfully. I didn't have to wait long to see how it turned out.

“I don’t need your candy,” -100 said. “I have my own.”

“Yeah, Khaki,”  $e = mc^2$  said. “They’re only like two pennies at the Dollar Store.”

$\varphi$  unwrapped a bite-sized candy of his own and let the wrapper float to the floor. He put the candy in his mouth, and with his mouth full he said, “That’s a bullshit award, Khaki.”

The other students started laughing and hooting and hollering. Then approximately half of the class stood up and unwrapped their personal candies, throwing or dropping the wrappers to the ground in imitation of  $\varphi$ . Amidst the descent of fluttering paper, Khaki nodded his head knowingly, as if realizing that he should have seen this reaction coming. He saw me watching and poked his head out of the doorway.

“Candy might be little too juvenile,” he said, evincing once again that he believed it not to be the fault of his approach but only of the implementation.

When I entered the teacher’s lounge, Billups was there waiting for me.

“Well, lay it on me, Mr. Dod,” she said. “What can I do? I tried to be firm. You see me? I thought I was firm.”

“You were,” I said. “But – “

“It was when she pushed me, wasn’t it?” Billups spread her arms out and threw her head back. She was frustrated with herself. “It may not have looked like it but that hurt. She’s a strong little bitch,” she said, and quickly added, “Excuse me.”

“It wasn’t just that. There was the sarcastic joke right before I left. And there are things you can do thing to prevent it from getting to that point where the student insults you,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that, you... Well, when you were told to mind your own business, you got defensive. And I understand, it’s frustrating to get talked to like that, but that’s what most of

these students thrive on. Confrontation. You can't give it to them. You need to cut yourself off. Emotionally. When they were insulting me, I didn't say a word. Now, there was a time when I wouldn't have been able to handle that, keeping my mouth shut, but I've learned that you have to. You either cut yourself off, or you get even madder and meaner and more intimidating than them. Then confrontation works. You have to be real, as they say."

"Well, I'm not the shouting type."

"I sensed as much," I said. "The other option is to not take it personal. Or to quit."

"I got bills," she said. She sat down at the table and seemed to be thinking something over. "How can I not take it personal?" she asked. "You heard the thing about my dreads."

I sighed, realizing it was going to take her awhile, if she ever got there.

At that moment, Hammond threw open the door with Khaki following close behind.

"Jesus," Billups said. "What happened?"

Khaki had his hand to his mouth. He removed it to reveal a bloody lip. "There was a fight," he said, showing the blood on his teeth.

"Those little mother –" Billups whispered before reverting back to "Peace and love, Denise. Peace and love." She grabbed some paper towels, moistened them under the faucet, and handed them to Khaki.

"I told him it's not worth it," Hammond said to me. "It's a noble thing. No doubt. But the school's not going to expel anyone over it." He shook his head. "Enrollment."

"What happened exactly?" I asked.

"There was a fight in my class," Khaki said, his voice a little muffled with the busted lip. Apparently,  $\phi$  and the much bigger 2500° got into a fight over a Snicker's bar. 2500° would have

slaughtered  $\varphi$  if Khaki hadn't intervened. Maybe. Maybe not. At any rate, it was like Mr. Hammond observed, noble.

"It's not worth it," Hammond said again. "I mean, you *might* get Worker's Comp, but..."

"You need to pick your battles," I said.

"Bingo," Hammond said, pointing.

\* \* \*

The third quarter saw things get worse for Billups. During one class, as Billups told us in the teacher's lounge, when she had her back to the students, someone took the opportunity to steal an unopened pack of dry erase markers from Billups' desk. When Billups found out, she said that whoever took them needed to return them. As usual, no one spoke up. Billups said she would leave the room, allowing whoever stole the markers the chance to anonymously place them on Billups' desk.  $x^3$  then claimed that she stole them.

"What are you going to do about it?"  $x^3$  asked.

"Is that what you want to do with your life?" Billups asked with impatience. "Be a criminal? A retardant to society?"

The class oohed.

"You can't call her a retard!"  $e = mc^2$  said.

“She didn’t call her a retard,”  $\pi^2$  said, coming to Billups’ defense.

$x^3$  said as she stood up from her seat and glared at  $\pi^2$ . “I’ll punch you in the face, too.”

“I did not call you a retard,” Billups said. “If you were listening you would have –”

Then  $x^3$  got inches away from Billups’ face. “I’ll fuck you up. Bitch.”

Billups sent for the principal and the vice principal. They dealt with  $x^3$ , and, since they were there, they searched everyone’s bag for the markers. They were not found in  $x^3$ ’s backpack. They were found in  $\cos x^3$ ’s bag.  $x^3$  had simply wanted to give Billups a hard time.  $x^3$  was sent home and suspended.

In that same class, after  $x^3$  had left, Billups’ students held a mild uprising. Facing the board and with her back to the class again, the students began throwing paper balls at her. After ignoring the first two or three, she kept trying to turn around quickly enough, after each paper ball landed at her feet or hit her back or her neck in order to catch the student who was throwing the balls, but she was unable to. At that time, she didn’t bother asking who did it because she had learned, at least, that no one would snitch. But, as evidenced by the fact that she put up a fight for her markers (only \$7.00 at Office Depot) and that she exacerbated  $x^3$  by suggesting she would become a criminal, Billups still hadn’t figured out how to let things go. So this time she asked if she could watch me conduct one of my classes.

“Hey, Dod, why’s Billups sitting in the back of your classroom?”  $e = mc^2$  asked.

“Yeah, what’s *she* doing here?” asked  $\varphi$ . “I heard she’s calling people retard.”

“Miss Billups,” I said quickly, “is here to observe me as part of an evaluation. You’ve seen these sorts of things before, teachers and administrators observing each other, so ignore it.” I paused. There were comments but none directed toward me. “Good, take out your books then.”

After that, there was the usual nonsense for a few minutes.  $\varphi$  wouldn't stop talking with  $\theta$ , and 2500° was spitting sunflower seeds at H, who uncharacteristically contained himself – but not unexpectedly, as I had noticed him shuffle into the classroom with a morose expression on his face – by getting up and moving to a different seat. But then the methane flare-up came from 30%. The class exploded with laughter.

“Damn, man. That shit stinks worse than your shot,” \$.02 said.

“Nah, that shit don't stink that bad,”  $\alpha$  said. “Have you seen him play?” He waved his hand in front of his face.

“I'll truck you, faggot,” 30% said specifically to \$.02, unwilling and unprepared to take the serious step of challenging the other source of the insults, the alpha male.

“That's enough.” I said. “Quiet down.”

“I wish I had a gun with me right now because, damn, man, I'd murder your ass right now,” \$.02 said.

The other students jeered and cheered.

“Fight! Fight!”

“You going to let him talk to you like that?”

“Step up, bitch!”

“Fuck that mother-fucker up.”

And then 30% got out of his seat, followed quickly by \$.02, and they met at the head of the room, directly in front of me. I calmly moved out of the way, allowing the wave of violence to crash.

I asked  $\vartheta$ , on a rare occasion when she distanced herself from  $\theta$ , who was cheering on the fight, to get the vice principal.

She nodded, said, “I got you, Dod,” and left.

Then Billups acted. “Boys, stop!” Billups shouted. She was standing now. “You’re not going to do anything?” Billups asked me.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You saw what happened to Khaki.”

She looked at the fight, one of the combatants was on top of the other, arms and fists swinging wildly. Billups held her hands over her lips, bounced up and down slightly, wincing on occasion.

The vice principal came and broke up the fight. It appeared that  $\beta$  had asserted dominance but both were bloodied.  $\beta$  was distinguished by his swollen eye. There was a little blood on the floor, which the janitor acted quickly to clean up. For a couple of more minutes, the students were excited, recounting the details of the fight, but they soon settled into their routine. Even though there were still fifty minutes of class time left, I grabbed an extra chair and put it next to my desk. Billups offered me the seat behind my desk, but I declined.

“I guess it’s too much to expect them to focus after witnessing that,” Billups said.

“No,” I replied. “I’ve continued to hold class after fights before.” I pointed to  $\theta$  and  $\vartheta$  who were practically on top of each other, laughing and talking about developments in a school romance. Then I motioned to  $\alpha$  and H, who were shooting paper balls into the wastebasket. “Do they look to you like they’re bothered by the fight?” I raised my eyebrows and waited for an answer.

Billups surveyed the room, focusing on and frowning at  $x^3$  who was demonstrating a provocative dance. Billups had no reply.

“No,” I said, taking a deep breath, “this class was over before then.”

“With the fart,” she said, nodding her head, finally seeming to understand. “But,” she said, not willing, I could tell, to so easily leave her instincts and values behind, “you’re not going to even try to have class?”

“It’s like this,” I said. “The students are like the atmosphere or the weather. It helps me to think of them as forces or phenomena. They can be nice sometimes, like a sunny day or a rainbow, but they can also be like hail and lightning and freezing temperatures. There are a lot of bad storms here,” I continued. “Hurricanes, even, in the classroom. Now think of teaching as constructing a building. Are you going to try and construct a building outside in the middle of a hurricane?” I paused. “No, you wait for it to pass.”

She looked to be lost in her thoughts again. She didn’t respond for some seconds. Then, finally, she answered “right” in a voice that was slightly different – in a way I couldn’t qualify. And I realized she wasn’t lost in her thoughts, she was looking at the corner of the room, at  $x^3$ , who, at that moment, was drawing her thumb across her neck, staring directly at Billups.

\* \* \*

I considered speaking to the principal about it, but, what would happen? Another suspension? Like most systems of many different parts – the anatomy of living beings, the global community, a national government, or a medium-sized high school – the school wouldn’t try to prevent, they



would only react. They wouldn't expel  $x^3$  until she acted on the violent overtures. Billups was left on her own.

I had a class at the same time that Billups had  $x^3$ , but Khaki didn't. I explained the situation to him, and he readily agreed to sit in Billups' class, for the rest of the year, if necessary, in order to watch  $x^3$ .

It was the fourth quarter. A hot day in May. The class had gotten used to Khaki being in the back of the classroom. He would bring some papers to grade while keeping one eye on the class. The thermostat had broken, Khaki later told me.

Billups was sitting at her desk. Khaki sat on the other side of it. The students were complaining about the heat and were walking around the room, fanning themselves and trying to open the windows. Khaki had said that 2500° was using a yardstick to try and pry open a lock that was sealed.

"Stop that," Billups said. "The windows won't open."

"But it's so damn hot in here, Miss B," said  $\$.02$ .

"I know it is. You think I'm not hot, too?"

$x^3$  scoffed. "She ain't *hot*," she said to  $\cos x^3$ .

"Not with that ass-smelling hair,"  $\cos x^3$  added.

Billups remained seated and silent.

$x^3$  kept fueling the fire. "Billups is just nasty," she said to the class.

The students began laughing.

Billups continued working on her computer. "Peace and love," she mumbled. "Peace and love."

"That's enough everyone," Khaki said.

“Shut up, Khaki,”  $\cos x^3$  said.

“Always smells like patchouli in here,”  $\varphi$  said with a smile.

The class laughed louder. The wave of insults and discussion centering on Billups’ hair moved faster and faster.

“You right, man. It *does* smell like that!”

“That’s what that smell is?”

“What’s patchouli?”

The volume of the laughter rose even higher. The entire class was out of their seats, high-fiving each other, slapping each other on the backs, leaning on each other in a pseudo-need of physical support.

“What’s patchouli?” someone mockingly asked.

“Dumbass!”

“That’s what you get at this school with shitty ass teachers like *Billups!*”

Someone threw a paper ball at Billups. It hit her in the shoulder. She barely flinched, but her breaths became sharper.

“Fuck Xavier P. Cochran!”

“Fuck Billups!”

“And fuck Khaki, too!”

Before Khaki or Billups had the time to consider the appropriate discipline,  $x^3$  went to the front of the room, pinched her nose, waved her hand in front of her face, and not even having to shout, simply projecting her voice over the din, said “Nasty ass, Billups!”

The class combusted. Students fell down, rolled on the ground, laughing.

Then Billups stood up slapping her hands on the desk. “That’s it!” she shouted. “All of you, shut up!” She moved to the front of her desk. “Get up off the floor and get in to your fucking seats!” She went to one student, a boy of some size, forcibly picked him up, and not so much by her strength as by the shock that moved the student to involuntarily assist her, she was able to put him in his seat. “Get off that floor and in your seats!” She lifted  $\cos x^3$  up. She wormed out of Billups’ grip but got in the seat.

“Don’t touch me!” the girl shouted.

“You can go tell your momma to sue me!” Billups shouted. Then with head-snaking attitude she said in the face of  $\cos x^3$ , “I don’t give a fuck.”

The rest of the students were getting into their seats. No one spoke. Billups marched to the head of the room, planted herself in front of the board, her arm and erect index finger hammering the air as she began to speak in a measured tone.

“This ends now,” she said. “No more fooling around in this class. I will write you up, I will have you suspended, I will have you expelled. I will. Beat. Your. Ass.”

It worked. The class was alarmed, if not frightened. Except for  $x^3$ .

She strutted toward Billups and stopped in front of her face. A shouting match of an unheard of decibel level, even for Xavier P. Cochran, played out for some moments, with Billups’ having no trouble in matching  $x^3$ ’s explosive volume. The match came to an abrupt halt when  $x^3$  clawed at and repeatedly yanked Billups’ hair. Khaki went to intervene, but before he could, Billups twisted out of  $x^3$ ’s grip and shoved her and sent her stumbling backwards, landing on her back. The students, so paradoxically united and quick to turn on their own, started to laugh again.

Billups' body faced  $x^3$ , but she turned her head to face the class. "Do not!" she shouted.  
"Start that up again!"

Billups then told  $\pi^2$  to get the principal and the vice principal and to hurry up.

$x^3$  had gotten up, was moving to her backpack and Khaki knew what was coming. He ran to stop her, but he didn't make it.

Billups had already torn the bag from the girl's hands. She opened it, reached in, and removed the knife, her fist closed around the handle.

\* \* \*

$x^3$  was expelled, but Billups, when informed she could press charges, did not go through with it. Curious as to her turn-around, I observed Billups a week later. My conclusion? She had learned to identify and manage the order of disorder, the state of the universe.

"Well, I don't feel like taking out my book,"  $\cos x^3$  said.

"Fine, then. You're going to fail this assignment," Billups said.

Then  $\cos x^3$  muttered something under her breath.

Billups walked to  $\cos x^3$  and asked, inches from the student's face, if she had something to say.

$\cos x^3$ , apparently, did not have anything to say to Billups.

$\pi^2$  smiled.

Billups went back to the board and continued teaching.

$\cos x^3$  turned to  $\pi^2$ . “Don’t think I didn’t see you smiling, bitch,”  $\cos x^3$  whispered. “If I was you, I don’t think I’d ever open my mouth with those ugly-ass, fucked-up teeth. I’ve seen Halloween costume teeth look better than yours.”

$\pi^2$ ’s lips began to quiver.

“Did you hear what she said, Miss B?”  $e = mc^2$  asked.

Billups stopped writing and said, “Yeah, I heard.” She turned to  $\cos x^3$ . “There’s a lot of evil out there, a lot of things that only want destruction. I can’t stop it all.” Then she turned to  $\pi^2$  again. “*You*,” she said, “have to figure out on your own how to deal with it.”

Later, in the teacher’s lounge, Billups was eating, her head down, staring at the table. She did not look up when I entered. I congratulated her on her handling of the class. She looked up then, her face expressionless, and gave me a simple “thank you.” But there was something different about her voice, something absent of girlishness, something brusque, something loud.

## Eating Food from the Garbage

“I have autism,” Jeff said.

Maxine was on one end of the couch, poking away at her phone, sending an occupational therapist’s information to a client when Jeff, her husband, made his autism announcement. He was on the other end of the couch, putting together his evening jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table. It was a 10,000-piece puzzle of an ibuprofen molecule that someone from work had given him. He had just opened it, discarding the Frodo from *Lord of the Rings* puzzle he had worked on for some days before. He hadn’t finished it. He had a habit of never finishing his puzzles.

Maxine didn’t look up from her phone. “No one *has* autism. They’re blessed with it.”

It was a refrain that she, an autism advocate, had used often. She had even said something similar to Mrs. Delano, the mother of her client, David Delano, earlier that day. Mrs. Delano was upset that David, her autistic son, had eaten some food from the garbage.

So David ate some food from the trash can, Maxine reasoned. Was that such a big deal? Maxine saw this as something positive. If we regret a mistake, she explained, which in this case was to prematurely consign a quarter of a Turkey Reuben sandwich to the kitchen trash can, and if we have the power to redress a mistake, in this case by fishing out said quarter sandwich from beneath a mostly empty carton of milk, then shouldn't we feel blessed to have that power? Neither Mrs. Delano, David's Mother, nor Becky, David's helper, seemed to see it in the same way.

"Along with having autism, Davey was sick a lot when he was a boy," Mrs. Delano said from underneath her veiled Sunday Mass hat, a hat by no means limited to Sunday. "He, especially, shouldn't be eating out of the trash." She poked her cane inside the trash can and made a face.

"I understand," Maxine said. "But, first, David doesn't *have* autism. It's not the disorder that everyone wants you to think it is. Second, autistic or not, David is an adult, and he needs to be able to make his own choices. Choices, every day. Hands or silverware? Newspapers or porcelain plate? Do I eat out?" Maxine asked, pointing to the door. And then, pointing to the trash can, "Or in? Frankly, Mrs. Delano, I think David's using the gift of being an autistic person to the fullest. He's blessed that he's not bound by the norms of neurotypical society."

And Jeff, corrected by Maxine, then used the same language after his announcement.

"Okay, then, I'm blessed with autism," Jeff said. "I found out. Today. At the doctor's."

Maxine stopped poking at her phone.

“A few doctors, actually,” he said. “The first two weren’t very open-minded. They both said that ‘Men in their thirties don’t get diagnosed with autism – ‘”

“They’re right,” Maxine said, laying the phone down on the coffee table.

“So I argued, like I’ve heard you do, that just because it isn’t done, doesn’t mean that I don’t have it. So I went to a third doctor and he – “

“He didn’t.”

“He did. He told me I was right, and he said that I had autism.”

Many, many questions came to Maxine’s mind, and much like an autistic person assaulted with sensory information might do, she froze at first, trying to process it all. Where should she start? Should she ask about what kind of a quack would diagnose him? Or how about why Jeff sought out a diagnosis in the first place? Or what the hell did the doctor think he was doing? Or what the hell did Jeff think he was doing? “Jeff,” she said, settling on something. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s never been easy for me,” he said, pacing on a path worn into the rug.

“Ever since I was kid,” Jeff continued to say, “I knew there was something was different about me. I’ve never been good around people, but back then I thought I was just a nerd.”

Maxine noted the movement in her husband’s hands. The hands would be at rest at his side and then suddenly flicker. Had he done this before?

“I have obsessions,” he said. “I’ve always bit the skin on my fingers. I pick the skin off my feet, too. Did you know that? Well, I do. My hands? I’ve always had trouble keeping them still.”

Was that her answer?



“And I’ve never been good in social situations. I’ve never been good around people. It’s why, I guess, I work in a lab with chemical compounds rather than humans.”

“That doesn’t mean autism.”

Jeff was silent for a bit. “When you have a migraine do you think Aleve or Afrin is more effective.” Jeff asked this with sincerity. “I’m not convinced the caffeine in the Afrin is all that’s it thought to be for migraine treatment.” He thought about it for a few more seconds, and then he brightened, perked up, as if hitting upon an answer. “You see that? You see what I just did? I just switched to a completely different subject without realizing it. And I’ve always done that. You can’t deny *that*, Maxine.”

“Ugh,” she said. “Come on, Jeff.” She had to admit, though, he did always do that. It drove her crazy. Still did. And even more so at that moment than it ever did before.

The sudden flickering movements of his hands became more pronounced. He was hand-flapping.

“Stop that,” Maxine said. “The thing with your hands. Stop it. It’s offensive.”

“What?” he asked, looking at his hands.

“You’re hand-flapping. You’re making light of what people on the spectrum can’t help.”

Jeff was still looking at his hands. “I didn’t even realize I was doing it.” His hands started flapping again.

Maxine got up from the couch, walked over to him, grabbed his hands and held them still. “You don’t have autism,” she said. Then, “I mean, you aren’t given that gift.”

Hand-flapping, Maxine had always contended, was something that neurotypical relatives wanted to cure of their autistic loved ones. Just because it didn’t look normal. But it wasn’t something that needed curing. It was a way of managing one’s place in the world, something that

made one more comfortable, no different from crossing one's legs or tapping a pencil. Maxine had tried, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to explain this to a number of clients and their family members.

Eating food from the garbage fell into the same category, but Mrs. Delano contended that David had never done anything like that when he was on his meds, therefore it wasn't appropriate.

"Fluoxetine and diazepam and aversion therapy," Maxine told her, "they keep what I like to call the neuro-expansive person from being who they are. I can't say it enough: Autism isn't something that needs to be figured out or corrected. Remember the change when you took him off that stuff? He was a different person. His personality, his thoughts, his ideas – they were freed. Look around," Maxine had said, indicating the living room. "This place is amazing."

David's living room, part Turkish seraglio, part hair salon, and part comic book store, looked like the creation of a rogue geneticist-turned-interior decorator. Oriental style patterned sheets hanging from the ceiling and throw pillows were arranged to make it look like a sultan's living room. Unhung framed posters of wizards and superheroines and hairdo-related images leaned against the wall at regular intervals. There were stacks of comics, fashion magazines, and art books separated into different corners of the room. On the far wall there was a series of bald mannequins in various states of dress.

"But the germs." Mrs. Delano insisted, poking the wall of the trash can with her cane.

Maxine had been patient with Mrs. Delano. She meant well, so Maxine humored her, peeking into garbage can to find mostly bits of ribbon and string and potato chip wrappers. She tested the weight of a milk carton. Nearly empty, but it did, she admitted to herself, smell a little sour. Curdled, maybe. "Don't worry, Mrs. Delano," Maxine said anyway, knowing the milk

wouldn't kill him. "It's not the dumpster behind Burger World. This is his own trash with his own germs."

Mrs. Delano then shook her cane at the other reason that Maxine had gone to David's: a large pile of unopened letters, postcards, and glossy advertisements on the counter. "But what about Davey's mail?" Mrs. Delano asked.

Becky, always biting her nails, said she had found his mail hidden in the hallway. "Behind the Comb-overs Throughout the Ages Poster." She handed Maxine an envelope from the electric company. "FINAL NOTICE" was printed on the front.

"I see," Maxine said, "Well, let's talk to David about it."

Mrs. Delano offered to fetch her little boy from his bedroom despite the insistence from Becky and Maxine that she rest. On her way to the bedroom, Mrs. Delano pointed the butt end of her cane at two end tables with lamps on top. One of the seraglio sheets was almost resting on the lamp shade. "Isn't this a fire hazard?" she asked.

Maybe, Maxine thought, but you didn't need to worry about every little thing.

"I don't know Miss Little-Peters," Mrs. Delano said. "I really don't know about him not taking meds."

"I don't think he would want to anymore, Mrs. Delano."

"What if I crushed them up," she said, "and put them in his food for him like we used to do with the cat?"

As nicely as she could, Maxine told Mrs. Delano that wouldn't be very ethical, which somewhat appeased the worried mother.

With her out of the room, Maxine confronted Becky about the phone call. Maxine wasn't terribly happy with her, calling Mrs. Delano, getting her unnecessarily worked up like that. If

Becky was worried, she should have called Maxine first. Maxine had set David up in that apartment, found him a job at the fashion museum, and had got Becky, a former high-functioning Asperger's client herself, a job with the agency that Maxine used to assist people like David. Yes, it was important to keep parents and relatives in the loop, but it was the advocate, who in this case was Maxine, who should have been called first if there were any hiccups in the transition from dependency to autonomy, a transition that was a couple of months in the making with David. It was less complicated that way. There were fewer emotions involved. It was an arrangement that made for better, more progressive problem-solving.

Maxine politely scolded Becky. "You know you should have called me first. And, yes, I know he stipulated that his mother be called first in case anything comes up, but David doesn't know what's best for him in this kind of –" Maxine had cut herself off when she saw Becky raise her eyebrows. "Well, forget what David asks for. At least for a time."

"I'm sorry Miss Little-Peters, but it's in writing," Becky said, still biting her nails. "I have to call the mom first. Then I can call you."

After she told Jeff he didn't have the gift of autism, he removed a folded piece of paper from his back pocket. He held it out to her. "This says that I do have that gift."

It was an annoyance when Maxine, as a health care professional, got cut out of decisions, but she was finding out it positively stung to get cut out of those same decisions as a family member.

Maxine snatched the paper, unfolded it, and flattened it with a yank on the edges. "What idiot gave you this?"

She held the paper in front of her face and read aloud, "The patient meets criteria A.1.a, A.1.c, A.1.d, A.2.b, A.4.a, A.4.c, A.4.d, and B.2 for autism spectrum disorder as laid out in the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V and exhibits moderate qualitative impairment in social interaction, mild qualitative impairment in communication, and restrictive, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. This conclusion is based on evidence including 1) self-reported patient history, 2) reduced activity in the fusiform face area as revealed by fMRI, and 3) family interviews –” Lowering the paper, Maxine asked, “Family interviews?”

“I got my parents – “

“Jesus Christ, Jeff.” Maxine said. She continued reading, “It is my opinion that the patient has high-functioning autism spectrum disorder and likely, though in the absence of earlier testing it can’t be said for certain, has been functioning with ASD since early childhood.”

When Maxine read the signature, “Dr. Gregory Mankewicz,” she crumpled the paper into a ball.

\* \* \*

“First of all, you’re an autism advocate,” Dr. Mankewicz said from behind his desk. “You should celebrate this news. Second of all, I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you, but he didn’t consent to it.”

Maxine was standing in front of the desk, holding in her hand Jeff’s balled-up autism diagnosis. “Didn’t consent,” she grumbled. “Fuck the HIPAA laws. You should have told me.”

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned from you,” he said. “And you’re proving it right now, is that it can sometimes be best not to involve family right away in every decision made by an autistic adult.” He shook his head. “Fuck the HIPAA laws,” he repeated. “Easy for you to say.”

“Well, forgive me, Gregory, but you’re not showing much concern for your professional reputation, either.”

“The late diagnosis you mean.” Dr. Mankewicz folded his hands on his desk. “We were talking about this the other day, weren’t we? Why put a moratorium on diagnosis? If they’re autistic, then they’re autistic, no matter how late it’s clinically recognized.”

“Ah, so, that’s what you get out of this, isn’t it,” Maxine said. “You declare that a thirty-six year old has autism, and now you become a trailblazer of Autism treatment.”

“I have to say, Maxine, I’m shocked by your reaction. And ‘*Has* autism’?” He picked up a journal on his desk, opened to a page marked with a post-it note, and read, “‘Autism Is a Gift. Maxine Little-Peters, Advocate. Not only have clinicians and advocates been plagued with questions of how to define autism and of treatment for symptoms of autism spectrum disorders, but also of how to understand autism. Since Leo Kanner’s pioneering research in the 1940s, autism has been thought of as a disorder, and as indicated by the American Psychiatric Association’s preference for the term *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, this viewpoint persists today. The thinking is that people *have* autism. They suffer from it. In this essay I hope to offer alternate viewpoints –”

“Oh, I know what it says,” Maxine said, tossing the paper ball diagnosis at a potted plant.

“You and Jeff,” Dr. Mankewicz said, “have a gift. Enjoy it.”

\* \* \*

After going to Dr. Mankewicz' and then to work, Maxine went home and found a crudely built pond with a couple ducks in the backyard. Neither fowl nor pond had been there when she left the house that morning.

Jeff smiled at her and waved. With the other hand he held the garden hose, the water arcing from the nozzle into the pond.

Maxine stood at the backdoor, her mouth agape.

"I always wanted a pool," he said. "Obviously, a pool is too expensive. But it costs nothing to dig a hole and fill it with some water." Jeff lifted the hose, looked at the nozzle, and nodded his head once in satisfaction.

Maxine marched to the side of house, bent down, and turned the spigot. When she stood up she was about to say something about wasting the well water, but a duck quacked at her.

Jeff smiled.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Maxine asked.

"Blue Swedes." He pointed at the ducks. "A lot cheaper than the White Mandarins."

"I'm not talking about that. Well, not only that. I'm talking about all of this."

"I'll fill the pond back up," he said, flapping his hands a little bit.

Maxine had seen this before. It was something like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Someone believes that they're one thing, or they start being treated like they're one thing, and they'll act

more and more like that thing. People, usually children, who are newly diagnosed with autism often end up exhibiting a spike in stereotypically autistic behaviors. So, too, apparently, was Jeff.

And if Maxine wanted to be honest with herself, this thing with the “Blue Swedes” was not all that different from some of Jeff’s other home improvement projects. He once, without telling her, painted the dining room dark green when Maxine was at a conference for the weekend. When she got back and saw how ugly it was, like the inside of a moss-lined cave, he stood there stunned, apologetic, claiming that he didn’t even think of what she would think about it, that he just assumed it would please the both of them. And, thinking about it even more, there were all sorts of instances of undiscussed plans. Yeah, the vacation package to Copenhagen was nice, but a random choice as far as Maxine was concerned at the time, that is until they got there and Jeff dragged her to a tour at the factory for Lundbeck, a pharmaceutical company that makes the lethal injection drug. It was his sole interest in going to Denmark. This “Blue Swede” syndrome, as Maxine couldn’t stop herself from smiling at the thought of, was there. It certainly was. But back then, it had only been part and parcel of Jeff’s eccentricity, something that was selfish or thoughtless when Maxine didn’t like the outcome, like the dining room, and something that was charming when she did, like Copenhagen.

At any rate, the Blue Swedes and the Blue Swede syndrome cast a new light on Mrs. Delano’s horror when they got David out of his bedroom to talk about his mail and his foray into the garbage.

David was a boyish-looking man in his forties. He had a little pot belly that hung over his customary pair of khaki pants. But during their mini-intervention, he was wearing an unusual hat, or perhaps it was a wig. Or a piece of conceptual art. At any rate, David’s headwear was made of various, long objects stemming from what might have been a swimming cap fitted to



David's head. The various objects were arranged in such a way as to suggest strands of hair. Of these objects, Maxine noted a pink wrench, a tangled USB cable, a wooden spoon, a telephone cord splayed at the end, a rubber chicken, and a dildo.

Mrs. Delano, who was standing behind him, had her hand on her mouth, eyes clearly fixed on the dildo. But Mrs. Delano, to her credit, and for all of her backward thinking, had been around long enough to know that you have to let things go.

Maxine walked to the bank of Jeff's homemade pond and held her hand out to one of the Blue Swedes. It flapped its wings, splashing hose water on her. "Jeff," Maxine said, "tell me that you at least called the lab and told them you wouldn't be in today. It's a work day."

He nodded his head and Maxine softened toward him. She felt, for the first time, that he'd be okay then. He was always a little strange. He was right about being obsessed with things. And his people skills were never top notch. Hell, he didn't even have any friends outside of work. And the hand-flapping. The path worn into the rug from pacing. The sudden switches in the topics of conversation. The "Blue Swede" syndrome. The signs were there, she conceded. Maybe she just never wanted to see it.

With a hangdog look, Jeff coiled the hose, grabbed the shovel, and said he was going to fill in the pond and get the ducks out afterward. "This won't be a problem anymore," he said.

"Don't worry."

\* \* \*

After a few weeks, Maxine was worried. His hand-flapping became more and more pronounced, and he flapped more and more frequently. Rather than spending a week or several days on puzzles before tiring of them, and leaving them uncompleted, he had recently only spent two, three days at most on them.

Most troubling of all was that the variety of puzzles narrowed. He, like so many other clients over the years, now had a fixation. For some it was birthdays. For others it was famous sports broadcasting calls. For David it was hair. And for Jeff it was drugs, chemicals. His work. In an of itself, such an interest was fine, but Maxine didn't like the idea of not being able to talk to Jeff about anything other than Vicodin and phenobarbital, a narrow focus that was not uncommon in many of her clients.

Jeff had managed to find a number of jigsaws that were narcotic-themed, anti-narcotic-themed, specifically, familiar to him from his work at the lab. There was a "DARE to say no to drugs!" one. There was a puzzle that featured a marijuana leaf covered by a big red circle and a line drawn across diagonally. And he had found a "This is your brain on drugs" puzzle with the egg in the frying pan. It was almost as if he was trying to collect the puzzles rather than solve them.

She knew that one of the best ways of ameliorating any negative effects of autism was to spend some time enjoying the types of activities that the autistic loved one enjoyed.

It was easy to do with clients. You just had to roll with it. With David, Maxine would say hello, and he would invariably ask the following set of questions, to which she had relatively invariable set of answers:

“Well, hello, David,” Maxine said. “How’s the apartment?”

“It’s fine,” David said. “Did it take you fifteen minutes to get here?”

“Well, let me think,” Maxine said. “Yeah. About fifteen minutes.”

“Did you take the highway or go through the city?”

“The highway,” Maxine said. “On Sundays I take the highway. No traffic.”

“Do you still live on Chester A. Arthur Street?”

“Yes, I do.”

In David’s case, if she didn’t stop him, it could go on like this for a long time. On the day of the mini-intervention she broke off by talking about his new project, his hat.

“I have to say, David. I like what you have here,” she said, pointing at the headwear and judiciously refraining from giving it a possibly wrong label.

“It’s an anti-hair wig,” David said. “I’m sick of hair.”

Maxine had asked him why, to which he responded:

“Do you think bald people are evil?”

“Not at all,” Maxine said. “Some of my best friends are bald.”

Then he launched into a not uninteresting series of thoughts on baldness.

“Ghandi was bald,” he said. “So was Charles Darwin and Shakespeare and Mikhail Gorbachev. Winston Churchill was bald. But how come bald men are always the villains in the movies? How come bald men are demonized by Hollywood? Why is Samson worse when he loses his hair? Why didn’t God make him start out bald, and when he grows hair, he loses his power?”

When he said that archaeologists found a recipe for anti-baldness ointment written on papyrus in the Middle Kingdom period in Egypt, he paced and bounced and flapped with undeniable fire.

“It was 3500 years old!” David shouted. “3500 years! That means for 3500 years hair people have been stigmatizing bald people.”

She agreed that it was terrible.

But Maxine was finding that it was not so easy to roll with the nonsense from your husband. She was helping Jeff with his latest puzzle, a photograph of President Richard Nixon signing the Controlled Substance Act. God knows where he found it.

“He was a great man,” Jeff said.

Maxine looked at him, then returned to the puzzle. “He was something,” she said.

“Public enemy number one,” Jeff said to himself. “Narcotics. Public enemy number one, two, three, and four, and five, and six, and – “

“Hand me that end piece,” Maxine said.

He looked for it but couldn’t find it. Maxine reached across him rather roughly and grabbed the piece. Then Jeff got up, picked up the puzzle box, and started swiping the pieces inside.

“Jeff!”

“I’m tired of this one,” he said.

Maxine grabbed the box and tried to save the pieces they had already put together. She put them back on the table, started to reorganize them, and asked, “Don’t you want to at least try to finish this one?”

Jeff didn’t respond.

She stopped fiddling with pieces and stared at him. “How many puzzles are you going to buy?” She pointed at the stack of puzzles in the corner of the living room, and asked again, “Don’t you want to figure at least one of them out?”

Maxine knew the look Jeff was giving her. From her clients. He was looking at her as if trying to guess what she wanted to hear. He apparently couldn’t figure it out, so he just sat back down on the couch again and scrolled on his phone. “You know Checkers, President Nixon’s dog?” he asked. When Maxine didn’t respond, he continued. “Did you know that some hippie druggies snuck into the White House and tried to put LSD into Checkers’ dog bowl?”

Maxine sat, stunned, for a moment, and then got up and left the room. On her way out, she heard Jeff saying, “President Nixon tries to save the nation from the curse of the drug epidemic and that’s the thanks he gets. They try to poison poor Checkers.”

\* \* \*

Jeff’s fixation on the evils of drugs and drug prohibition picked up, but after awhile Maxine learned how to tune him out. She had a hard time tuning out the hand-flapping, though. It wasn’t that the hand-flapping was any more annoying than the drug talk, but she was concerned that he’d go to work and flap a beaker or a petri dish filled with microbes right off the lab table. She was able to get him prescribed to fluoxetine, aka Prozac, in the hopes that it would curb the

hand-flapping, and, if she was lucky, the drug talk, too. He wasn't thrilled about taking it. His anti-drug stance had extended from illegal narcotics to most other drugs, including antidepressants like fluoxetine, but he gave in and agreed.

Even with the fluoxetine, Maxine was worried about leaving him home alone. The regional chapter of the Autism Advocates of America was holding a banquet, and she found herself fearing another pond-digging incident. She hated that she had to start worrying about things like that, but what choice did she have? She would have to convince him to join her at the banquet.

"Jeff," she began by way of preparation. "We're going to be at a dinner table in a big hall with a lot of people tonight." She held his hand and squeezed. "I want to know that this is going to be okay for you."

And, surprisingly, unbelievably easily, he said, "I'll be fine." He added, "I'm looking forward to it. They're serving swordfish you said."

She did say that, and she was excited that he was excited about something other than drugs and jigsaw puzzles.

But the banquet turned out the way she feared. Jeff started off talking about his work to the ASD researcher next to him. They talked shop. Deals on bulk Bunsen burners, bogus paperwork required by the state, lab rat ethics, that sort of thing. When the man left to go to the bathroom, the doctor across the table from Jeff tried to talk to him. Jeff was reluctant. He made no eye contact. He asked no questions about the doctor or his work. He showed no acumen in engaging in the volley of question and answer, of comment and further comment, the complicated steps involved in the dance of conversation. The doctor showed a surprising lack of awareness in who he was attempting to engage.

“Your wife does great work,” the doctor said in his endless series of attempts to relate to Jeff. “She’s something of a pioneer in advocacy circles.”

But instead of agreeing or saying something, anything about Maxine, Jeff asked, “Do you know what Timothy Leary used to serve at his League for Spiritual Discovery meetings?”

The doctor stared for a second, cocked his head, and gave a slight smile. “No, I don’t,” he said.

“He served the hippies LSD burgers, peyote pork and beans, ketamine tenders, cocaine pizza, Cornish game heroine, and marijuana toaster strudel.”

The doctor was speechless, but the person next to him laughed and commented that Dr. Leary sure seemed to serve a lot of proteins to his adherents, sans marijuana toaster strudel.

“Do you know President Nixon’s dog, Checkers?” Jeff asked.

“Jeff,” Maxine said. “Please.”

“Yes,” said the man next to the doctor. “I remember Checkers.”

“President Nixon trained Checkers to be the first drug sniffing dog in the country. It’s true. Then Checkers himself trained the next generation of drug sniffing dogs. They call those dogs first generation drug sniffers. Now, I think, they’re up to the fifth generation of drug-sniffing dogs.”

The man who, it seemed to Maxine, was baiting Jeff, not out of any malevolence but most likely because he thought Jeff was joking, asked Jeff if he worked in narcotics research or with substance abuse.

“I hate drugs,” Jeff said. “All of them.”

“Oh, look, Jeff,” Maxine said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “They’re bringing the swordfish out.”

“Are you a scientologist?” the man asked.

“Nine out of ten soldiers in the Vietnam war returned home addicted to narcotics.”

“Nine out of ten? That seems a bit high.”

“Thirteen out of twenty children in the eighties who tried LSD moved on to developing heroine addictions.”

The man leaned forward. “Where did you get that number?”

“Have you ever seen what methamphetamines do to pregnant rats in their second term on a diet of only fructose-imitation monosaccharides?” Jeff’s flapping hands hit the table and rattled the silverware against the plates. “Have you ever seen what the rat fetus looks like? That’s why I hate drugs.”

This man, like the doctor sitting next to him, also couldn’t take the hint. Maxine swore that all doctors were autistic, too. But Jeff had declared that information with such confidence, that the man didn’t seem to be sure whether this was a conversation to abandon or if he was in the middle of a debate.

“Okay,” the man said. “But you don’t use any drugs? Not even antibiotics?”

The man had done it. Jeff was overwhelmed. He left his seat without saying anything, and Maxine was at a loss as to how to handle it. Should she go after him? Or maybe she should stay in her seat and pretend it was normal because, in a way, such a reaction had become kind of normal?

Jeff was now at the point where he couldn’t even sit and tolerate a little uncomfortable socializing, which was totally new, but, again, as if with so many other signs linking the old Jeff to the new, not completely unprecedented. How different was this from that girls’ night a few years ago where Maxine got too drunk and Jeff had to pick her up? She had him come inside to



say hello and – admittedly it wasn't the best idea because her friends were also drunk and asking each other some pretty personal, forward questions – he blew up at the hostess, yelling “Jesus Christ!” at her when she asked him one too many times if he ever thought of growing a beard to cover up his baby face. It came off as – it was a scene. She was embarrassed then, too.

The man at the table, meanwhile, was looking at Maxine, and she told him that Jeff had an infection. The doctor left it at that, and Jeff never came back. She could have said that Jeff is autistic. Certainly the people there, if anywhere, would understand. But she didn't. She was, she admitted, angry, even ashamed, that it had come to this.

\* \* \*

“He's regressing,” Dr. Mankewiecz said.

“Burnout?” Maxine asked.

“Regression, burnout,” Dr. Mankewiecz said. “However you want to put it. He's clearly having more trouble dealing with sensory input than he was some months ago.”

“But why are his symptoms suddenly, so suddenly, flaring up like this?”

“Symptoms?” Dr. Mankewiecz picked up the journal with Maxine's essay and walked around his desk. He sat next to her. “Symptoms are results of a disorder, Maxine.” He handed her the journal. “You're having trouble with this.”

“Of course I’m having trouble with this,” she said. “I can’t take him out of the house. I can’t leave him in it without worrying that he’s going to destroy the yard or god knows what else. He won’t stop talking about Nixon and his goddamned dog, Checkers. And his hand-flapping’s going to cost him his job.”

“He told me he doesn’t want to take the fluoxetine. When did you start him on it, and when did his acute reactions begin?”

“Oh, please. It’s not the fluoxetine. If anything that’s helping.”

“I’m not suggesting that it’s the fluoxetine. But I am suggesting that *your* reaction to his behavior, which led you to urge fluoxetine on him, is a stressor.”

“There’s no proof that stress causes regression,” Maxine said.

“Not much. But in my professional opinion, which is what you’re here for, is that’s what’s causing the regression.” Dr. Mankewicz walked to the door and opened it for Maxine. “My advice to you is to take him off the meds, or have him take them only before he goes to work so he doesn’t have any accidents with his perseveration techniques, the flapping, and stop oppressing him. What harm, after work, does hand-flapping or talking about drugs do to him? Or you?” And as Maxine walked out he added, “And reread your essay.”

\* \* \*

Two days after the event, Maxine got him prescribed a second medication, diazepam, in hopes of curbing his anti-drug obsession. As much as she respected Dr. Mankewicz, how was she supposed to believe that Jeff's problems would simply go away by adding tolerance for harmful behaviors and by subtracting medicine?

Maxine came home from work one evening and caught Jeff digging through the trash can.

"What the fuck are you doing, Jeff? That's the fucking trash can!" She slapped his arm out of the garbage and he backed off like a chided pet, in a pose that was reminiscent of the photo he had shown her of Checkers meeting Leo Brezhnev on his state visit to Washington.

He cowered in a corner of the kitchen, looking like he wanted to say something without being able to. Maxine apologized and rushed over to him. She kissed and hugged and squeezed him in a type of primal remorse. She apologized over and over.

"The swordfish," Jeff said. "I decided I didn't want to throw it away yet."

Though Jeff had left before the waiters could get the swordfish on his plate, Maxine made sure they served it anyway, and she was able to have them wrap it up and bring it home for him.

"Jeff," she said. "Promise me that when you throw away your food, you'll leave it thrown away. Please?"

"Even at work?" he asked.

Maxine released him. "At work? You fish for food out of the trash can even at work?"

Jeff didn't respond.

"Jesus Christ, Jeffrey. What if they see you? People get fired for less."

At this point, Maxine was no longer sure of herself. Was she making too much of this? Or had she not been making enough of it with her clients? Thinking back, she might have been borderline negligent with David.

When she asked him a serious question, about a somewhat silly subject, about whether or not he was going to advocate for bald rights, David completely ignored her and continued to obsess over the Egyptian anti-baldness ointment.

“The recipe called for lead, onions, snake fat,” he said. “And hippo fat.”

Not only did she allow him to take the conversation wherever he felt, but she completely disregarded his absent-mindedness. She remembered that he had dug a wig out of a cardboard box while he was listing the ointment ingredients. Then he hurled it, presumably because of his disgust with hair, across the room where it went straight into the lamp, nearly knocking it over.

All Maxine had to say was, all she had by way of reaction to behavior that was very likely detrimental to him was, “And with your anti-hair wig, you’re looking to change how society perceives bald people?”

“Not only am I standing with bald people,” David had said, and then he removed the wig to reveal a newly shaved head. “But I’m taking a stand against hair. This wig represents all of the horrible injustices that hair perpetrates.” He lifted up the pink wrench and said something about how hair pigeonholes people into gender roles. Holding the frayed telephone cord he said, “Hair stifles communication between people.”

When he got to the part about what the dildo represents, Maxine remembered that Mrs. Delano gasped. “Davey, please!” she said.

David was silent for a moment, and then came this gem: “Jean-Luc Picard was bald. And he was captain of the starship *Enterprise*.”

And what did Maxine say? “And a very good actor, too.”

Jesus Christ. But was that so bad? Did she not get to the issue at hand? The ignored bills? She did. She definitely did. She remembered holding up the electric company’s cancellation notice and explaining that if he didn’t want to set up automatic withdrawal for his bills, then he would have to pay them on time and watch out for the mail if he happened to miss any payments.

And when she handed the bill to him and he didn’t want to open it because he had already got back on the subject of baldness and why evolution hadn’t weeded it out, because it denoted wisdom and longevity if she remembered right, didn’t she then decide that some occupational therapy was needed? Yes, she did. She took it seriously. She even told Becky to take care of the bills until they could get David used to paying them.

She did take it seriously. And reasoning this way, reassuring herself of her judgment, she felt justified in enrolling Jeff in aversion therapy.

\* \* \*

They still used the shocks apparently. She couldn’t believe that aversion therapists were still using the shocks. She had them use the smells. Video of people digging through the trash paired with the most heinous smells imaginable. It was extreme, but this had to stop. His livelihood, his

and their sense of normalcy was on the line. And it worked. He stopped eating out of the trash. He wouldn't even go near the trash.

Jeff stopped talking so much of anti-drug policy, too, but he was spending hundreds of dollars on jigsaw puzzles. From the odd comment here and there, it was clear to Maxine that he still held his staunch, even draconian, position on narcotics prohibition, but his puzzle interests had shifted and narrowed. There were only so many Checkers jigsaws out there, so he branched off to other White House pets. There were Bill and Billy, Theodore Roosevelt's pet lizard and Calvin Coolidge's pet pygmy hippopotamus; Pete the squirrel of the Harding administration; Chelsea Clinton's cat, Socks; Jimmy Carter's Border Collie that went by the name of Grits; and there was even a puzzle made of a painting of Jack, Abraham Lincoln's pet turkey. Jeff had also accidentally bought a puzzle of Lady Bird Johnson, thinking that, because of the name, the first lady of Lyndon Johnson was a presidential parakeet.

For the most part, other than some weight gain and sluggishness in Jeff due to the medication, things went okay until Colorado passed their decriminalization of recreational marijuana amendment. Maxine was with a client when the news was aired in the evening. Jeff threw all of his puzzles out on the lawn. He kicked over all of the trash cans in the house. He fell into the coffee table, breaking the glass. When she got home, he was still raving.

"Goodbye America!" he was shouting, bleeding all over. "The hippies won! Forgive us, Checkers. Forgive us! From now on," he said, panting, flapping his hands, "it'll be LSD jerky for our men, Caesar salads with LSD dressing for our women," and, starting to weaken and lose volume in his voice, he said, "and LSD milk and cookies for our children."

Maxine reacted with an anti-psychotic, risperidone. That made three medications for Jeff, and she, getting the idea from Mrs. Delano, crushed them up and hid them in his food. She was

fairly confident in the medication, but she didn't want to take any chances. When Maxine couldn't be at home, she would have Becky stay with him.

The problem was that Becky couldn't be at Maxine's beck-and-call. When something came up at David's, and Becky was already helping another client, Maxine felt she had no choice but to bring Jeff with her.

"If I hear the term 'baldy' one more time," David was saying, "I swear I will kill the next hair person I see." He was quick to add, "But not you, Miss Little-Peters. Or you – what's your name?"

"Jeff."

"Or you, Jeff. But the next person other than Miss Little-Peters or Jeff," David said. "The next idiot who walks by in a pompadour and dares to say anything about Vladimir Lenin's chrome dome is going to get it."

Maxine assured him that no one was likely to do such a thing.

"They better not," David said, walking into the kitchenette. He bent down and dug through the garbage and removed half of a meatball and placed it on the kitchen counter, presumably to snack on later.

Maxine saw Jeff's eyes widen as he looked on at David picking through the trash. He backpedaled toward the door, slowly opened it, and then ran down the apartment building hallway.

"Shit," Maxine said. "The aversion therapy."

She looked at David, who was still digging through the trash, and saw him remove a creased picture of a dozen bald heads he must have printed from his computer, and, apparently, accidentally thrown away.

“Can’t you stay away from that trash can for one second!” Maxine shouted before running after Jeff.

Maxine, whose voice held authority in David’s mind, got him away from the trash can, apparently, because she heard him yell something, followed by the crash of glass and some other objects. She caught up to Jeff outside. He was panting from his sprint, but otherwise fine. And before Maxine could even feel terrible about the situation she had put Jeff in, making him afraid of the garbage for Christ’s sake, before she could repent and swear that she would never again repress, so cruelly repress him by doping him up and subjecting him to aversion therapy, she saw the smoke coming out of David’s window. She called 911, ran back upstairs, and found David in the hallway cursing the anti-bald conspiracy and the loss of his anti-hair wig. When things had settled down, the fire department told her that a sheet had caught fire from one of the table lamps.

Maxine took off work for a week.

\* \* \*

“I just want to say right away, again, that I am so, so, very sorry about what happened to the apartment.” Maxine looked at David, then Mrs. Delano. “I’m partly – I’m responsible for this,



and I'll do whatever I can to make it up to you. I'll find you a new apartment," she said to David  
"I'll work tirelessly for your son," she said to Mrs. Delano.

Mrs. Delano playfully poked Maxine with her cane. "It wasn't completely your fault."

David's hair had grown back a bit and when Maxine commented on it, he handed her a pamphlet from his pocket. "BALD RIGHTS. NOW!" was written on the cover.

When they finished eating, Jeff excused himself to work on the evening jigsaw puzzle.  
David said he would tag along.

"Do you know Checkers, Nixon's dog?" Jeff asked.

"It's not true," David said. "You can spell baldness without badness. Baldness has an 'L'.  
Badness doesn't."

"He's not talking about baldness," Mrs. Delano said. "He's talking about Checkers."

"What about Checkers?" David asked.

"Don't go to Colorado," Jeff said. "They can experiment all they want up there, but – "  
Maxine put her hand up. "Jeff, tell him who Checkers is first."

Mrs. Delano and Maxine talked about their new approaches. Risperidone for David's  
anger. Fluoxetine for Jeff's hand-flapping, but only when he was at work.

After the Delanos left, the phone rang.

"This is Bank of America anti-fraud protection," a robotic voice said. "Did you make a  
purchase of \$522.46 on April, 22 from Puzzle World? If yes, press 1. If no, press 2."

After Maxine pressed '1', she saw that the journal with her "Autism Is a Gift" essay was  
on the counter. She flipped through it, chortled, and opened the lid of the garbage. She tossed it.  
As it fell, it wedged a piece of a Turkey Reuben into view. She stood for a moment, debating,  
hesitating, considering, and then she dug in and removed it. She ate it.

## Jim Finn, Risk-Averse Lumberjack

Jim Finn, the mightiest man in the Yosemite, loved three things in this life: unforgettable feats of strength, safety, and being right.

Jim Finn could stack seven sequoias end-to-end and stir the clouds – for days at a time. He could fell fifty-five of the giant trees just by breathing on them and haul them off by his self on his bare back, tough as bark. He could chop wood so fast and fine he could make it snow wood shavings over three counties.

But he never did any of this, though, without his protective eyewear, his lower-lumbar-supporting back brace, or without making the men at his camp sign an injury waiver. Mighty or not, Jim Finn'll be damned before he takes lightly the dangers that chopping wood, hauling logs, and stacking sequoias pose to his eyes, back, and fellow loggers. And if any of the men got to whispering that he was maybe a little

too hung up on safety, Jim Finn wouldn't care because he damn well knew, by God, that he was right to be cautious.

Well, one day none other than Paul Bunyan showed up. His appearance could only mean one thing: a contest to see who would go down in history as the mightiest man in this great American nation.

"Safety first," Jim Finn said, offering a pair of protective eyewear for Bunyan.

Bunyan laughed. The forest shook. "No thanks, Jim Finn," he said.

They hacked those logs at a clip that would've put a wood-chipping machine to shame. When they'd finished, the ground was covered in three feet of bark chips and wood splinters.

"I'd say it's a draw," Bunyan said. "But I did it without worrying over a little tree dust getting in my eyes. You call that mighty? And you know what? I suspect you'd have been just fine without them glasses."

Finn frowned a frown so mighty it popped the goggles right off his head. He took a long, hard look at them. No nicks. Not even any dust. And there was Bunyan, no protective eyewear at all, with nary a mark on his smirking mug.

"Think you can carry as many logs as me, Jim Finn?"

Finn did, and so he strapped on his quadruple extra-large lower-lumbar-supporting back brace. But neither he nor Bunyan could best the other. Another draw.

"But I didn't need no girdle," Bunyan said. "And neither did you."

Maybe not, but Finn thought it was just plain old reckless to go around carrying logs without one. He frowned anew at Bunyan and flung his back brace to the dirt. The ground rumbled. "Paul Bunyan," he said, "you're going to get a hernia." But then again, Finn thought, maybe not.

Bunyan wasn't done dogging Finn yet, though, and he yelled "catch" and tossed a sequoia to him. When Finn caught it, he found it to be as light as a lily.

"See? Your back's fine," Bunyan said.

It was. Bunyan was right.

“Alrighty, Jim Finn. One last test. We’ll stir them clouds, and whosoever balances the sequoias the longest can rightfully go down in history as the mightiest man on either side of the Mississippi’.”

Out of habit, and probably not so much out of principle anymore, Finn had all of the men sign an injury waiver. Then he handed a form and a pen to Bunyan. “So no one, bystander or participant,” Jim Finn not so mightily said, “can say they didn’t know the risks.”

Bunyan scoffed. “Jim Finn,” he said. “Mightiest coward this side of the –”

Finn frowned his mighty frown again and cursed Paul Bunyan and he couldn’t help himself but to pulverize his pen to powder in his big old paw. He growled and rummaged in his pocket for another one, and handed it once again to Bunyan.

Bunyan ignored him and Finn, well, for the first time in a long time, Finn let it go, and Bunyan went ahead and balanced his sequoias. With barely an hour up, a time Finn could beat in his sleep, a log tumbled down and scraped Bunyan’s cheek.

The log left a tiny cut.

“Aha!” Finn shouted. “Aha! Aha! Aha! Well, look at that. The mighty Paul Bunyan sustaining personal injury. You see now, Bunyan? You see?”

“I’m fine, god dammit,” Bunyan snapped. “And it sure don’t mean what you think it means, that you’re right about having everyone sign that damn waiver.”

“Oh, no?” Finn asked. “What about infections, Bunyan? You might could get one,” Finn said. “And what if it’d been my turn? You could take me to a court of law.”

“Fine, then,” Bunyan said, picking up a sequoia and handing it to Finn. “You just balance your damn logs.” He wore his mighty smirk once more. “Or you can call me the mightiest. Ever”

“Not without your waiver,” Finn said.

So the two men stood there, facing each other, a few paces apart, one man pointing a tree and the other pointing a pen and an injury waiver at one another, and neither one budging.

In the end, Paul Bunyan could be sure of going down in history as the mightiest, but as the blood from the cut on his face dripped ever so slightly, Jim Finn grinned, a grin as big as, but no bigger than, the entire Yosemite.

## Love Is an Ethically Questionable Bag of Bear Parts

Prunella heard about the iDeologometer from her sister, Gerda. They were in the car. In traffic. And Prunella had just been cut off by someone who was driving what she could only describe as a clown car, garishly-colored and polka-dotted, a floppy, oversized, fake red wig on top. It didn't really make Prunella angry, traffic couldn't have been moving at more than 10-15 miles an hour, but it sure made Gerda mad. She yelled at Prunella to honk her horn. And Prunella did. But Prunella never honks her horn. Never. She doesn't believe in honking the horn. It's almost always just obnoxious and vindictive in her opinion. But Gerda had pressured her. Well, soon after the horn-honking, they passed the clown car, which was now in the next lane over, and the clown car driver, who actually was a clown, rolled down his window. He honked his clown horn,

with the red rubber ball at the end, at Prunella. Then the passenger in the back rolled down his window and he honked his clown horn at Prunella. And before she knew it, she had a dozen clowns honking clown horns at her making her feel terribly, terribly ashamed. It was ridiculous. She didn't even want to honk her horn at those clowns in the first place. And not only did she feel bad about it, she felt bad about feeling bad about it, and each time a new clown started honking his clown horn at her she felt worse. That's when Gerda told her about the iDeologometer.

Gerda was fiddling with her phone, pointing it at Prunella. She took off her sunglasses to get a better look. "Jesus," Gerda said. "Does it really matter so much to you that you honked at those clowns?"

Prunella was confused. She didn't think Gerda should be able to tell how much it troubled her.

"Have you heard of an iDeologometer?" Gerda asked.

Prunella had not heard of an iDeologometer, and Gerda was more than happy to tell her. It was an app that worked like a bar code scanner, but with sound, not images. It worked like this: You pointed the phone at someone and open the iDeologometer app. You press the scan button. A rating and several other values will pop up on the screen. The rating and point values are measurements that indicate how faithful the speaker has been to their beliefs in the last sixty days. And Gerda had just taken Prunella's ideological fidelity measurements on the thing.

"You're joking," Prunella said.

"Think so? Listen to this. Wow. Okay. In addition to honking the horn when you don't believe in in it, you apparently told several lies to one Jenny Matthews, a neighbor it says here, about a pair of shoes. Jesus Christ, Prunella. You're going to have to show me those things,"

Gerda said. “Anyway, on top of lying you betrayed the following beliefs: you paid over \$150.00 for these shoes, though you don’t believe in spending frivolously when some people in the world make less than \$150.00 for a half years’ worth of work. You bought them at the mall, though you claim to hate the mall – you did tell me you were girlcoting the mall, Prunella – because of the vapid consumerist culture it represents. The brand name is “Drive-by Shoe-ter,” a brand that makes light of violence, which is something I know for a fact that you detest. And – this one takes the cake – you actually elbowed through several teenage girls who were crowded around the shoes in order to have first chance of buying said shoes, which breaks so many of your beliefs that I have to click a link to find out what all of them are.”

Prunella was stunned. “It said all of that?”

“And that was just one example. You have a really low rating, too. A 2.1. Out of 10.”

Gerda put her sunglasses back on and said, “And by the way, you are upset with Mom.”

The iDeologometer, apparently, had told her that, too, and it was their Mom that was the cause of this drive. Prunella and Gerda were on their way to pick up their sister, Beryl, and the three of them were to go to their Mom’s for dinner in order to meet her new boyfriend, Don.

But Don was not just Mom’s newest boyfriend. He was the first since her husband, who she and her daughters referred to as That Guy, left the family to fight in the Tortilla Uprising in El Salvador. That Guy was sick of paying taxes to a government that was always sticking its fingers in the craws of other governments and tired of living in a country where everything he did indirectly supported a government that killed babies, that kept the poor from making a living with their fruit carts, that captured monkeys and forced them to learn to type on the typewriter – all in the name of kowtowing to United Fruit and the Freemasons and the anti-Semitic mole



people and whoever else had money to grease the pockets of the politicians. And so he left. He grabbed a gun and went and did something about it.

And Mom would get drunk night after night and tell her daughters how she always wanted to go on an adventure with him (and why couldn't he have whisked her away to revolution in El Salvador when she was a young woman without kids) and how selfish and tyrannical he was until she sort of got over it and said it's just that he was all mixed-up and she's sure he didn't want to be that way. Then she adopted the same uncompromising attitude as he did, her first act being to vow that she would never, ever even entertain the idea of remarrying. Her second act being to tell her girls to *Do what you think is right, no matter who it hurts, because that's what people will do to you. And if you think something's fucked up, then say something, do something about it.*

"Just like me," Gerda said, "you think Mom breaking her vow and getting serious with some guy is messed up, when we talked about it earlier, you pretended it wasn't."

\* \* \*

They pulled down the gravel drive of the communal farm where Beryl and her husband, Reynaldo, and their brood of children lived. There was a pond at the end of the driveway, on the muddy banks of which, a bunch of young children in coarse potato sack onesies were laughing

and playing. On the other side of the pond there were a few more kids defending themselves from a motley force of waterfowl –chickens on the front line, dive-bombing ducks, geese using long necks to bite the children from a distance. The children’s shrieks were punctuated by savage war honks and fierce battle quacks, and one of the kids was bleeding. Beryl was pretty forward-thinking when it came to animal rights, so the livestock was on equal footing with the family. The kids bore the brunt of it.

Prunella sprinted out of the car and in the direction of the birds. She shouted, waved her arms. She intended to chase them away, but then a goose charged at her, and she ran away.

Prunella outran the goose, and Gerda, meanwhile was laughing at Prunella and heading behind the old farmhouse where the barn and the large vegetable garden and the fields and fields of crops were. Prunella caught up to her, jabbed her with her elbow to get her to stop laughing, and they both went to look for Beryl.

Out back, there were more kids, older ones, in the fields. This was how the family survived. A farm. A child labor force. No jobs. No Amazon.com. No grocery stores. No gas-guzzling automobiles or cell phones. They grew, made, built, mooched, and bartered. They bought as little as possible. They didn’t want to enable capitalism to widen the income gap, harm the environment, exploit labor, scam consumers, and do a bunch of other bad stuff that Prunella couldn’t remember. Beryl’s family made many extreme, but noble, sacrifices.

Reynaldo was coming out from behind the outhouse, dragging a cisternful of the family’s shit on the ground. Beryl was in the barn. Through the open barn door, Prunella saw something lovely about Beryl’s tiny frame as she grunted and stacked huge hay bales.

Reynaldo waved to Prunella. “Hey, Prunella!” he shouted. He dug his hand in the cistern and held up a handful of the bounty. “Want some grade A shit? How about you Gerda?”

“Gross,” Gerda said. “Not again.”

Beryl pitched a hay bale on the barn floor and yelled, “We need that for the plants, Rey!”

“What do you mean by ‘not again?’” Prunella asked.

Beryl took a deep breath, wiped her forehead with her palm, picked some hay out of her hair, and walked over to Prunella. Beryl smiled, forming deep creases in her brown face.

Prunella told Beryl that her birds were murdering her children. Beryl replied that yeah, she knew, they liked to play together. Prunella said okay, she was joking about the murdering, but one of the kids looked hurt. Beryl insisted it was fine. Gerda, did, too. Prunella insisted that it didn’t look like it. Beryl said not to worry. Prunella said she was worried, it didn’t look good. Beryl said something else, and Prunella finally gave up. Prunella was practiced at saving her breath from pushing too hard for what she believed.

\* \* \*

When they got to their Mom’s, Don was waiting for them in the living room. He wore a sweater with a Green Bay Packers logo on it. He smelled like meat. He called the sisters “sweeties”.

Then Mom walked in wearing an apron and Gerda laughed at her.

“An apron?” she asked. “How domestic, Mom.”

The sisters had never seen Mom in an apron. “Laugh all you want, but I’ve got a stew going, and it’s bubbling hot,” she said. She smiled. She briefly put her arm around Don’s waist. Kissed his cheek. Then she hugged everyone.

“Stew?” Beryl asked.

“Not to worry, honey,” Mom said. “I have some nuts and berries for you if you don’t want stew.” Then she whispered, “There’s salad, too.”

The sisters were poking around at the new décor in the living room. Mom had changed it from Yoruban art and spears and masks to Inuit art and spears and snowshoes. Before going back into the kitchen and declining an offer from Prunella to help, she told everyone to take a seat, get to know Don a little bit. He’s got a pilot’s license. He makes great pies. He grew up in Wisconsin on a farm.

What kind of farm Beryl wanted to know.

“Dairy. Mostly,” Don said. He sat with his feet flat on the floor. His hands were on his knees. He looked uncomfortable. “Had some heifers, too,” he said.

“You didn’t butcher them, did you?” Beryl asked.

“Uh,” Don said. “I – When I was younger. But it’s been a long time since – ”

“Good,” Beryl said. “You’ve given up murdering animals.” She got up from her seat, gave Don a hug, and sat back down. “That means I can still talk to you.”

Beryl laughed and then Don laughed somewhat nervously. Prunella could tell that Don wasn’t sure if Beryl was joking or not. She wasn’t.

“And you make pies, too?” Prunella asked.

“I make the best youngberry pie you’ll ever have. You ever had a youngberry pie?”

“So you’re murdering berries now?” Prunella asked. “Innocent, young berries?”

“I – I’m sorry. I’m not sure what – “

“Now *I* can’t talk to you,” Prunella said. She waited a few seconds. “Kidding, Don.”

Mom shouted her approval of the joke from the kitchen, and then Don realized he was supposed to laugh or something, too, so he did, but it wasn’t very genuine. He was clearly unsettled.

“Were you mocking me?” Beryl asked Prunella.

“No. Not at all,” Prunella said. “Obviously there’s a difference between animals and plants.”

But Prunella had been thinking about this issue. What if Prunella was a super vegan, and she decided that it was bad to eat anything that was multicellular, that she would only eat multicellular organisms, and what if she felt so strongly about being unicellular that she went around judging everyone and saying she wasn’t going to talk to this person or that person or that she was going to girlcott this place or that place if they didn’t stop eating or serving multicellular? It seemed unfair to her.

“I, uh, always made sure to do them in painlessly,” Don said. “The young berries.”

Mom shouted her approval of that joke, too.

He’s cute, Prunella thought. He was so nervous, and he obviously wanted to make a good impression. His Packers sweater was probably the nicest one he had. Maybe it was even sacred. Only on the most important occasions – the Superbowl, Thanksgiving, the Annual County Cow Competition – did he wear the Packers sweater.

Gerda asked what was in the stew. Meat? Yeah, beef, Don said. So not only was Mom wearing an apron, but she making a stew using perhaps the meatiest of meats (or at least the

poster meat for meats): beef. This took everyone by surprise, as Mom never made meat (or beef) stew. She never cooked anything with meat (or beef). She rarely even ate meat (or beef).

Gerda then asked Don about Wisconsin.

“My dad was a cheeseman. Mom was a milk maid,” Don said. “You could say it was an *udderly* perfect match.” Don was impressed with his joke. The sisters weren’t. But Prunella, at least, smiled politely.

Gerda asked Don to keep going, to tell us more about Wisconsin, and Don obliged.

Gerda, meanwhile, had taken out her cell phone. She was going to get him on the iDeologometer.

“Loved that farm,” Don said. “But I never took to cheese. Making it, that is. Not eating it. Loved – still love – eating cheese. I just never had the yellow thumb for it. That’s what they call it. Every good cheeseman has the yellow thumb. My brother, though, he had...”

Prunella saw that Gerda was starting to angle the cell phone at Don. She really, really didn’t want to get into it with Gerda, but she had to do something or else she’d feel as if half a dozen clowns were honking their clown horns at her again. It wasn’t right for Gerda to take the reading of this man who they hardly knew. It wasn’t right to invade privacy in general.

Fortunately, on the way to Mom’s, Prunella had told Beryl about how Gerda used the iDeologometer on her. And how it worked. The kinds of things it said. All of that stuff. And Beryl was appalled. Prunella left out the part about how she bought and downloaded the app as soon as she was finished talking with Gerda.

So Prunella secretly drew Beryl’s attention to Gerda and the cell phone, and Beryl told Don that she thought she heard Mom calling for him. He went into the kitchen. Beryl wasted no time in confiscating Gerda’s phone and launching into a lecture on the invasion of privacy. What

are you? The NSA? How would you like it if people spied on you? Didn't you hear about how the government accidentally raided the meeting of those World Trade Center Attack reenactors?

"But that guy is an idiot hick," Gerda said. "He probably drives a huge truck with assault weapons and a cooler of horse steaks in the back, speeding his way from the Klan meeting to the protest at the gay funeral, so he can get back to beating his wife before bedtime."

"Now you're being judgmental. Idiot hick or not, he has rights and –"

"Hey," Prunella said, "be respectful. You're talking someone who Mom cares about."

"Let's not mince words," Beryl said. "He's an idiot, Prunella."

"I'm sure Mom wouldn't date a Klan-going hunter who –"

"Aren't cell phones against your religion or something?" Gerda asked Beryl. "Aren't you forbidden to touch them?"

Beryl glared at Gerda. "How many times do I have to tell you this? I don't believe in *using* phones. It's fine if I touch them." Beryl explained that cell phone companies gave our records away. Landline phone companies had a history of monopolizing the industry. And all of them were greedy capitalists.

Then the house phone rang. Mom picked it up.

"Beryl!" she called out from the kitchen. "It's Reynaldo!"

Gerda sat up and laughed. "Oh. What's this?"

Beryl picked up the phone in the living room and really let Reynaldo have it. I thought I only told you to call in an emergency. How much more simple and straightforward of a request can I make? No, you can't get wheat from the Hendersons. You're using their phone right now? Damn it, Rey. Of all people! Aren't the Lozanos or the Wongs there? I told you the Hendersons' wheat is bad. They get the dung they use to fertilize their field by giving their animals laxatives.

“How would you like it if what I fed you made you shit all over yourself!” she said. “It’s unethical!” Then she hung up.

Prunella, meanwhile, had clowns honking at her again. She just couldn’t help her curiosity. While Beryl was on the phone with Felix, Prunella used her cell phone to get Beryl’s reading on the iDeologometer.

iDeologometer Rating: 8.01

UBTB Point Value (Upheld Beliefs/Total Beliefs): 1,939,301.9/2,421,101

Percent Score: 80.1%

Belief Fidelity to Belief Infidelity Ratio: 4:5

Rationale:

1. Subject opposes American capitalist democracy but enjoys fruits of security and prosperity afforded by said government.
2. Subject opposes deceit in all forms but told children that boogiemer doesn’t exist though subject can’t say for sure that said boogie doesn’t exist.
3. Subject opposes fossil fuels but takes fossil fuel-using bus, accepts fossil-fuel using car rides from neighbors and relatives.
4. Subject opposes private property but withheld more than subject’s fair share of tomato crop from the Hendersons because Ginnie Henderson badmouthed the tomato basil soup she made for last year’s Commune Compost Festival.
5. Subject opposes phone companies, but used phone company services 4 times in past 60 days.
6. Subject opposes Damn, That’s Good! Brands for multiple reasons ([click here](#) for details), yet bought five Damn, That’s Chocolatey! chocolate bars in past 60 days.

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Potential Ideological Infidelities:

1. Subject claims to oppose Henderson family’s flour over lax ethics. Subject may be lying, and may oppose Henderson family’s flour only because of a family feud. (re: Ginnie Henderson’s badmouthing of subject’s tomato basil soup at last year’s Commune Compost Festival.)

[CLICK FOR MORE](#)

Wow, Prunella thought. Beryl is exhausted, her face aging beyond her years, living a life where dung assumes an all-important role, yet she’s only able to uphold eighty percent of her beliefs. And that’s mostly because of unavoidable things like living in the country and using the bus to get around. She was trying. Unlike Gerda, who was constantly trying to criticize others for



not being faithful to their beliefs or for having beliefs that she thought were made in bad faith – beliefs that she thought people were flat-out wrong for having. What gives her the right to criticize? It was like the super vegan scenario. Who gets to draw the line between who should and shouldn't be criticized?

Even Beryl couldn't completely cut out her Damn, That's Chocolatey! bars. Chocolate had always been a decadent thing in the family. When That Guy was still around being a tyrant, Mom was given a bag of chocolate-covered ants that a friend brought back from Colombia. That Guy didn't allow candies in the house, and even though most people wouldn't consider ants to be candies (even chocolate-covered ones), they were in his house, and therefore they were contraband. Mom supported the candy ban, giving birth to the family use of the term 'girlcotting', but she figured why not treat themselves, so she gave the girls a handful of ants each when That Guy was at work one day. Mom and Prunella ate all of them right away. So delicious. So sinful, Prunella remembered. They were like chocolate-covered peanuts. Beryl painstakingly stripped the chocolate off the ants' little limbs and held a funeral for the ants in the backyard before eating her chocolate bits. Gerda refused to eat them at first, but when no one was around, Prunella caught her eating them, too, in the security of her bedroom. Yes, Prunella thought it was wrong, and she figured that if everyone in the world ate chocolate-covered ants whenever they wanted there'd be chaos, but the wrong thing was sometimes so good.

\* \* \*

After some more conversation and milling around, they gathered within the newly painted mahogany-colored walls of the candle-lit dining room. It was decorated like a log cabin Mom seated Don at the head of the table. While she set the table she gave him a peck on the cheek. When she sat down she caressed his knee. Then she made googly eyes at him.

“Girls,” Mom said as she bit into a crostini. “I have news for you.”

“Here it comes,” Gerda said to Prunella.

“I’m starting a business,” Mom said. “With Don.”

“You hate business, though,” Gerda said.

“I used to. Yes,” Mom said. “Now I only hate pointless businesses.”

“You’re a capitalist now?” Beryl asked.

Mom smiled at Don. “Yes, I guess I am,” she said. “I am a capitalist.”

This was just great. Mom had suddenly committed herself to bilking people out of money, resources, reverting to the law of the jungle. But Prunella hid that she was upset.

Don asked what the big deal was. “You girls commies or something?”

Beryl said yes, she even lived on a commune. Gerda said she had hoped to be a communist, but found she’s more of a radical socialist. And Prunella didn’t say anything. She knew it would be just a matter of time before there were a dozen clowns hanging out of the windows spastically honking their clown horns at her. But the problem was she also didn’t really believe in getting upset at her Mom or giving her Mom or her boyfriend a hard time.

“Sweeties, I don’t want to ruffle any feathers,” Don said, “but this country is what it is because of our freedom to do business. It sounds to me as if you’re ungrateful for the hard work and good business your forefathers did.”

Beryl and Gerda looked like they were ready to flip the table over.

“Gerdyl. Berra. You ought to sit back,” Don said, “and reflect on what you have here.”

At that point, Prunella wouldn't have denied her sisters whatever harsh reaction they were readying to unleash. Don was turning out to be kind of a dick. But Mom liked him. Mom might even love him.

And Gerda was about to let him have it, but, despite herself, Prunella cut her off. “You're right, Don. The, um, the founding fathers, like you said, did a pretty good job.” Prunella felt the glare of her sisters settle on her. “It's just a shame that somewhere along the line, we lost sight of the opportunities, of the sense of fairness,” she sputtered, “that capitalism's capable of, and became – “

“Oh, stop making excuses, Prunella,” Gerda said. “I know you don't believe in capitalism either, so stop defending it and stop pandering to him and start defending yourself. And us. Your sisters.” Then she looked at Mom. “Tell me this is all a joke.” She held her hand out to Beryl, and Beryl gave the cell phone back to her.

Prunella felt like there were ten clowns honking their clown horns at her at that point, but how many more would there be if she joined her sisters in ganging up on her Mom?

“It's not a joke,” Mom calmly said. “I knew this would upset you. But you were going to find out eventually. And I'm not going to tip-toe around it. That's one thing that won't change with me, and, girls, I respect you for not tip-toeing either. That's not how I raised you.”

“Mom,” Prunella said, “what exactly is your business?” Prunella paused for a moment to give Mom time to answer, to assuage, but she didn't. “I mean you're not selling something that people don't need at least. Right? I can't imagine you signing off on some big advertising thing.”

“It’s sales, honey, if that’s what you’re asking,” Mom said. “And yes, there will be some advertising involved in select markets, but I’m not looking to turn into Neo-Imperialist-Mart or anything. You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Subject opposes capitalism yet defended it,” Gerda said.

Prunella wasn’t confused this time. “You took my reading?”

“Listen to this, Mom. This comes from my iDeologometer. It measures how faithful one is to their beliefs.” Gerda held the phone close to her face as she read. “Subject opposes private business yet supported it in conversation with mother. Subject believes in being straightforward yet subject declined to reveal disappointment in subject’s mother. Subject believes it’s important for a person to be faithful to her beliefs, but condones mother’s betrayal of her beliefs.”

There were fewer clowns than Prunella expected. Only two. A third shook his fist from the car. Being unfaithful to her beliefs, which was mostly not sticking up for them, wasn’t news at this point. And why even care? Gerda likely had as low of an iDeologometer rating as she.

Mom wasn’t fazed either. She said she knew that Prunella was disappointed. She didn’t have to say so. And she didn’t much approve of Gerda throwing her sister under the bus like that, either. And who says she betrayed her beliefs? Some computer? No. They simply changed.

Gerda pointed at Prunella. “All I’m saying,” she said. “Is that you’re playing peacemaker in bad faith. You’re not sticking up for what you believe. You’re just sticking up for Mom. You know what your rating is? It’s a 1.9. Lower than last time.”

“You want to know what your rating is?” Prunella asked.

Gerda got out of her seat. “This isn’t about me!” Prunella had gotten to her if Gerda’s pacing the length of the table meant anything. But Gerda stopped. “You know what?” she said. “Go ahead. Read it. I’ve got nothing to hide. I’m not perfect either.”

Prunella was in a position where she was swerving to avoid the clowns, but it felt like she was swerving right into a different group of clowns who were in a car with the name 'Prunella' stenciled on the side. She didn't believe in these sorts of confrontations with Gerda. But she was sick of Gerda pointing the finger at those whose beliefs, or whose fidelity to those beliefs, wasn't up to snuff. Who was Gerda to say? So Prunella shared the reading.

iDeologometer Rating: 2.9

UBTB Point Value (Upheld Beliefs/Total Beliefs): 290,000.29/1,000,001

Percent Score: 29%

Belief Fidelity to Belief Infidelity Ratio: >3:10

Rationale:

1. Subject opposes capitalism but is a willing participant (click [here](#) for details) in many capitalist ventures.
2. Subject opposes child labor but has multiple articles of clothing (click [here](#) for details) made by children at slave wages.
3. Subject opposes invasion of privacy yet invades the privacy of others continually (click [here](#) for details), including less serious forms of privacy invasion such as gossip (click [here](#) for details - note: due to high volume of gossip only last 23 days of gossip record available).
4. Subject opposes prissiness, especially in females, but twice refused in the last 60 days to visit sister's farm because it's "disgusting there, literally a pig sty" and because on a previous visit the husband of the subject's sister offered subject's male companion a handful of human feces which the said companion accepted for reasons unknown.
5. Subject opposes deceit in all forms but lied at least 136 times in past 60 days (click [here](#) for details), including to former male companion and to subject's sisters.
6. Subject opposes the eating of meat but ate 4 super-sized Blood Burger value meals from McDeadCow's in the last 60 days (and really liked them) though subject claims that McDeadCow visits are only for the fries and for when it's late and nothing else is open.

CLICK FOR MORE

Prunella clicked for more, but Mom interrupted her.

"That's enough, Prunella," Mom said. "You've made your point." She got out of her seat. "Is everyone ready for the stew? Yes? No? I am. Now I know that you are, too, Gerda." Then she bent down to kiss Don. "And I bet you are, too, love? Right?"

Don nodded vigorously, and Mom went into the kitchen. Gerda, as red in the face as the clown wig in Prunella's imagination, went to deredden her face in the bathroom.

It was as if the clowns were honking at her, but there were no noises coming out of their horns anymore. Why should they make her feel bad for having a 1.9 rating? They had no right. And, for that matter, when should anyone feel bad for not holding up their end of the belief bargain? If they were anything less than perfect? If they have below an 8 rating? Below a 5 or a 2? When did anyone deserve to be criticized? Answer: no one did. And Prunella didn't even feel all that concerned about living according to any of her beliefs. So what if she avoided arguing needlessly with her sisters. So what if Mom wanted to start a business. Big deal! She can be a capitalist. She can be part of the problem. What should Prunella care? Why worry about going to McDeadCow's anymore? Gerda's absolutely right, their fries are amazing, and if Prunella wants a Blood Burger with them, then bring it on. Hold the mayo, extra blood!

"Don, I'm not here to get after you" Beryl said. "But was this business thing your idea?"

"Nope," he said, tucking his napkin in his sweater collar. "It was all hers."

"Well," Beryl said. "What exactly is this business?"

Don hesitated. He smiled a bit. "I think I ought to let your mother tell you."

When Mom came back with the stew, she saw that goofy smile of Don's and smiled herself. "You told them?"

He shook his head. She asked him if she should tell them, and he said, yeah, why not.

"Don and I," she said, moving behind Don, wrapping his arms around his neck, "are getting married! We're engaged!"

Silence. The loudest thing was the half-surprised, half-ecstatic look on Don's face. It remained that way until Gerda returned.

"Why is everyone so quiet?"

Prunella hated Gerda at that moment, hated that Mom would have to publicly admit her sins again.

“I’m getting married to Don,” Mom said.

“You’re what!” Gerda shouted.

Mom sighed. “I know. I broke my vow.” She pulled Don up, out of his seat. “But what can I say? People change. They grow into other things. And I love this man.”

Beryl got out of her seat, too. “I’m okay with it,” she said. “I know what this is.” She walked over, hugged Mom. “Love will give you a handful of your own shit, and, somehow, for some reason, you’ll be okay with it.”

“Sweeties, your mother and I,” Don said, “are very happy together.”

Both Gerda and Prunella had their phones out at that point.

iDeologometer Rating: 5.2

UBTB Point Value (Upheld Beliefs/Total Beliefs): 496.08/954

Percent Score: 52%

Belief Fidelity to Belief Infidelity Ratio: 1:2

Rationale:

1. Subject opposes gun control in all forms but voted for gubernatorial candidate that supports assault weapons ban.
2. Subject opposes criticism about his country but sat back and patiently listened to wife speak ill of subject’s beloved United States of America.
3. Subject opposes abortion on principle but supported daughter-in-law in having an abortion after subject’s fiancée convinced subject that it was the daughter-in-law’s right.
4. Subject believes in being straightforward but remained quiet when fiancée told subject the names of wife’s daughters, names which the subject believes to be even more ridiculous and laughable than the names of the black people in inner city Milwaukee.
5. Subject opposes putting women in harm’s way but was browbeat into taking fiancée on dangerous bear hunting expedition.
6. Subject opposes candy in his home but allows candy-covered bear parts.

[CLICK FOR MORE](#)

“He’s just like That Guy!” Gerda said to Mom. “He’s violent. He loves weapons just like That Guy ended up doing. He even hates candy like That Guy! For God’s sake, Mom, you’re going to marry a pro-life, bear-killing racist.”

“Bear-killing?” Beryl asked, taking the cell phone from Gerda.

“What the hell you talking about?” Don said. “What does it say there? I’m no racist.”

“Oh, no?” Gerda said. “What would you say if I told you I had an African-American boyfriend named Money Dollar? Hmm? His name was Money Dollar Williams.”

“I’d say that’s a silly name, but that doesn’t mean I’m racist.”

“But I bet you’d say all of those people have silly names. You are racist!” Gerda shouted.

“That’s not true, Gerdyl,” Don said. “That’s not true.”

“She’s right, Mom,” Prunella said. “It’s not overtly racist, but – “ Prunella cut herself off. She was helping to put her Mom on trial.

“I hate to feed you the cliché, girls,” Mom said, “but even though he’s far from perfect., he’s a good man.” Mom grabbed Don’s hand. “And I have nothing more to say about it.”

Beryl stepped forward. She gave the phone back to Gerda. Beryl’s arms dropped to her sides. “You. Kill. Bears.”

“That’s right,” Mom said. “We’re in the dead bear part business.”

“What the hell is that?” Gerda asked.

And Beryl asked, “What kind of people would want dead bear body parts?”

Mom just laughed as if they were naïve little girls. “Many, many kinds of people want dead bear parts,” she said. And then she explained.

They went north. To Canada, Alaska. Flew there in Don’s plane. They camped out in the woods. They spied on bear hunters. When a hunter killed a bear, Don came running after them



with a fake park ranger's uniform and a fake badge – and a fake gun – and scared off the poachers. They'd been doing it for months. And they were able to find out that in the areas they patrolled, poaching had dropped by more than 50%. They were, basically, marking territories as unsafe for poachers. They were saving bears. And harvesting the organs of dead ones. And hacking their limbs off. And putting them in bags. And then selling them for profit. And they fucking loved it. It was adventurous, adrenaline-pumping, and, they believed, it was ultimately good work that they were doing. And when people stopped killing endangered bears, when there weren't poachers, then they wouldn't sell bear parts anymore.

“No. No. No,” Beryl kept saying. “That's so completely fucking warped.” She shook her head so fast that Prunella couldn't even see her face. “I can't even begin to explain it to you.”

Gerda had her cell phone out, trying to get an iDeologometer reading when Mom was speaking. She put it away in frustration. “You're so mixed-up that the damn thing's not even working,” she said to Mom.

Beryl stomped into the living room, and Gerda followed. They gathered their things.

“Mom,” Beryl said. “I'm girlcotting you. Until you stop this truly fucked up *business*.”

“It's a crime,” Prunella muttered. She was still seated in the dining room. “Profiting off murder.”

“You're marrying another sociopath,” Gerda said. “Killing bears on top of it.”

Mom sucked her teeth. “I don't expect you to understand me, girls, but I understand you, and fully support whatever you decide to do. I love you all the same.”

Gerda and Beryl were ready to go. They told Prunella to hurry up, let's get the hell out of here. But Prunella didn't move.

“You've got to be kidding me,” Gerda said.

“Is this one of your jokes? Part of your weird sense of humor?” Beryl asked.

“No,” Prunella said. An iDeologometer reading would say that she didn’t have the courage to stand up to her Mom, to girlcott her like her sisters were doing. But seeing them, listening to them condemning their Mom made her forget why her sisters were, and why she should be upset with their Mom in the first place.

Beryl and Gerda declared that they would girlcott Prunella, too, if she wouldn’t renounce their Mom, and Prunella said fine.

“If it has to be that way,” she said, “then it’ll be that way.”

And her sisters walked out the door.

Prunella hugged, really squeezed and hugged her Mom. But not Don. Not yet.

“Mom,” she said, “what you and Don are doing...” Prunella took a step back. “It’s – I don’t know. I have no right to say this, I should just be girlcoting you, but what you’re doing seems so very, extremely wrong.”

Then they all went to the kitchen and ate some delicious, sinful youngberry pie.

## The Hideout

### Day 1

About a hundred people were getting shot out by the ravine while they were having sex. The man and the woman still in the house, that is, were having sex. Not the people by the ravine. They were naked, too. But they weren't lying down. They were standing. They were standing naked on the edge of a mass grave waiting to get shot in the back of the head. So, yes, there was penetration of a sort at the ravine also, but, thinking about it, I'd say what was happening at the ravine was the complete opposite of sex. But there was sex where I was. The panting and the grunting and the moaning and the guttural German dirty talk were so loud that it masked the rifle fire coming from the outskirts of town, out by the ravine.

As for me, I was cut off, isolated in a hideout behind a false wall in the dining room of the house. I'd been cut off since yesterday evening. Physically, at least. In other ways, much longer. But being cut off wasn't so terrible. It was better than being with everyone else in the ravine. I had some stale bread. Some cans and water. A bucket that could probably hold – I hoped – six, maybe seven, more days of waste. I trapped the smell with a dinner plate of fine china, an heirloom that once belonged to my great-grandmother, who, I think, started our proud family tradition of dying in pogroms. At any rate, heirloom or not, the plate fit on top of the bucket perfectly.

I could see out the cracks between the planking of the fake wall. I could see the dining room, the unadorned proscenium that divided it from the living room, and the living room itself that terminated with the front door. I'd seen the whole show play out there. How the soldiers had broken in and clubbed Grandmother Dobrodub's jaw when she reached for the photo album and how they then removed her and the rest of the Dobrodubs who hadn't believed me when I told them how awful it would be, who didn't believe me when I said look, I've been hiding for a while now, I know how this works, and you, cousins, will get taken just like my parents and sister and brother-in-law and nephew unless you hide. It was understandable, of course. If I were them, I wouldn't want to believe me that the Germans were actually doing this and getting away with it, either. But they should've, because now, a day later, they probably had the weight of a packed school gymnasium's worth of corpses on top of them in the ravine.

And I then watched with disbelief how the SS officer, Hauptmann, and one of his men had cleaned up the place that same evening, with Hauptmann settling in and making it his lodging. Terrible luck. Not that I was surprised, though. I saw how he removed the Dobrodubs' photographs and the mezuzah and the menorah and everything else that would hint that this had

been the house of a loving, reputable Jewish family. I saw Hauptmann kicked open the door to the living room, how he and his bride, Henrietta, whirled into the house, him carrying her in his arms while in the middle of a passionate kiss. I saw how Hauptmann served dinner to her, how they didn't make it halfway through their meal before she slipped off her shoe and started to rub his crotch with her foot. How he picked her up and laid her on the sofa and lodged himself between her legs. How she said she had always dreamed of Mallorca or Malta or some Mediterranean beach for her honeymoon but if this is how it would be the rest of the week then Latvia would be just fine.

A honeymoon in Latvia. How could a man be so brazen or imprudent or just plain dumb as to his wife would be okay with being brought to the site of a mass murder? And for their honeymoon at that! And I, of course, was trapped with that man and his wife, forced to bear witness to this absurdly incongruent display of love and lust. There I was, the third, invisible party in the honeymoon of *Sturmbannfuhrer* Fritz Hauptmann, the SS officer at the head of a German military police unit tasked with killing Jews, or "partisans" as I heard him call us, and his beautiful young bride, Henrietta. While I huddled in the dark with a bucket of my own piss beside me, they ate and napped and made love all day and night. It was almost enough to make me wish I was in the ravine, but I tried, really tried – taking deep breaths, thinking happy thoughts, pinching myself, all of that – not to let the whole situation get to me, no matter how senseless it was, because if it got to me, then that would be it. If you got too emotional, if you lost control and allowed yourself to leave the hideout, then you were as good as executed.

## Day 2

In the afternoon one of Hauptmann's men came knocking on the door. Hauptmann stormed out of the bedroom to answer it.

"What the hell is it, Boden?" Hauptmann asked. I could only hear the clinking and rustling of metal and wool from the soldier's equipment and uniform before Hauptmann took a step back to give himself some distance from Boden, the soldier. I could see then that Boden was wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. His face was spattered red, and there was a still partly-wet splash of blood on his chest and shoulders.

Boden took off his cap. "It's the men, sir," he said.

"Well it better be fucking important," Hauptmann snapped. "You know I'm on my honeymoon."

"I know, sir, but this problem needs your attention."

Hauptmann turned away from Boden, looked at the floor, and sighed. "Well, what is it, then?"

Boden started to walk into the house, but Hauptmann put his hand out.

"No. Don't even think about coming in here." Hauptmann pushed him back outside with the tips of his fingers. He flicked something from the soldier's shoulder. "You have pieces of skull and Jew blood all over yourself."

"Yes, sir," he said, gripping his cap tighter, seeming a little embarrassed that he had forgotten his manners, as if the first thing every good little German boy learned was to wipe his feet and wash his hands of brain matter and Jew blood before coming inside.

Boden took a breath before beginning. “Most of the men on my shift refused to shoot,” he said. “I had to do it all myself, along with Limburger. It took hours, and right after we finished Limburger started crying and then he screamed and threw his rifle into the ravine and ran off.”

“What do you mean ran off?” Hauptmann asked.

“He’s deserted, sir.”

“If he comes back, arrest him,” Hauptmann said. “And promise extra schnapps to the men on your shift who take part in the actions. And impress upon them that, even though they’re not at the front, the work they’re doing here is also a defense of the fatherland. Their duty. As patriots.” Hauptmann put his hand on the door and started to close it, but he stopped. “Why now?” he asked. “After all these months.”

“That’s the thing, sir. I think the –“ Boden cleared his throat. “The nature of the work – the liquidations,” he said in a hushed voice, “have taken their toll.”

“The women?”

“And children,” Boden said. “This town had a lot of them.”

Hauptmann nodded and said, “Allow them to drink on duty, too, if necessary. And try to space out the number of kiddies you have to kill in one action. If you see too many in a group, save them for the next, ja?”

After the police officer, soldier, child murderer, however you want to call him, left, Henrietta walked into the room in a tightly tied silk robe. Hauptmann met her in the middle of the room and attempted to slip his hands inside the robe, but she gently pushed his arms away from her and took a step backward. He was floored. The look on his face was the kind one had when receiving news of a death (in normal times, at least). He asked her if she had heard what they were talking about. Some of it, she said. He reached out to hug her and she accepted his

arms. She put her head against his chest. He slipped the robe off one of her shoulders and massaged her.

“What was he saying about children?” she asked. “They’re not – ”

“No, no, no.” Hauptmann must have gotten a little blood on his hands when he pushed Boden outside because a smear of blood ended up on Henrietta’s shoulder. When he noticed, I could see the panic in his eyes. “Nooo, nooo, no,” he said again, nervously chuckling. He licked his fingers and wiped off the blood. “Only partisans, sweetheart. Just Jewish and Bolshevik men.”

“Then why were you talking about women and children? I’m sure I heard that man say something about children.”

He started to stroke her hair and kindly explain the subtleties of military police procedure, and that the discussion between he and the soldier centered on how it was hard, difficult, very difficult work for the men to separate the women and children from their fathers and husbands, but it must be done to protect the Reich, to restore Germany and Germans to their special place in the world.

“Then where are the women and children? I didn’t see any when I came into town.”

“They’ve been resettled in the east,” Hauptmann said without hesitation.

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. Were all German citizens this gullible? “*Resettled in the east?*” Hold it one second now. That’s what they told each other when Jews started disappearing from places like Berlin and Hamburg, where it made sense to say that Jews were being moved to this menacing and nebulous east. There was a lot that was east of Germany. But here? There was no more east here. This was Latvia. As east as it gets. East from here was



Moscow. East was Siberia. East was the Pacific Ocean. There was no resettlement here. Only execution.

The late afternoon light came through the cracks in my hideout, lighting chips and nicks in the gold trim of my great grandmother's china plate. The blue painted image in its center – a girl on a dock offering her hand to a boy in a boat – clearly wasn't as bright as it probably had been, but the scene in the center – it was as warm and simple as ever, and this plate, that scene, had been witness to, and supported, many a piece of bread broken at the Dobrudubs' table.

Henrietta, it seemed, didn't have the stomach to consider that he was lying. Having been satisfied with his explanation, she looked up at him warmly and hugged him tighter. Hauptmann released her after a minute and led her by the hand to the liquor cabinet. He put his arm around her and poured two glasses of schnapps. He handed her one. He toasted to their love.

### **Day 3**

I was exhausted enough from trying not to make a sound or chew too noisily or breathe too loudly, from trying not to involuntarily assert that I exist, that I was able to get some sleep. But they interrupted it with their incessant lovemaking. The bedroom was on the other side of the back wall of my hideout and the bed was placed against that wall, specifically the headboard. It wasn't even the noise of the headboard banging against the wall that woke me up but the force of impact. It knocked my head off the wall, throwing my chin into my chest. I instinctively reached for the dinner plate and was almost disappointed to find that it hadn't crashed and splintered on the floor.

It was one thing to have to listen to Henrietta's moaned declarations of love, to Hauptmann's dirty talk that my university German only half-prepared me to understand – I was able to block that out at times, but there was no ignoring them when their erotic acrobatics banged the damn wall and shook me awake. Who did these people think they were? It couldn't possibly be pleasurable. It was a marvel of endurance. These people were more like athletes, like runners in a marathon, than lovers. And athletes had to train for their events. Is that what they were doing in Germany these days, training Aryan super-athletes for the Olympics, Aryan super-soldiers for war, and training Aryan super-lovers to maintain a near constant state of arousal? But how does one train to keep your genitals from getting sore? It was divinely inspired. It was as if there had been some sort of Teutonic ambrosia in all those now-empty pints of schnapps scattered in the living room. If everyone in Germany was like Hauptmann and Henrietta, then there wasn't much hope for the rest of us. There'd be little Siegfrieds and Brunhildas in every corner of the globe writing works of philosophy, composing symphonies, waging wars, being typical Germans.

But they didn't go unmolested either. Someone was knocking on the door again.

“Oh, fuck,” Hauptmann said. He apologized to Henrietta and said he'd be right back. He opened the bedroom door, but stopped before leaving the room. He politely, even sweetly requested of Henrietta to “wait right here, darling.” And then he closed the door. He stomped out of the bedroom and into the living room, every stomp seeming to growl about how much of an inconvenience this mass murdering business was.

It was Boden at the door again. When Hauptmann opened the door, the bedsprings tensed and released and the bedroom floorboards creaked. Henrietta must've been up. I salivated a bit, I

could taste the inevitable argument, the questions she would ask after eavesdropping. If she found out, then Hauptmann could bid *guten nacht* to his honeymoon.

“Well?” Hauptmann asked.

“It’s the men again, sir.”

“What now?” Hauptmann said in a whine. “Didn’t you tell them about the fatherland? And the schnapps?”

“Yes, sir. Exactly as you instructed. But the men from the other shifts started asking for extra schnapps, too. They said why should some get extra schnapps and others not get extra schnapps seeing as how all of them had to liquidate women and children.” Boden was looking at the floor. “So I only thought it fair for the offer to, uh, that they get the offer, too. And, well, sir, I had to. They would have refused to serve again. We wouldn’t have been able to do the action.”

“Okay, fine. Give them schnapps, too. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Hauptmann said as he started to close the door. “I have an insatiable young woman waiting for me in the bedroom.”

“Sir,” Boden said. “We ran out of schnapps.” He glanced at the empty pint standing on the floor next to the sofa leg. Then he briefly looked up at Hauptmann.

Hauptmann looked laughably forlorn as he studied the liquor cabinet and the dwindling schnapps supply. He had a fifth and a few pints left, and he gave all of it but one of those pints to Boden. “Give them this for today’s action,” Hauptmann said. “You’ll need to order more schnapps from Riga. Tell the men they’ll get their share when it gets here. And give them an extra ration of sausage in the meantime.”

After Boden left, sure enough, as I had assumed, Henrietta revealed she had been listening, and I couldn’t wait to see the fireworks. She was already standing in the center of the room when Hauptmann turned around.

“Sweetheart, I asked – “

– you to wait in the bedroom? But he didn’t finish what he was saying. He must have registered at that moment that her arms were crossed, and that she was pissed, that she had heard something she wasn’t supposed to.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Hauptmann asked cautiously. He tried to put his hand on her shoulder but she swatted it away and recrossed her arms. Good, Henrietta. Show him. Show him you won’t stand for this Show him that the average German won’t consent to this. Show him there are humans yet, even in the midst of all this, there are still humans.

“*Insatiable?*” she asked. “Why did you have to talk to that man about me?” She began to cry. “Is that the first thing you think of when you think of me? Just some insatiable woman?” She told him that she was supposed to be his wife, not some barmaid, and then she started crying pretty heavily. “That man,” she said, “has no business knowing anything about my private life, much less my love life, but you talked to him about me as if I was the town whore.”

*That’s* what she was upset about? Those two men were talking about murder. Were they not? Was it just me that heard that bit about the liquidating? I had my hands on the wall to balance myself while I was watching, but I had gotten so worked up that I started shaking the fake wall a little, rattling my cage, rocking the china plate.

The din of rifle fire started up at that moment. Hauptmann apologized over and over, made weak excuse after weak excuse. The shooting began then, and he had to raise his voice to be heard. A torrent of excuses followed. It’s just talk, honey, it doesn’t mean anything, I need to project power, and virility, in front of the men, I didn’t – The volume of the rifle fire and the hollering of the soldiers picked up then and Hauptmann had to start shouting. I didn’t mean it! Of

course I don't think you're no better than a common whore! I've never been fonder of a woman in my whole life, I love you so much! And so on.

And the excuses worked. She – inconceivably, she let the whole thing go. She calmed down. I picked up the plate from the bucket and felt like smashing it over her head, but I couldn't do that to the plate. It was bad enough, I realized, that I was using it to cover up the scent of shit. At any rate, I felt like strangling her. Her husband just plied a platoon of punks and cowards with liquor and extra sausage links to kill innocent people, the killing of which was audible to all three of us, and she was fussing about some thoughtless comment about her sex drive? I saw that she was allowing him to hug her and serve her more schnapps, to my ever-mounting frustration, but I saw right after the hug that she moved her head away when he leaned in to kiss her, and I put the plate back on the bucket. There was some hope yet. She would learn the extent of what was happening here – she *had* to – and would not be able to ignore it.

#### **Day 4**

The next morning Hauptmann actually decided to get dressed and go to work. It was the first chance in days I had to escape the house. But escape the town? If I wanted to continue in this world, I'd be taking an awful big risk. There was no telling how much of a presence the Germans still had outside, but they had to leave at some point. How many people were there left to murder here? It should have made me shudder, but I didn't. I couldn't get past the lovers. What if they spent the rest of the time fondling and having sex and making ad nauseum declarations of love for each other, unencumbered by what's going on outside the house? What if Henrietta left

seeing the other side of her husband? That was what made me shudder, that she would be escape this place without coming to grips with what her government, her husband was doing in her name.

Hauptmann wasn't gone long. He returned with a bouquet. Or his best imitation of a bouquet. There was nothing flowering this time of year, and the florist had certainly been killed, so Hauptmann's arrangement was nothing but some tall browning grass with a few wheat fronds and a mangled dandelion in the center.

When Henrietta woke up and shuffled into the living room in her silk robe, the bouquet was in water. She looked at it, then at Hauptmann, then back at the bouquet. She smiled.

"I wish I had been stationed in Holland for you," Hauptmann said. "But I got the best this town has to offer."

She started grinning and put her hand on his cheek and hugged him. Then she sat on his lap and curled against his chest, but, in spite of the reconciliation, there still wasn't any sex. My proud and principled, newly-minted *housefrau* was still holding out. Hauptmann, I must say, had managed to solve that insatiable woman problem pretty quickly.

The Jewish problem, however, had returned. Boden was back.

"Again?" Henrietta asked.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Hauptmann said. "Let me get rid of this."

Hauptmann opened the door. Boden's uniform was clean, his skin as-yet-untouched by sweat or dirt or bits of skull. Hauptmann went outside and closed the door.

While he was outside, Henrietta held her head in her hands looking like she was about to cry again. She sat like this for about a minute or so, and then got up and looked at her surroundings for maybe the first time since she came here. She looked at the furniture, out the

windows, at the white curtains gently blowing into the room. Then she looked at the walls. She leaned in to look at certain spots on the walls. I knew what she was looking at. She was looking at the squares and ovals that were brighter than the rest of the wall, at those spots where the Dobrodubs' photos had been. Then she looked at the liquor cabinet. She got a glass. She kept looking for something, but didn't seem to find it.

When Hauptmann returned she asked him without turning around, "Where's the schnapps?"

The *schnapps*? You saw the empty spaces on the wall. Can't you see what that means? Can't you see that you're honeymooning in a stolen house? The house of my murdered cousins? (Why hadn't they listened to me and hidden themselves?) And you're bothered by *schnapps*? *Schnapps*? Is she that callous or just stupid?

Boden must not have had good news because Hauptmann came in with a scowl on his face. And Henrietta caught him off guard, as he undoubtedly had whatever problem Boden brought to the door on his mind.

"I had to – I had to give them to the men."

"You gave the men our schnapps?"

"It's complicated," he said. "I had to, my flower. It was – They needed a reward for their service. To the fatherland."

"You gave away *our* schnapps to your men?"

"Listen, sweetheart. I'm sorry about the schnapps. But there's something else," Hauptmann said. He moved closer to her, but stopped short of touching her. "I hate that I have to do this, that I have to say it, but I have to go."

"Now? You're going to leave me here now?" she asked.

“Something came up,” he said, shaking his head. “I won’t be long. I promise I won’t. Something with the men needs my attention, sweetheart. I’m sorry.”

“Now?”

“Sweetheart, please.”

“You convince me to come Latvia – Latvia! Of all places! – for our honeymoon, foolishly – “

“But you said you couldn’t wait for me any longer. You wanted to come to – “

“Don’t interrupt me,” she snapped. “You foolishly promised that we’ll have the week to ourselves. Then you talk about me like I’m some kind of whore to your men. You bring me to this strange house, abandoned by whoever lived here. People who are either dead or refugees and for some reason have taken all their photographs and left behind things of actual value. Like the china,” she said, motioning to the china cabinet.

Yes, yes, Henrietta. You have it. The china, the china. Why would expelled people take photos and not the china? Deep down you must know they were killed. You must know your husband removed the photographs so you didn’t feel uncomfortable. You must have the sense to know this You know. I know you know. I know I’m not the only sensible one, the only – yes – outraged one left alive.

“And now you’re going to leave me here, alone, in this strange place. It feels haunted, Fritz.”

It is haunted! You’re right, Henrietta. You’re so close. Make the connection. Ask him about the women and children, the entire families, the innocents.

“And on top of that you give away my schnapps?”

No, no! Not the schnapps! Forget the schnapps!



“Sweetheart, sweetheart, I’m sorry. Believe me, I’m so very sorry. Please understand. It’s war.”

“I don’t see any war here,” she said. “All I hear are what – executions?”

“These are dangerous people – men, dangerous men, Henrietta. Enemies of the Reich. I’m doing this for you. For my family. For your family. For us.”

He slipped, he slipped, Henrietta. Did you hear? He said people first. Not men. People. Women. And children!

“I can’t believe you took my schnapps,” she said.

Hauptmann had one more attempt at appeasement in him. “I only gave away our schnapps,” he said sincerely, “For our country. For the war effort. For our right to live in peace. And dignity. To not make the same mistakes we made after the last war. You’re a patriot aren’t you? I need you to be a true German.”

The appeasement worked. She considered each word, each sentence, each deadly sentiment in earnest. She whispered that she was a patriot, said he knew that. Then she breathed deeply, lowered her head, apologized, said she’d do anything for the fatherland, she didn’t mean to be selfish, and so on and so forth.

He had turned it around on her, and I couldn’t help it anymore. I stood up abruptly and really banged my shoulder hard against the wall. I froze. I was finished. The hideout, this cage, seemed to have gotten smaller, or that which was in it, me and all that goes along with that, had gotten bigger, started boiling, streaming through the walls. I kept waiting for them to walk up to my wall, speaking in hushed alarm, carrying the shadow of a gun. I even hoped that they had heard me, so I wouldn’t have to listen anymore.

I began to fear that it wasn't just stupidity or obtuseness but just plain callousness. And I didn't want to be a part of this callousness.

But, amazingly, there was no indication that they had heard me. I peeked through the crack, and there was nothing. They had heard nothing. Slumping down to the floor, I wanted to stretch my legs, to lay completely down, tired of cutting myself off in this hideout-turned-cage. There was the china winking at me again. I picked it up, clutched it to my chest. The fetid smell was almost unbearable, but I kept clutching the plate, wondering how much senselessness a person could be expected to take before losing it. How much more could I take?

### **Day 5**

There was one more moment when I could have escaped the house. My plan all along had been to wait for the soldiers to leave, but the other part of me, the part that believed, had to see, in the midst of all this, needed to see this domestic drama come to its inevitable end: Henrietta taking a stand. I believed she would. Otherwise, even for Henrietta and Hauptmann, there'd only be danger, a constant state of alarm that entire nations could at any moment turn against each other or even against their own people. I was completely alone. Hauptmann had gone off. And at some point in the night, Henrietta had also left. Where to? I didn't know until Hauptmann came back the next morning and found her dressed and sitting alert and erect on a dining room chair, facing the door. Her bags were packed.

Hauptmann entered in clean civilian clothes. His hair was a little wet.

"You showered," Henrietta said.

“I didn’t want you to see me dirty from work.”

She nodded. “You mean you didn’t want me to see you covered in blood?”

He didn’t have an answer for her. He looked puzzled.

“The blood of children!” she shouted.

“Sweetheart, I’m not sure what – ”

“I saw you at the ravine,” she said.

“You left the house?”

She nodded.

“You saw me?”

She nodded again.

“What did you see?”

“Oh, please, Fritz,” she said, laughing a little.

She knew, as did I, that he was trying to suss out if he was in a position to fill in the gaps of her knowledge of the facts with lies. He wasn’t.

“You can’t lie to me,” she said.

No, he can’t. You can’t lie anymore, Fritz. She knows it all now. And she’s going to let you have it.

“I *saw* it,” she said. “You. I saw you shooting not just men. But women and children.”

She looked him straight in the eye then and sorrowfully said, “I even saw you shoot a baby.”

Weasel your way out of that, Hauptmann.

She stood up. “I’m leaving,” she said, and she grabbed her bags. “You can take me to the station or I’ll walk. But I’m going home.”

“Sweetheart – “

“No. Don’t bother,” she said, turning away from him. “Are you going to take me or not?”

“But sweetheart – “

“I said no!”

He couldn’t believe it. He just stood there with his mouth open like some hulking idiot. I wanted to clap, I wanted to cheer, I wanted to hug her.

So Hauptmann, in desperation, pulled out all of the stops. He literally got on his knees and begged her not to leave him, to wait for him. That she needed to understand that if she truly didn’t want her country to make the same mistakes as at the end of the last war, then they needed to make sure the enemy – yes, the Jews – were out. And that they stayed out. That they weren’t allowed to sabotage their country, their government, their wages, their ability to put bread on the table and logs in the fire. It was dirty work. Tough work. Even the *Reichsführer* said we had the hardest work. But if we only take care of the fathers and the husbands, then the children would just grow to take their places and we’d never break the cycle of blah, blah, blah, blah.

I really couldn’t listen to any more at that point. And, up until then, Henrietta had shown such promise, such growth, such rationality, such – dare I say it? – morality. But she let his base groveling get to her. Agonizingly, heartbreakingly, world-shatteringly, she relented.

She said she’d wait for him, but she wasn’t guaranteeing anything. *Wasn’t guaranteeing anything?* Why bother? Everyone in that room knew she wouldn’t leave him.

He thanked her and proclaimed his love for her while sobbing, over and over and over. He crawled to her knees and hugged them, still sobbing, but she patted his head and told him to get up, it was okay but to please give her some space right then. He removed himself from her and held his hands up, still on his knees, still sobbing, and said okay, okay, I’m sorry, sorry, sorry, I’m so sorry, sweetheart, thank you, thank you.

Watching all of this – I'd hit bottom. I couldn't fight anymore. Certainly not them. Certainly not the way things apparently were. For Henrietta. For me. For all of us. There was no shot of fighting and winning those battles. The only thing I had a chance against was myself, but I didn't have the energy to fight that battle anymore either. I involuntarily stood up again in my wretched cage and I kicked over the bucket. And though I wasn't watching through the crack anymore, I knew they heard me and had to have been looking at me.

“Are you crazy!” I shouted at Henrietta after I had kicked open one of the wall plank. I squeezed through the opening and yelled some more. “How can you consent to this!” I had completely left the hideout by then. My hands were in the air. I held the dinner plate. It was covered in piss and shit but it still wasn't broken. I pointed at her. “You said you saw it!” I shouted. And that really scared her, and she ran to her husband, hid behind him with her hands on his shoulders, space no longer needed when the Jewish menace was at hand. “He's a monster!” I said to her. Then I said to him. “You are a monster!” And again to her. “Doesn't that *mean* anything to you?”

“Fritz!” she said. “Do something!”

Hauptmann reacted quickly, automatically after so many ravines. He drew his handgun and fired, solving his Jewish problem. And me? I was left with no question as to what one should expect, if he should ever leave the hideout.

## VITA

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