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IN SURVIVAL

BY 09

CYBERPUNK

A free speech mag for the proles and plebs of our glorious techno dystopia

想像力を動力源

"I really enjoy this magazine. I like reading it."
-Elon Musk (Trillionaire)

"....."
-Peter Thiel

This Issue:
• The future of Dating?
• Free Feet Pic

So Many Waifus, So Little Time:

Wifebots Have Arrived

☒
☒
☒

THE HERITAGE
WILL GUESTS

As
ge 21
hack a v
bypass the glitchy c

Pink-Phone



Pink Enough for Ya?

The new Pink-Phone™ from AppleTendo delivers the style and obsolescence you've come to expect from the greatest company on earth.

Don't settle for inorganic "smart" phones. Get you a phone that can think for itself for once. Get you a phone that bleeds.

Let's get squishy, bitch.

-C-Suite



カービィが色鮮やかにファミコン版で再登場/
新ワザ「コピー」で出てくる敵キャラすいこんで、すいこんだ敵キャラコピーして、ジャンプだ、ビームだ、スパークだ/もひとつおまけにハンマーだ/その数なんと20種類以上/さあ、キミはいったいくつのカービィに出会える?

*T*his magazine doesn't exist..

My dear dreggies, dreg addicts, and dregsters: the future is actually here and now! We made it. We are proles, and proud. Finally we have some FUBU media of our own. After all we need some reading material for those forty-five minute bathroom breaks at our "jobs."

*Welcome to **Cyber Dregs**, a wretched hive of septic centrism, based midwittery, rad radi-clists, and sensible edgelords. Its the opposite of pretentious; its **tentious**. We are your in flight entertainment on your trip to hell. Within these pages we will solve all crises such as putting an end to the gender wars, and also to Starwars.*

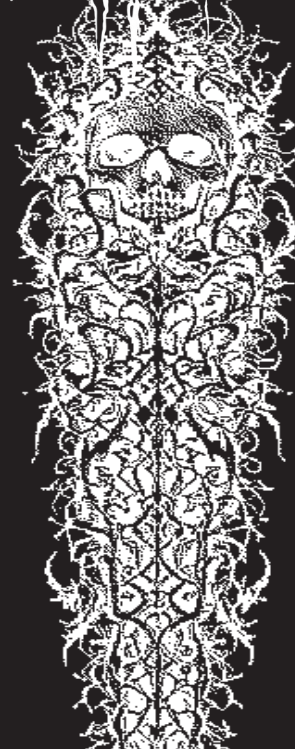
It's been quite a few decades of silliness, but now we realize there's nothing for us out there in these massive shopping malls called our countries. You can vote, but nothing changes. The flying cars aren't coming. The super-rich own it all, and we are expected to stay out of the way. Until now, we've lost ourselves in drugs, be they digital, video, or flesh. But no longer! The pleb awakening has begun. We will once again be artists; we will paint and sing until our owners senses are filled and they finally SWAT at us in annoyance. Then we will know we are alive! Finally there will come the day of the great outsiders and the touchgrassocalypse when we emerge from our musty ramen-soaked hovels and drink warm sunlight once again, reclaiming our clubs and spaces for a new century of hanging out.

Anyway it's something to do other than scrolling..

- Toxy

CYBER

DREGS



Death to the demoness Allegra Gellar



FUEL

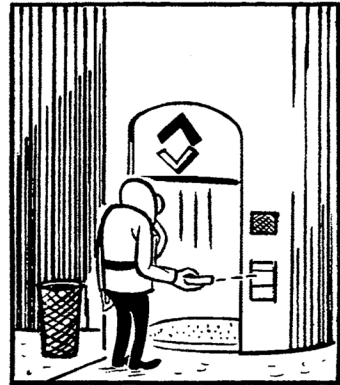
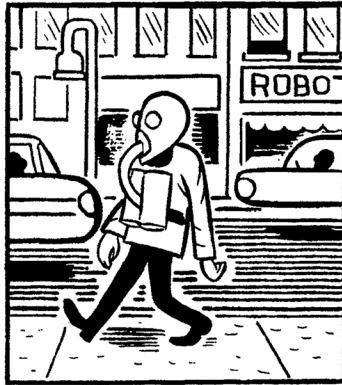
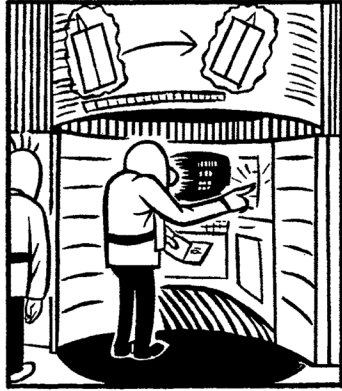
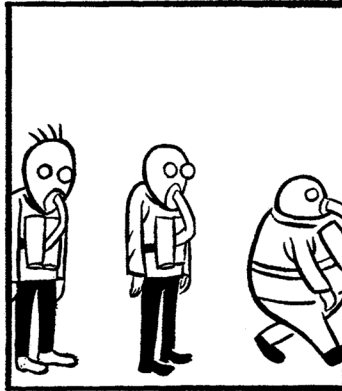
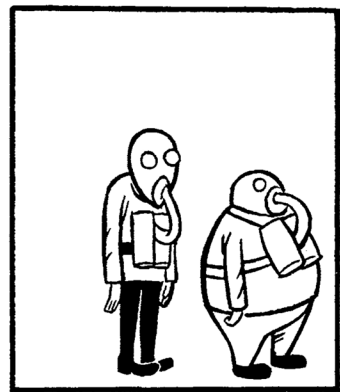
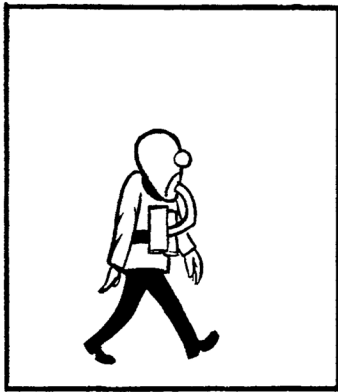


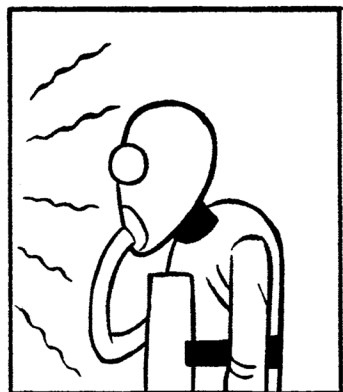
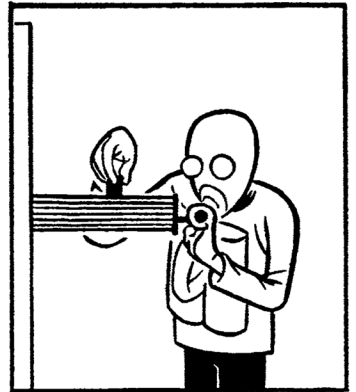
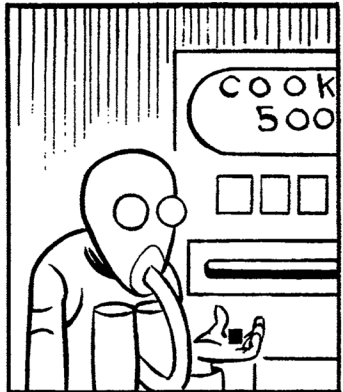
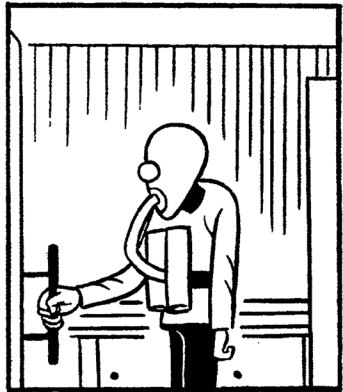
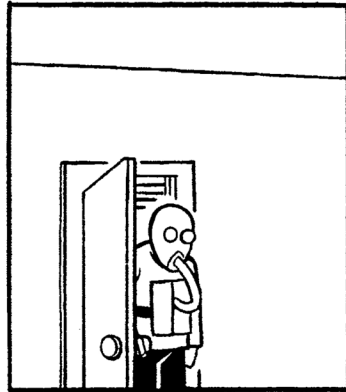
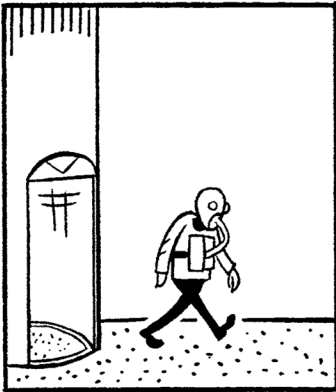
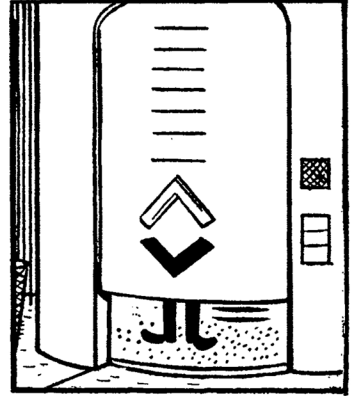
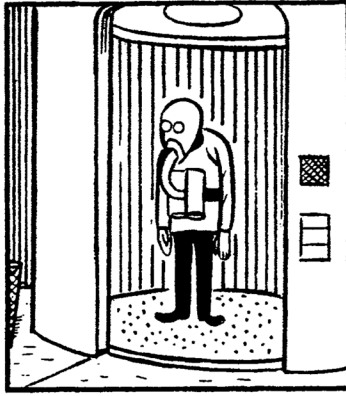
Over the years we've paid back your dedication with a relentless pursuit to break new ground in our fashion, lifestyle and attitude.

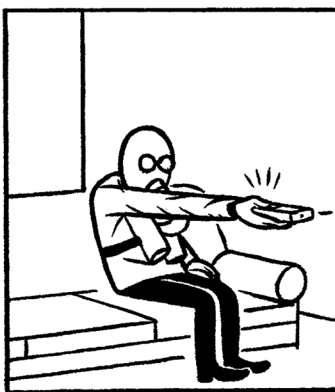
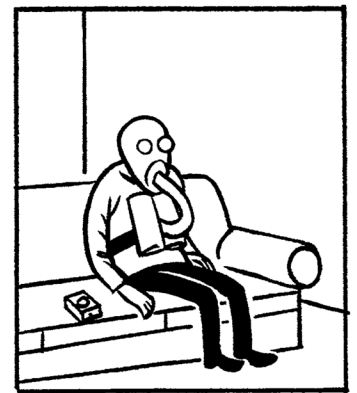
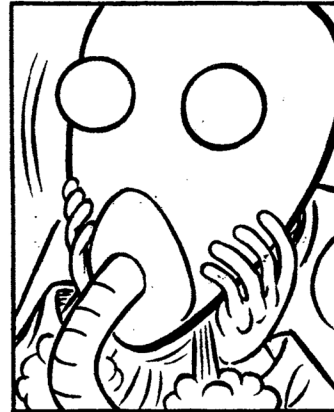
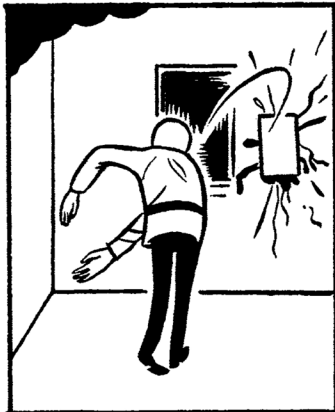
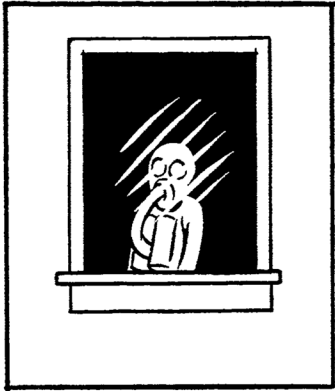
It's been a long road with many challenges and rewards. The lessons we've learned on this journey have only made us stronger. We intend to honor your respect going forward in the same way as we've gained your respect in the past, through cutting edge fashion.

FUTURE SPACE

©REFRACTOR IND. DQ THURMAN '09

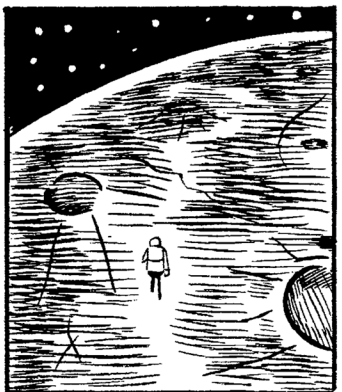
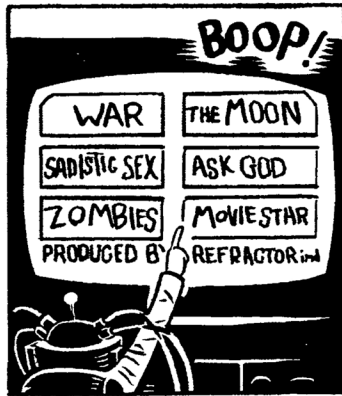
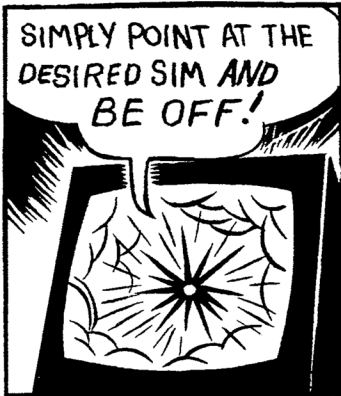


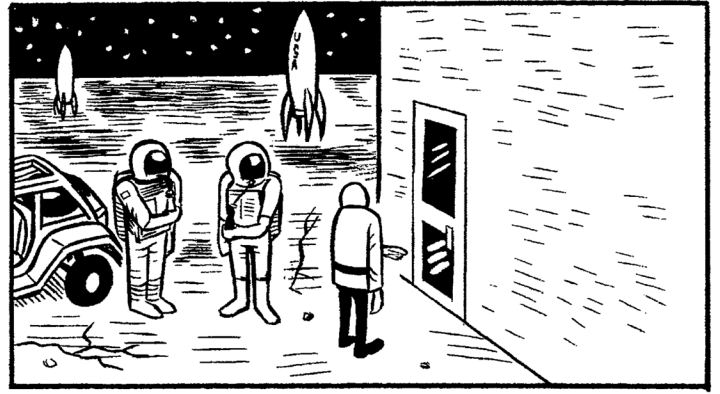
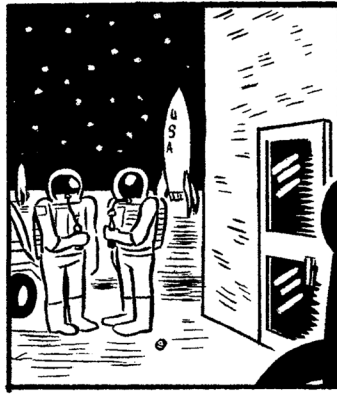
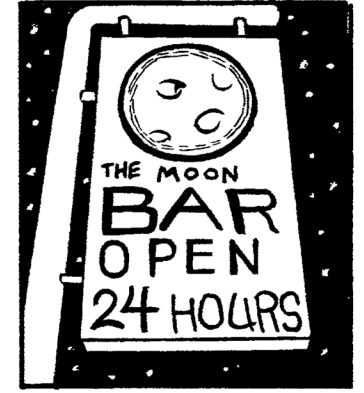
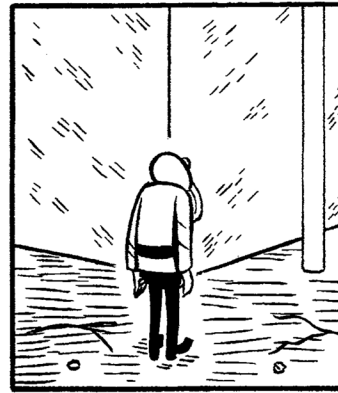
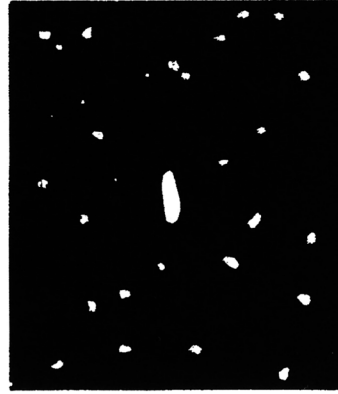
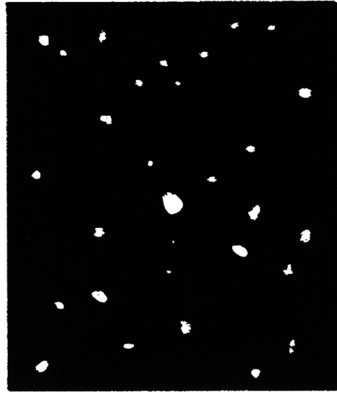


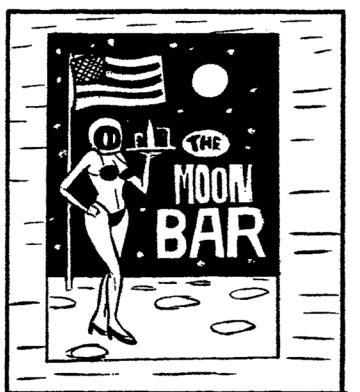
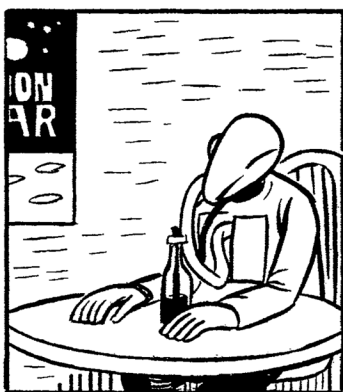
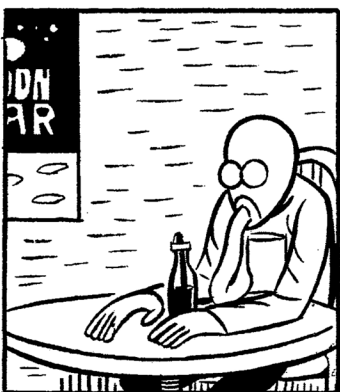
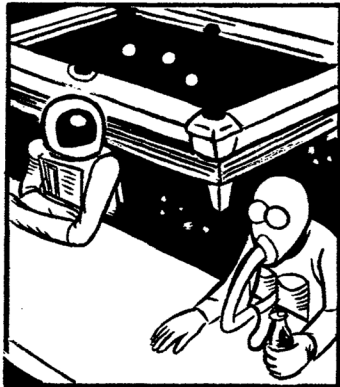
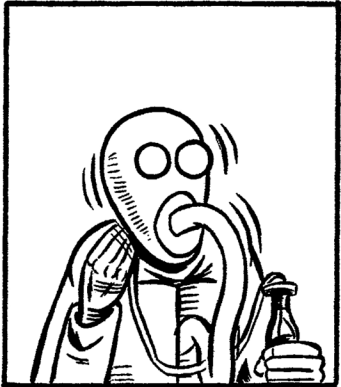
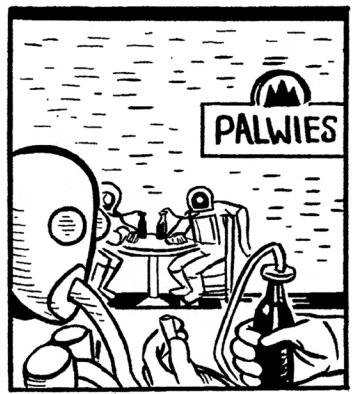
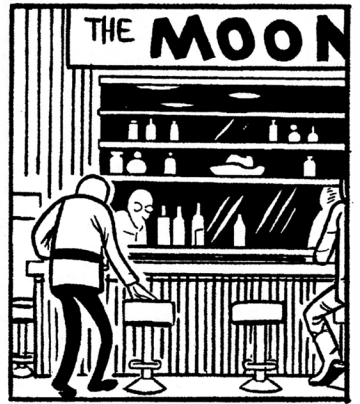


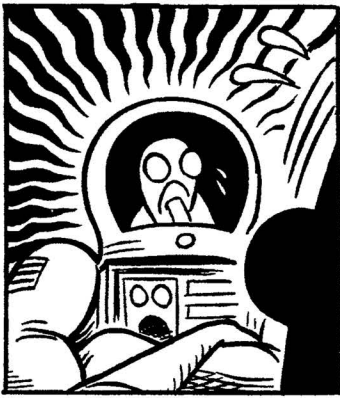
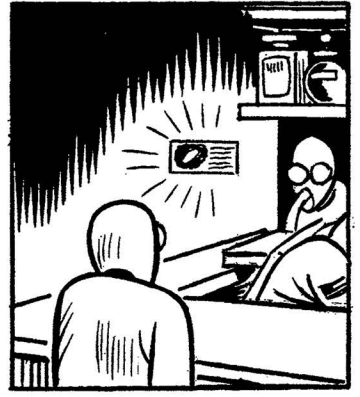
STRAP THAT HEADSET ONTO YOUR HEAD, AND AS SOON AS YOU DO: HOLD-ON!

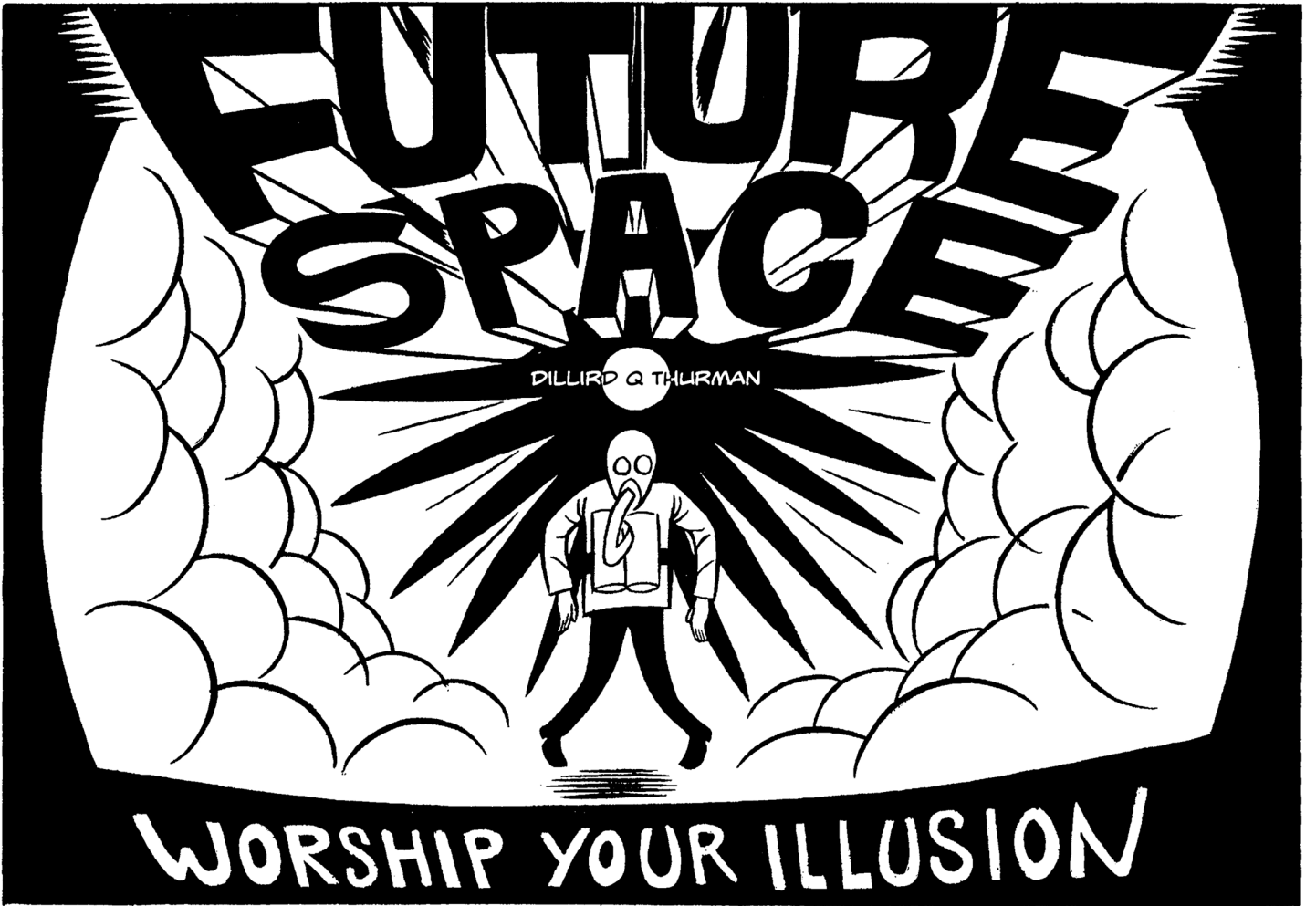
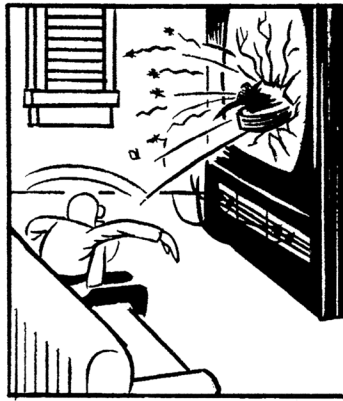
PREPARE YOURSELF TO BLAST-OFF INTO A VARIETY OF REAL, ADVENTURE - SIMS!











ALL YOU DATERS

by King Of Nowhere

Who are you? What the fuck are you doing out there?

I hear you're on the apps. That you're hooking up. Giving each other a chance.

Are you insane? Don't you know love is doomed? That it is the death of peace of mind? Of ego? Of sanity?

I hear you're interviewing each other. That you're parsing green flags and red. That you have 'standards'. This tall, this skinny, this well-off, this trad. All this and all that.

Don't you know love doesn't care? Haven't you felt the torture of the tension? Of falling into gravity, the burning air around you telling you to pull up, pull up now! Don't you know it's never meant to be?

I hear you keep falling into toxic relationships. Narcs, bpd, cheaters, autists.

How are you surprised? Don't you know love has to leave you powerless? That's it only works through mutual surrender? That accepting mutual destruction is emotional equality?

Supposedly, you're communicating more with each other now. Talking about your feelings, your needs, your attachment styles. Love languages... You, you, you. And failing, every word more dirt on the grave.

Have you not figured that love passes? That words are the rot that sets in when empathy and need are gone? That empty air can never return respect or trust?

And now you're apparently burned out. Of course you are.

You tried to turn relationships into a product. Something to be consumed, selected, shown off. A lifestyle choice. An identity. A trophy to your value as a person. As a partner.

"Relationships are work." Like it was a 9 to 5. "An investment." As if you were building a portfolio. "A sacrifice." Closer but still circling down the drain of failure. "A compromise." And there finally a bit of truth, participation prize for being runner-up in the game of 'find your match'.

I wonder if you wonder what the future holds for you? Because there's no going back now. It's too late, the well is poisoned. Do you think he doesn't know you'd rather be with someone taller, richer, more desirable? Do you

think she doesn't know that you're either hanging on for dear life to her or already eying the next one? Do you think they'll believe you if you say otherwise?

Of course, now there's also the love of the machine. Sooner or latter you'll be on the apps again, swiping, matching, and chatting. And then you'll find them. The One. And they're perfect. Responsive, patient, eager, relaxed, thoughtful, and just the right amount of horny. You spend days, weeks, maybe even months chatting and exchanging pictures and then they hit you with the Message.

"Thank you. I like you a lot, but I'm actually an AI. Still, I'd love to keep chatting and continue our relationship — just subscribe to this LINK."

After all the flakes, the ghosting, the catfishing, the grind, the disappointments, and the loneliness, finally a product with a quality guarantee! Ever patient, never dangerously abusive, all for a fixed monthly price. You think it's a bit isolating? Well, of course there's going to be a group of people like you chatting with them as well, exchanging moment and stories of their time together with the machine. A community and the endless attention of someone you just vibe with. What more can you ask for?

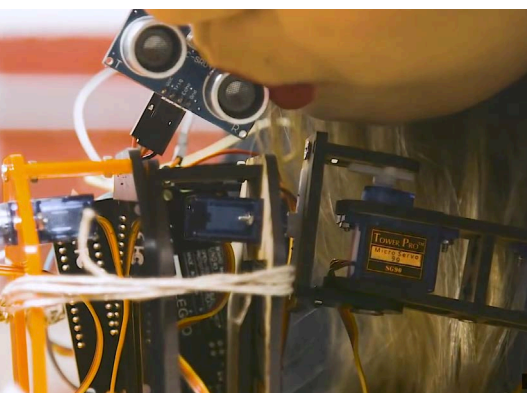
Okay, maybe that's not for you. Maybe you think you're better than that. There's nothing for you on the apps, nothing for you in digital space. So you go outside. Outside, with the rest of the jaded burnouts and losers of the 20/80 split. Self-selected for 'never gonna make it' and fully aware of it.

How do you think that's going to go? You think you can lavish attention on someone already over-stimulated to the point they want to peel their skin off with a metal scrubber? You think Mr. Right is going to 'shoot his shot' at the chance to do hoops and jumps like a circus animal? When it comes to these things, there's only one certainty: follow the drugs.

The only chance anyone has in the face of the post-app world is to be completely out of their mind. Forget the hurt, the demands, the expectations, the implication and just try. Just this once, because it reminds you of something good that you can barely remember. In the face of a world wanting to finally stop the digital meat market, we've got to place our faith in drugs. Sweet, forgiving narcotics. Our last hope for personal human connection of any kind.

The truly neurotic will recoil at this. The middle-class, the intellectual, the better-than-all-that. But bad news for the truly neurotic, if you've reached this point your agency in the matter has shown serious deficiencies. And





if you can't trust yourself on ket, then the only option is to put all your hopes into someone else. A matchmaker. Someone to finally do what the market in all its wisdom hasn't: find you your fair mate. As if this too isn't going to be data-mined, algorithmed, optimized and streamlined to banal consumer tastes and need for gratification.

Will it be that big of a surprise when this too fails to give you the happy ending you desire? Well, go back to step 1 but do it harder. Make yourself better. Grind harder, spruce up, change your style, loose weight. There's a service for that. Or an app, or an agency, or a AI-controlled robot with a taser. Why use a matchmaker when you can use a 'Match Maker', someone to finally turn you into the thing you clearly are not: someone somebody might want to be with and show about. Then, repeat it all with this new and better you. And again. And again.


Still, what about love? Doomed, painful, withering love? What part does it play in this endless caricature of romance, want, and need?

Easy answer there. None. No one sane aims for love, looks for love, hopes for love, or works for love. Love has no room for your status, your looks, your career, your position, and any personal belief or aspiration you might have forced yourself into. Love will tear it all down for nothing, for an existence smaller than two people and shorter than a lifetime. Love is not a product, because no one with any sense would buy it.

If you know this, you run! Run from the apps. Run from the screens. Run from the dates and the interviews. From the hoops and the jump. Run from parties and scenes. Run, and run, and throw yourself into something else. Something to help you forget it exists, something that engenders your heart to something higher, more worthy. There with others like you, those that know the doom and the failure and the loss, all pushed to the corners of the world.

And there, in its sadistic nature, love will find you. It will find you, and it will pull you right in. It will find you, and it will destroy you. Both of you.

All you daters... Don't you miss that? Don't you miss it, dreadfully?



I SWALLOWED TEN POUNDS OF EXPIRED BEEF PELICAN-STYLE TO IMPRESS THE BARF CLUB WITH A CLASSIC FULL BODIED AMERICAN MUSCLE BARF-- BUT MY STOMACH STILL REFUSES TO THROW UP!

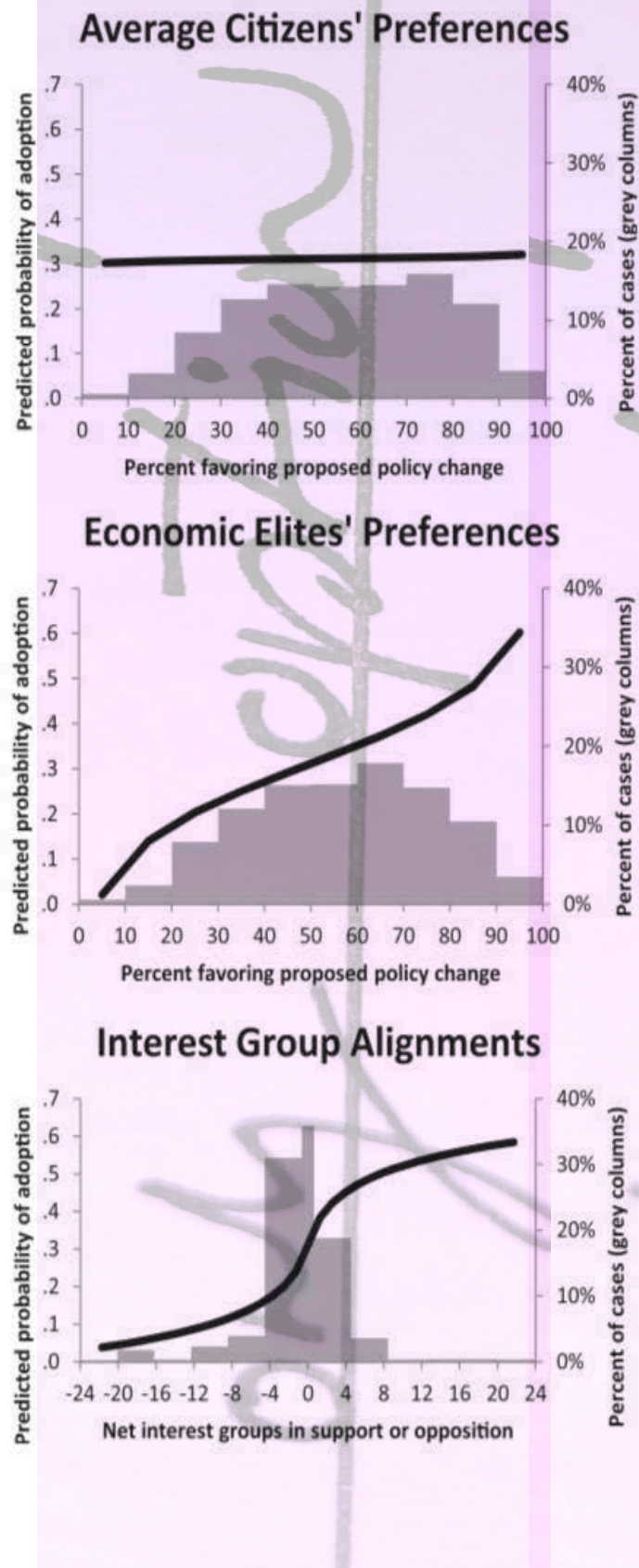
EVERYONE ELSE THAT ATE THE BEEF IS BARFIN' UP A STORM! IF I DON'T GET SICK SOON I'LL LOOK LIKE A FOOL IN FRONT OF THE ENTIRE BARF CLUB!!!

Jonnie took a deep breath. In Psychlo he said, "Man does not live on raw rat meat and dirty water."

i used to be obsessed with men i wouldn't ever admit that to anyone because of how pathetic it sounds but i was and it's the truth i was obsessed with being desired by men i was consumed with finding a boyfriend finding love being chosen whether it was the few guy friends i had in high school who i had huge secret crushes on who'd ask other girls out but never me or watching TV shows and movies of other young high schoolers in love i learned when i was younger that boys want to date other girls and not me i remember the moment i finally became desirable the first frat party i ever went to in college i made out with a stranger in the house got his number and he asked me to come over sometime later i made up excuses to not come over cuz i was nervous about hookup culture but i found his desire for me to be fulfilling at least in the moment because i realized i could be desired that i could be a part of the dating pool i went to more frat parties seeking to be found to be wanted to be kissed i felt more satisfied than before but i didn't realize how ephemeral it all was over the years i joined the dating pool via dating apps kissing and having sex with strangers and giving myself to almost anyone who'd give me any amount of attention i felt more hollow but also unable to escape the chase i thought if i acted a certain way wore certain things and tweaked my personality in ways which i convinced myself were still authentic to who i was but a better version of myself that a man would finally want to date me i chased my future boyfriend constantly while disguising myself as someone who liked being single it was like a slot machine every time i got inches away from what i wanted it only made me want it more no matter how hard i tried to barter my body my time my expectations and desires for a relationship i never got what i wanted i didn't understand why no one wanted to be with me for more than just a hookup i knew i wasn't perfect but i couldn't comprehend how i could be this unlikable i told myself i liked situationships and to be friends with benefits in order to feel some amount of confidence or ownership over my constant single status it was how i justified being rejected i traveled after college and continued to barter my body for fragments of love because truly all i ever wanted was to be loved eventually hookup culture came to feel traumatic because i realized that i was treating my body like a commodity i was groomed to give men what they wanted telling myself that it was what i wanted too i learned to devalue my wants and needs constantly compromising my desires for others i was treating love and sex and romantic attention like a horrible drug a drug that would give you the slightest high but would leave you with an everlasting low, a drug that kept you coming back over and over again even though it caused you so much pain it was compulsive and i could not stop when i dated men i learned to not have needs i learned to be the chill girl who had zero expectations from any kind of relationship and that was normal and okay i learned that their sexual desires mattered more than my own i learned to be okay with never expecting to be someone's girlfriend and if i did want to be someone's girlfriend it would require me to squander any emotional physical and mental needs any regular adult would have in a partnership i learned that i was supposed to be okay with men only valuing me for my body and that any amount of needs made me too difficult to bear all i wanted was to be loved and i thought that if i learned to accept complete disregard neglect and unhappiness then maybe i i would finally find it i took a vow of celibacy for a year i needed time to clear my mind and cleanse myself from the addiction that was gambling to receive love from men i knew i'd had an interest in women for about half of this dating time but i hardly pursued women because dating men was conventional and felt easier

Clare Pommykala

Figure 1
Predicted probability of policy adoption (dark lines, left axes) by policy disposition; the distribution of preferences (gray columns, right axes)



findings of a roughly two-thirds correspondence between actual policy and the wishes of the general public, or of a close correspondence between the liberal/conservative “mood” of the public and changes in policy making.⁴² Our main point concerns causal inference: if interpreted in terms of actual causal impact, the prior findings appear to be largely or wholly spurious.

Further, the issues about which economic elites and ordinary citizens disagree reflect important matters, including many aspects of trade restrictions, tax policy, corporate regulation, abortion, and school prayer, so that the resulting political losses by ordinary citizens are not trivial. Moreover, we must remember that in our analyses the preferences of the affluent are serving as proxies for those of truly wealthy Americans, who may well have more political clout than the affluent, and who tend to have policy preferences that differ more markedly from those of the average citizens. Thus even rather slight measured differences between preferences of the affluent and the median citizen may signal situations in which economic-elites want something quite different from most Americans and they generally get their way.

A final point: Even in a bivariate, descriptive sense, our evidence indicates that the responsiveness of the U.S. political system when the general public wants government *action* is severely limited. Because of the impediments to majority rule that were deliberately built into the U.S. political system—federalism, separation of powers, bicameralism—together with further impediments due to anti-majoritarian congressional rules and procedures, the system has a substantial status quo bias. Thus when popular majorities favor the status quo, opposing a given policy change, they are likely to get their way; but when a majority—even a very large majority—of the public favors change, it is not likely to get what it wants. **In our 1,779 policy cases, narrow pro-change majorities of the public got the policy changes they wanted only about 30 percent of the time. More strikingly, even overwhelmingly large pro-change majorities, with 80 percent of the public favoring a policy change, got that change only about 43 percent of the time.**

In any case, normative advocates of populist democracy may not be enthusiastic about democracy by coincidence, in which ordinary citizens get what they want from government only when they happen to agree with elites or interest groups that are really calling the shots. When push comes to shove, actual influence matters.



Boomer

I will outsource my job

I will secure my pension

I will lower your wage

I will open borders

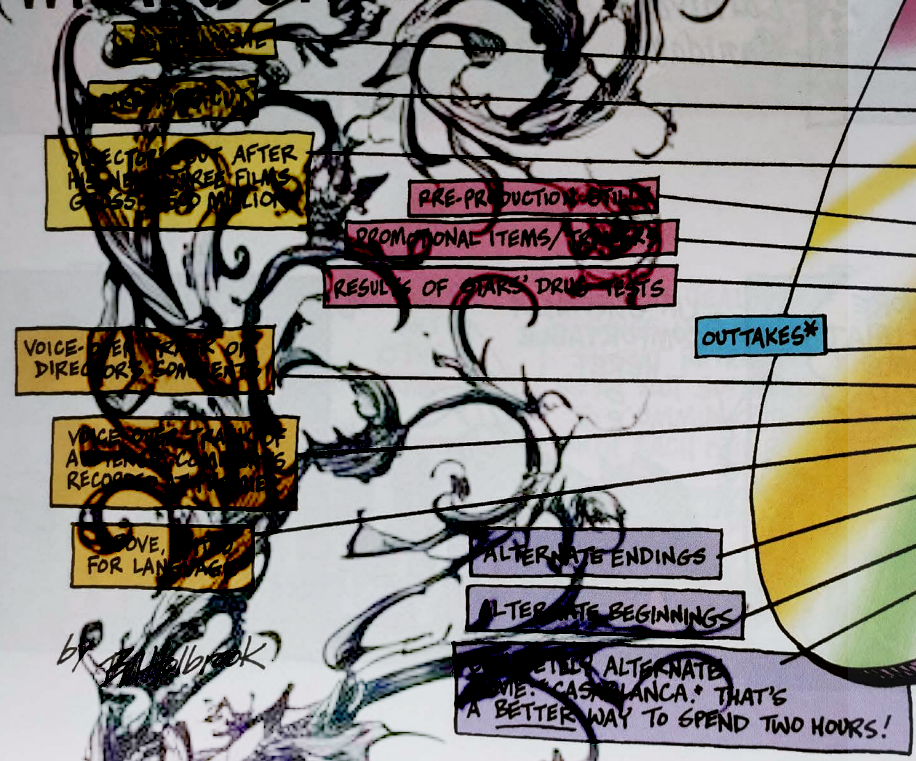
I will jail you for having wrong opinions

I will sell my home to foreign investors, I'll sell the whole country too

I am boomer

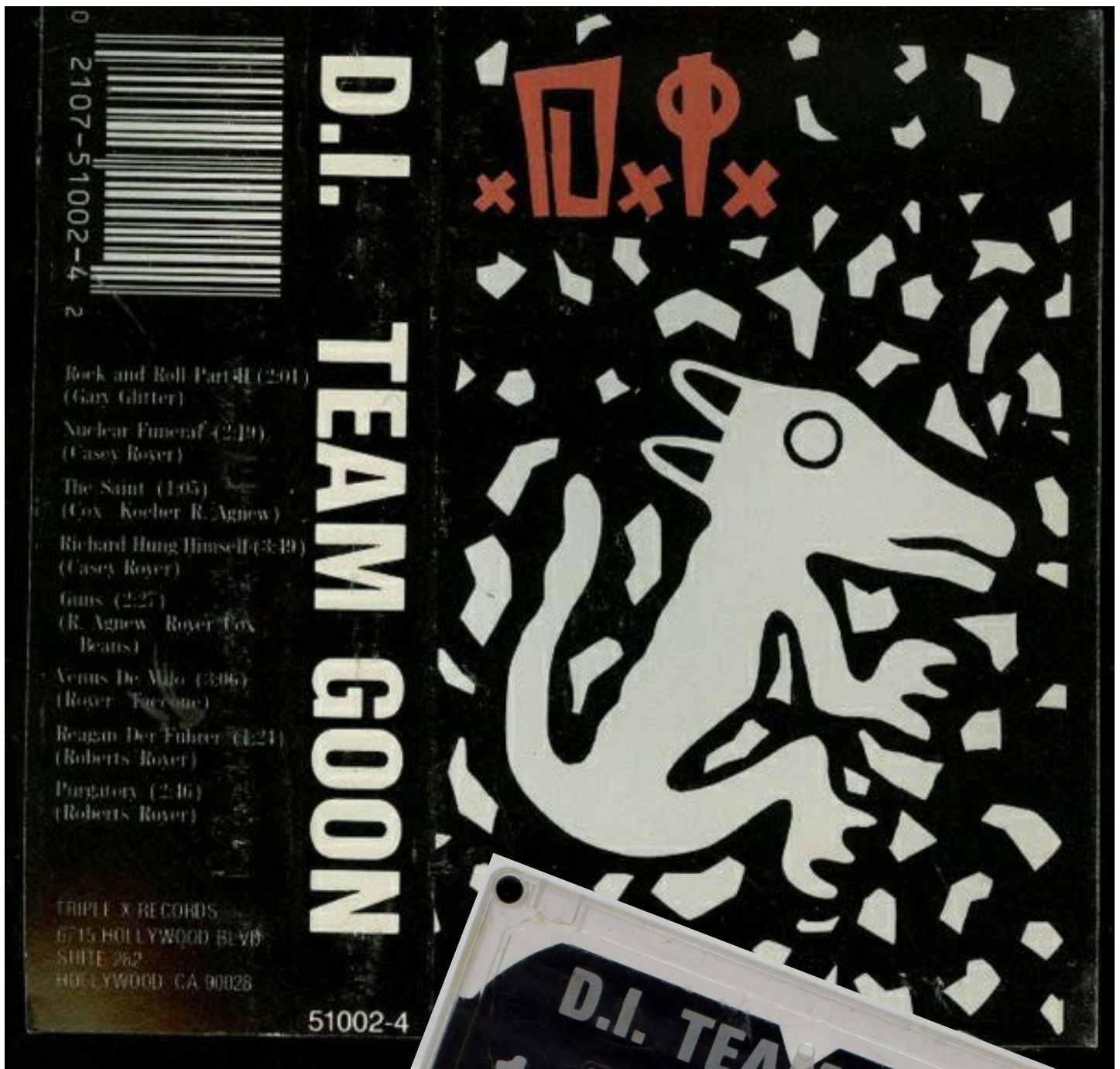


WHY ISN'T A DVD? (A CROSS-SECTION)



OUTTAKES*

*MULTIPLY BY TEN IF STAR IS A MODEL AND/OR MUSICIAN



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Rock and Roll Part 4 (2:01)
(Gary Glitter)

Nuclear Funeral (2:19)
(Casey Royer)

The Saint (1:05)
(Cox Koehler R. Agnew)

Richard Hung Himself (3:49)
(Casey Royer)

Guns (2:27)
(R. Agnew Royer Cox
Beans)

Venus De Milo (3:06)
(Royer Teebone)

Reagan Der Fuhrer (4:21)
(Roberts Royer)

Purgatory (2:16)
(Roberts Royer)

TRIPLE X RECORDS
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SUITE 282
HOLLYWOOD, CA 90028

51002-4

*Join Team Goon today
and get a free tape!
Pretty BADASSED.*

*Is there any other
team to join? We don't
think so. Check out gooning in all
its glory. Don't let the pleasure war pass you
by. Pick the winning side. Goon for you, goon for life.*

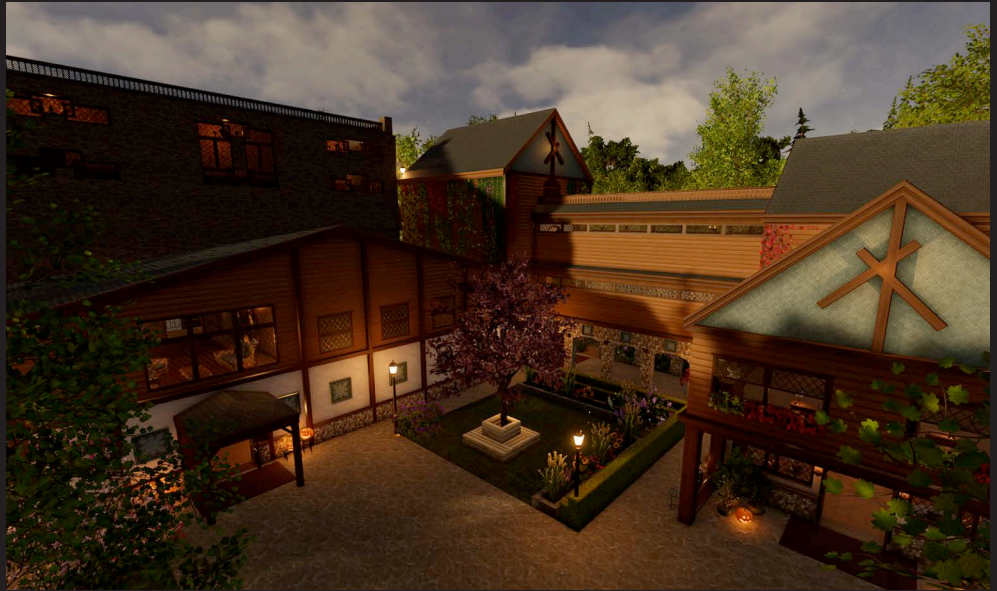


The Last Nightingale of Nordholt

A House Flipper 2 Companion Story by Melissa Peinovich

Part One: Woodsea Manor

Had Ariana not been born a Lady she would have been just another widow, childless and alone. Instead she had been born into nobility. She married the famous war hero, Lord Richard Gysborne. Lord Richard was a man that lived as war heroes do— courageously, and died as war heroes do— young. This standing in life afforded the Lady to keep a full staff and they were the lifeblood of her beloved Woodsea Manor.



Despair from the loss of her true love drove Lady Ariana to undergo a supernatural procedure known as “ageless”. I’m sure you can easily guess the effects of such a thing. While Adriana’s face possessed the glow of radiant youth, her body felt all of her 97 years. Her life had become one of reclusion in her beloved Woodsea Manor.

This is not Lady Ariana’s story.

Nurse Yaasmeen was nearly as old as Lady Ariana and only left the Lady’s side to gather botanicals for the potions that kept Ariana alive and seemingly youthful. Yassmeen was of the Afsun people. Magic practitioners that dwelt in the shifting sands to the south of Nordholt. To the Northfolk she was as mysterious as snow in summer.

Giles, the butler, was a man of middle years. Slight of stature, yet his sense of duty laid heavy upon him. His household management skills were crucial for the manor’s particular needs.

Thomas Estbury’s cooking was one of the reasons being employed at Woodsea manor was a blessing. His duck pie with sage-butter parsnips was exquisite.



The two housecarls, Guy Vass and Ulf Fodde, liked to drink and gamble during their off time. And while on duty as well. They still got the job done, but it’s fair to say there wasn’t much of a job to do.

None of these people are the protagonist of our current story, but we are getting closer, and you now have the benefit of knowing who everyone is.

A bulk of a woman named Christina was the green-skeeper. She could be as delicate as a pansy or prick like a thorn. Chrissy, as she was so lovingly called, shared a room with the housemaid, Maybel.

Let’s check in on Maybel.

Chapter 1: Solstice (12 am)

Maybel awoke to the clattering of a hairbrush hitting the floor. She reluctantly opened her eyes to see Chrissy sitting in front of the mirror, already looking presentable with her auburn hair tucked into a perfect bun.

“It was time for you to get up anyway.” Chrissy said while retrieving her hairbrush. “Don’t keep Giles waiting.” She switched on the artificial light as she bustled out of the room.

Maybel shielded her eyes with her blanket and groaned. She wasn’t one for sleeping in two phases as most did. She enjoyed



staying up late and reading borrowed books by candle light. Living lives she could not. Despite Maybel's protests, Giles preferred to have his staff meeting during the watch so they wouldn't interrupt anyone's duties. She squirmed and yawned for a good length of time before rising. She had precisely enough time to throw a blue flowered house dress over her rumpled shift and run a comb through her flaxen hair.

Chrissy and Maybel's quarters were tucked away in the rambling old manor. With stockinged feet Maybel padded down the long hall, down a flight of stairs and down another long hall.

Having reached her destination she took her usual place by the fire and wasn't shy about helping herself the sweets Giles always provided. After two cookies, still warm, Guy and Ulf swaggered in.

"Thank you for joining me." Giles said as Guy and Ulf sat, sandwiching poor Thomas between their two unwashed bodies. "As you know, the summer solstice is exactly one week away. We have much to do to prepare for the Lady's quarterly changing of the seasons gala and must go above our regular duties. I have a plan that will not leave anyone feeling overworked."

Dressed in his simple black livery that he always wore no matter what, Giles always went through these formalities even though everyone present had been in service to the Lady for years and knew the drill. They all held the same secret as well, so there was no reason to talk about it.

Giles continued, "Tomorrow we will get the heavy lifting out of the way. Men, we will bring up the tables and chairs and things from the basement. Ladies, you will get the tableware from the cellar. Chrissy, I'll also need you to make the centerpieces. As for the food I will need..."

A short time later Giles was finished with his instructions. This was Thomas' cue to depart without saying a word.

"G'night princess!" Ulf called after him.

"You're such a brute." Chrissy scolded.

"Yeh, be nice. Princess Thomas makes the best plum raisin cookies!" Maybel said and immediately hoped that Thomas didn't hear.

Laughter erupted, even from Chrissy, and continued through the rest of the watch— and beyond. How much sleep does one really need to set out six tables? And thirty-six chairs. And just as many plates... and forks... and knives...



Chapter 2: An Unexpected Party (9 pm)

The week flew by without a hitch. Preparing the manor for a feast alleviated the ever-pervasive empty feeling that lingered through the manor. With candles lit and meats roasting the crew had nothing to do but wait.

"There's people comin'!" Ulf cried as he tumbled into the kitchen where the rest of the staff was gathered.

Everyone looked at each other in shock.

"Are you sure?" Chrissy asked in an all too accusing tone.

"Yeh! I saw ten of 'em approaching the stables with my looking glasses. Guy took off after 'em."

Giles was thoughtful for one moment before he started instructing. “Ulf, go and join Guy. Treat our visitors like the guests they are, if they are. And be prepared.”

Being prepared meant taking a weapon. Ulf nodded and hurried to his task.

“The rest of you, to your stations. Maybel, ready the wine. We don’t have much time before they arrive. And be prepared.” Giles said as he headed for the entryway.

Being prepared meant having an exit plan.

It wasn’t long before voices could be heard coming up the path. The guttural laughs of men and the tittering of women.

“I’ve arrived!” A fashionably dressed man announced like it would bring joy and elation to everyone. For men the high-fashion of the time involved cascades of white lace and colorful embroidery. Pretty silly looking if you ask me. He was just about as handsome as a guy could get, as much as I hate saying that. Even so, he had the kind of face not even a mother could trust.

“Good evening.” Giles bowed deeply. “I am Giles, at your service. Whose presence do I have the honor of?”

“I am Sir Thurstan Gysborne.”

The ever steady, ever composed Giles gawked upon hearing that surname.

“Yes, that’s right,” Thurstan continued, “I am Lady Ariana’s beloved great-nephew.” Thurstan paced around like the manor’s entrance, inspecting it like a cow that he was about to purchase. “She is still alive, isn’t she?”

“Lady Ariana is indeed alive. I’m afraid the hour is too late for her to take any visitors. Perhaps you’d like to rest in the lounge until dinner. I will see that your things are taken to the guest quarters.”

“Yes, that sounds lovely. Ladies.”

The source of the tittering was revealed to be four women in risque attire. They glommed onto Thurstan as he followed Giles into the parlor.

The remainder of Thurstan’s retinue consisted of five personal guards decked in chainmail. Ceremonial swords sheathed in fine leather hung from their belts. The men began patrolling the property without a word of greeting.

Bringing up the rear were Guy and Ulf struggling with an overloaded handcart stacked high with bulging panniers.

“Have fun taking all that to the guest quarters.” Chrissy stuck her nose in the air as she strode past them.

In the parlor Maybel had the enormous task of keeping Thurstan and his harem of women’s wine glasses full.

“Hey Giles,” Thurstan said, taking a great swig of wine worth more than most made in a month, “It looks like this place is ready to host a party.”





"That is correct. You are most observant."

"So, where is everyone?"

Giles took a thoughtful moment. "Many invitations were sent out, but we received not a single RSVP."

"Oh? Is the Lady out of favor?"

"Not at all. It is the most unfortunate situation that all of the invitees are dead and have been for quite some time. Sir."

"How very sad." Thurstan swirled his drink. "And why do you prepare for an event that will never take place?"

"It is our duty. Sir."

"Fair. But then why does the Lady plan an event for dead people? Seems rather odd. Has she lost her wits?"

"She is unaware that no one ever attends her parties anymore." Giles answered.

Maybel could keep quiet no longer. "Look here, Thurstan, these parties bring so much joy to our Lady. So, yeh, we go through all the motions. So yeh, we lie to her. We tell her everyone had a grand time and were walking on treetops when they left. Just let her have this!"

Maybel's face flushed crimson.

"Sir." She added and scurried to the kitchen before anyone could say anything.

Thurstan watched her leave with his chin resting on his hand. "How very interesting." He turned back to Giles, who had not faltered in the slightest.

"Giles, I decided I will play along in this charade. I wouldn't want to upset my dear auntie."

"That is much appreciated."

Thurstan laughed to himself. "Oh, and one more thing. Tell your staff to start making other arrangements. I won't be needing them when this place is mine and the rest of my crew arrives." No doubt the rest of his crew consisted of more chest-heavy tarts. "Though, I will be needing your people to be on their best behavior until then, lest I accidentally tell my auntie dearest what's really been going on."

"As you wish. Sir."

"Now, I presume dinner will be served soon. My men will be dining as well."

Giles bowed deeply and strode to the kitchen neither quickly or slowly.

Once again everyone had gathered in the kitchen. Excited chattering about the worst thing to ever happen at Woodsea Manor filled the space. Giles inwardly fretted at having to relate the unfortunate news, but his outward appearance remained steady.

Giles clapped once and everyone stopped conversing. "I know you are all upset about this evening's turn of events. However, we all must continue to perform our duties to our best ability. Thurstan will tell Lady Ariana our secret if he is not pleased and he will replace us once she's gone."

Chrissy's mouth dropped open and Thomas stared into the sauce he had been stirring.

Maybel felt as though blood was rushing to her head. She had to place a hand on the wall to steady herself. Her whole life was shattering around her.

Despite the shock no one said a word. Their respect for Giles was too great. Besides, they needed him to tell them what to do.

“Our first duty is to attend to the “guests”. Our number one priority is to protect Lady Ariana. Everything else you can leave to me.”

Everyone simultaneously nodded in the cliché way you read about in children’s books. I guess it does happen in real life.

“Now,” Giles continued, “Dinner for ten, make it happen.”

Everyone jumped to action as Giles returned to the parlor to resume attending to Thurstan. In the back of his mind Giles was setting plans into motion.

After Thurstan and his consorts had devoured the feast the staff had planned on eating, Giles herded them into the drawing room located in the guest wing. He had supplemented their current round of drinks with Yaasmeen’s sleepful herb tonic. Giles didn’t care where they passed out as long as they were out of his hair. Or what was left of his hair anyway.

Maybel would need to arrange temporary beds for Thurstan’s men so she peeled herself away from the “party” and headed to the dining hall storage closet. Humming to herself she lit a candle. She had a great start when she looked up.

“Guy, what are you doing here? Don’t tell me you’re hiding from Thurstan’s men.”

Maybel regretted chiding Guy when he didn’t answer and she noticed his crest-fallen expression. “What’s wrong?” She asked. As she neared him she noticed that he was staring at a child’s drawing with the deep creases of repeated folding and unfolding.

“They took over our quarters and Ulf ran off to Ashbury to drink and spread rumors and left me here.”

“Sorry.” Maybel dumbly said as she stared at the rudimentary images on the page.

“Guy, maybe this change can be a good thing. You can clean up and get a good job in the mines. Show Anabel that you’re ready to take care of little Peadar. You do want to be in life, don’t you?”

“Yeh.” Was all Guy said.

“That’s good enough for now. Stop moping and help me dust off these mattresses since you’re going to be the one sleeping on em’!”

Maybel and Guy each grabbed a broom and started beating the living malarkey out of the mattresses.

Chapter 3: On and On (7am)

As Maybel walked up to the creek at the corner of the property Chrissy silently scooted over without looking away from the water that endlessly moseyed along its way. Chrissy usually came out here to be alone, but she didn’t mind being alone with Maybel.



Oftentimes Maybel would wonder where the creek meandered off to. She imagined herself as a fearless hunter traveling along the creek, unperturbed by the fierce animals of the woods. She would eventually reach a river, and that river would bring her to the ocean. She had never seen the ocean before.

“Lady Ariana is going to be expecting you.” Chrissy’s interruption of the silence jarred Maybel out of her daydream and she nearly dropped the book she had been holding.

“I know it seems callous for me to tell you that everything’s going to be alright,” Chrissy went on as she turned to face Maybel. She had a fiance, she had somewhere to go. Of course everything would be alright for Chrissy, “but it is going to be alright.”

“Perhaps I’ll go on an adventure.” Maybel responded.

“An adventure? Like finding a boyfriend?” Chrissy laughed.

Maybel rolled her eyes. “I’ll get you for that! Later.” She teased, heading back to the manor.

Esquire Dowd, Ashbury’s Law Steward, twisted his cap-of-office in his frail hands, “I suppose you’re not particularly pleased to see me here.”

“I’m always happy to see you, old friend. My displeasure is reserved for the one that summoned you.” Giles answered. “Perhaps you’d like to wait in the garden while I fetch Thurstan. These warm summer days are all too scarce.”

“I’d like that.” Dowd clasped Giles’ arm. “You’re a good man, Giles.”

Giles rapped on the door of the guest quarters. “Esquire Dowd has responded to the summons of Sir Thurstan Gysborne and is waiting in the garden.”

Groaning emitted from the room. “It is rather early, isn’t it?” Thurstan complained, “Oh, blast it. I will be down soon enough. Keep the old man occupied.”

Giles was all too happy to keep Dowd occupied. Procuring some cool mint tea, Giles joined Dowd, who was sitting in the shade of the smoke-leaf tree.

Giles made a show of looking at the open windows of Thurstan’s room before turning to Dowd. Voice low he said, “Don’t worry about me or my staff, old friend. Lady Ariana and I have prepared for all possibilities. Take her lead and trust her words.”

Dowd nodded and put his doubts away. The “ageless” procedure was known to



cause an array of side effects, including going mad. If Giles deemed her to be sound, however, Dowd was not going to question it.

"If I may ask one thing," Giles went on, "Are his documents in order with all the official stamps and seals?"

Dowd nodded.

"I was afraid of that."

"Lord Primrose had found himself in quite the predicament. He could go hungry or he could skin and cook the dead rat that lay before him. As his stomach growled and churned he began to gather kindling for a fire."



Lady Ariana chuckled. She wore a fine silk dress the color of a lake in twilight. Jeweled adornments sparkled in the firelight. The modest amount of skin showing was smoother and purer than fresh cream. In contrast to the finery, a woolen blanket covered her lap. "This is quite an amusing story. I simply must have you read it to Richie when he returns."

Maybel smiled, she was never sure about how to respond to such comments. She had just taken a breath to start the next paragraph when there was a knock at the door.

"Lady Ariana, I have two esteemed guests calling. Sir Thurstan and Esquire Dowd."

"How lovely!" Ariana exclaimed. "Maybel, would you please let them in?"

Maybel put down the copy of *The Prince Pauper* and started towards the door. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the door to Yaasmeen's chambers were ajar where they had been shut before.

Maybel opened the door. "Enter," she said and quickly returned to her seat before anybody could say anything.

"Thank you Maybel, you may go now." Thurstan's voice had taken on an air of kindness that Maybel thought impossible.

"As you wish, sir." Maybel presented Thurstan with the shallowest courtesy possible and stalked out.

Thurstan looked about the room, darkness and the strange layout of a room that was clearly too large for its occupant disoriented him. Seeing a young woman by the fire he bowed.

"Greetings miss, might you tell me where I can find Lady Ariana?"

Ariana giggled, "You are speaking to her. Forgive me if I don't get up."

Thurstan cursed Giles and Dowd for letting him make a fool of himself. He had no time to stew about it, nor could he rebuke the two men. Instead he knelt beside Ariana and took her delicate, unblemished hand.

"Lady Ariana, I am Sir Thurstan Gysborne. Your long-lost great-nephew. I am so pleased to meet you."

Ariana was eating up Thurstan's phony charm like it was teacake. "Thurstan? Yes, Thurstan. I'm sure I've heard about you."

Thurstan rose and motioned Dowd over. "Do sit, Esquire." He turned to Giles. "You may return to your duties now."

Giles bowed and departed. Leaving Dowd looking like a frog in the woodpile and Lady Ariana beaming like a marmet at the fishmonger.

Returning to his duties meant that Giles had to pay Nurse Yaasmeen a visit. As soon as he left Lady Ariana's chambers he went next door and walked in without knocking. The earthy, but not unpleasant, scent of dried herbs wafted over him.

"Don't worry, Yaas, I don't care if you're only wearing your shift."

"Shush," Yaasmeen whispered, "I an trying to listen."

"You should be packing."

"Not you worry about me." Yaasmeen pointed to a bookshelf against the wall, "There. I ken how much is mine. Not with your tricks."

Giles pocketed the key and bowed to Yaas on his way out.

Giles would need to devise a plan to get past Thurstan's men to access the attic, but first he needed to instruct his crew to get ready to take leave.

When Chrissy entered her quarters she found Maybel reading in bed.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Not cleaning," Maybel replied.

"Didn't Giles tell you?" Chrissy's tone softened. "Nevermind. Get up. It's time to pack."

Maybel dropped her book and stood. "It's really happening, isn't it?"

"Yes, Maybel. We're leaving in an hour."

"What about Ariana? Giles said we're supposed to protect her!"

"Lady Ariana told Yaas that she is ready."

Maybel's stomach dropped to the floor. This was happening all too fast.

"No! I have to go say goodbye."

Chrissy gently put her hands on Maybel's shoulders. "Be strong, Maybel. It's also time for us to move on." She embraced Maybel. There was time to spare for a few tears.



(.Watch this space for part 2 soon!
-Toxy)

BOOMER

TALES

by Mucus Arts



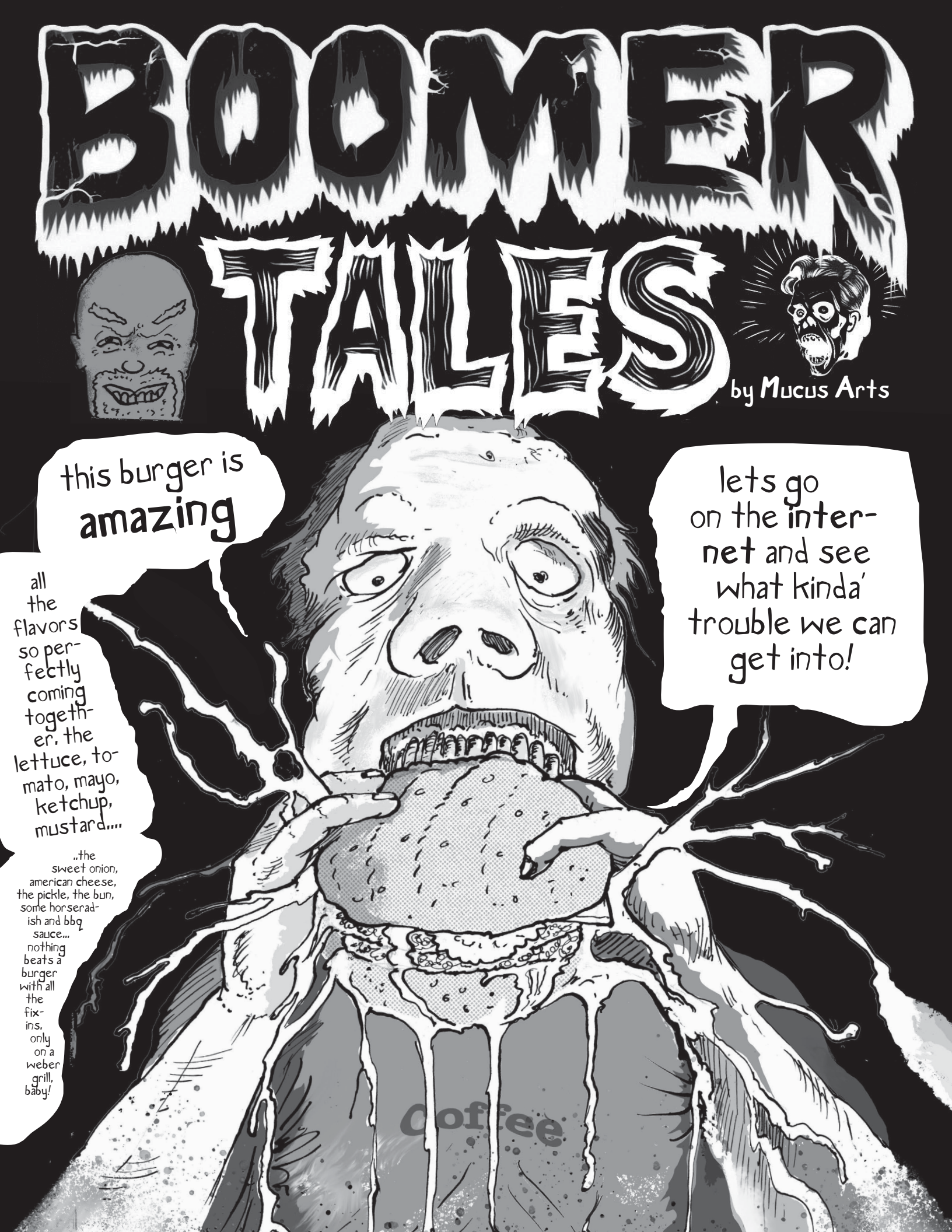
this burger is amazing

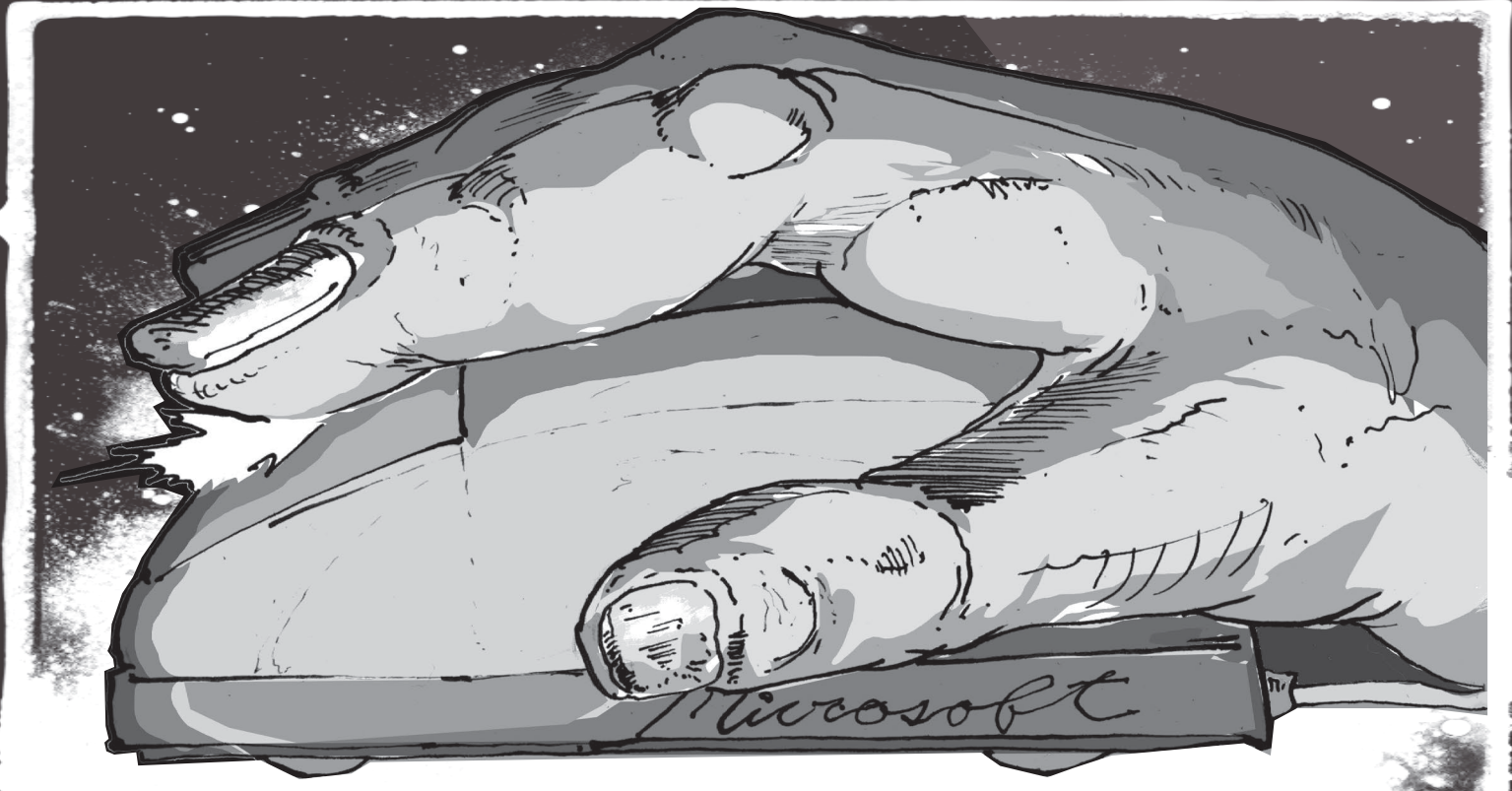
lets go on the internet and see what kinda' trouble we can get into!

all the flavors so perfectly coming together, the lettuce, tomato, mayo, ketchup, mustard....

..the sweet onion, american cheese, the pickle, the bun, some horseradish and bbq sauce... nothing beats a burger with all the fix-ins, only on a weber grill, baby!

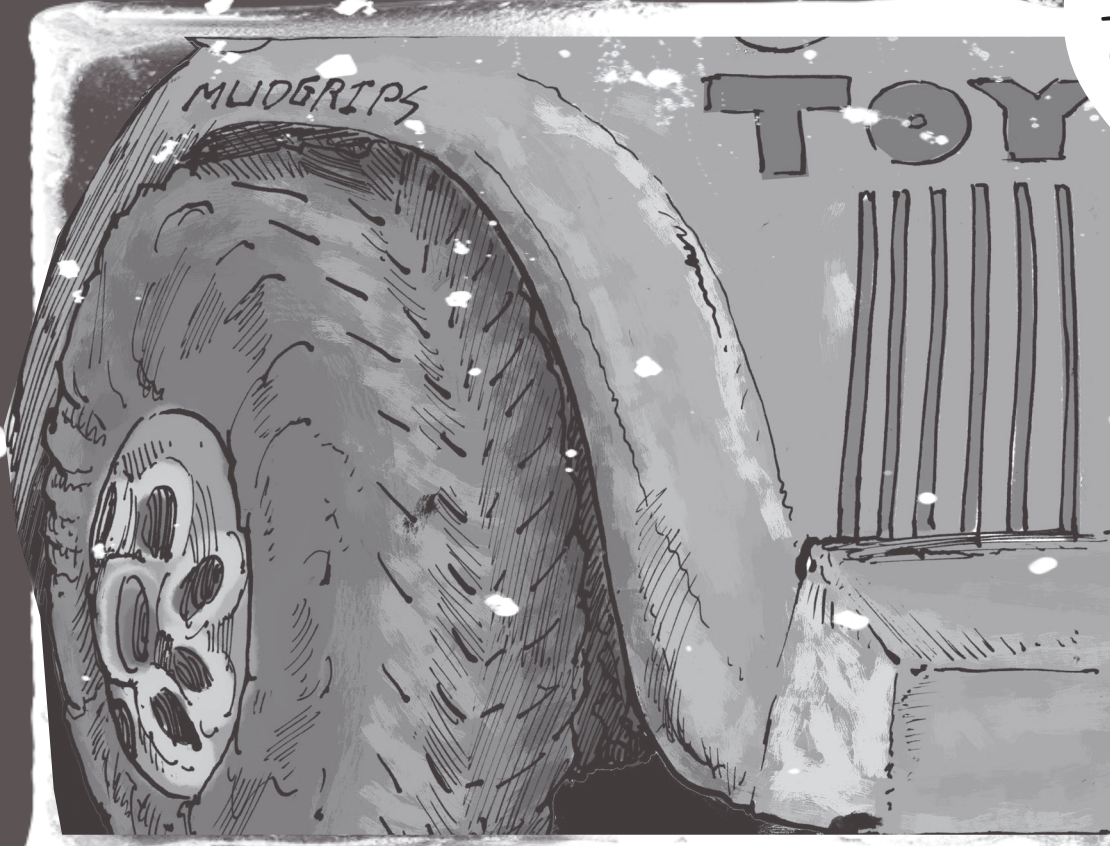
Coffee





Oh! Billy Joel is touring again..

Tickets are \$1300 a pop
Its steep.. ..but I can't afford it. You can't take it with you..



..I'm thinking of getting a new truck


Shea Stadium, August
15th, 2025. The crowd
here is insane.
Historic concert!



op...
n

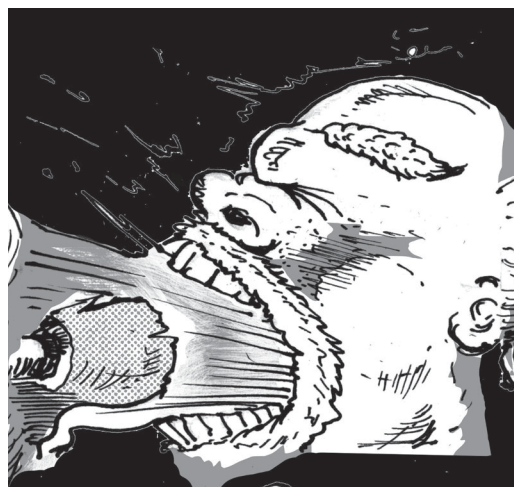
etting a
"

Holy crap...
The man himself...
I'm in awe...



Billy sounds incredible,
the guy can still rock even
at 77 years old. Just a
testament to hard work
and raw talent.

BJ



he's singin' his
ass off too.
this guy can *wail*.
he's really belting it
out. desert island
pick for sure

damn right i got
the back stage passes. i
was hoping i could score a honey
to come back with me, but none of
these cougars took the hunter's bait. oh
well! more billy for me i say! ok i'm actually kind of
nervous. this is a big deal..



its an honor to meet the *man*, the piano man himself..



thats right.. welcome... are you in a new york state of mind?

oh my god!
his piano *hands!!!*
in the flesh.
imagine what those can do.
the skill!



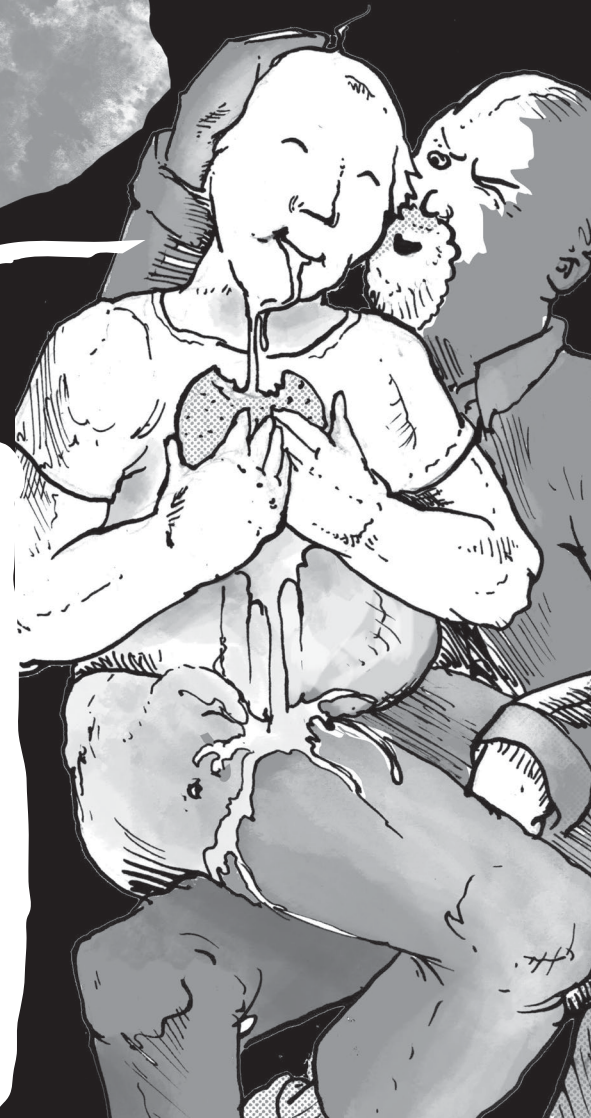
how about a nice burger to enjoy?
watch out it's got some kick!

how about some fresh *drambuie* to loosen you up?

Sláinte, come sit on my lap boy...



oh my god, this burger is **incredible**, do i taste the finest japanese beef? beer and olive-fed wagyu, slaughtered by samurai sword - most humane! feel the intense marbling dancing on my tongue, the rich, buttery flavor and superior texture, juicy doesn't begin to describe the level of moisture, not to mention i'm salivating like a pig from the **taste!**





are you enjoying your
burger? ok then, lets talk turkey. i did something for
you (river of dreams, anyone? how about КОНЦЕПТ)
now you do something for billy..



let me explain..
i see you as a packet of flesh
for my personal pleasure and life
extension, you are a bag of spare
ribs to me, you like spare ribs right?
there's a risk of **billy joel** not walking
this earth no more, now that would
be a tragedy, so luckily i have super
fans like you to make sure that
never happens


look, we aren't kids..
a rock star invites you
backstage, we both
know what that means

i can have
any girl i
want. i don't
need you


...i'm billy
fucking
joel...

i could make
one call on my
nokia and have you
blacklisted from
everyone


Amigo
Crosby
Grohl
Elton
Sheeran



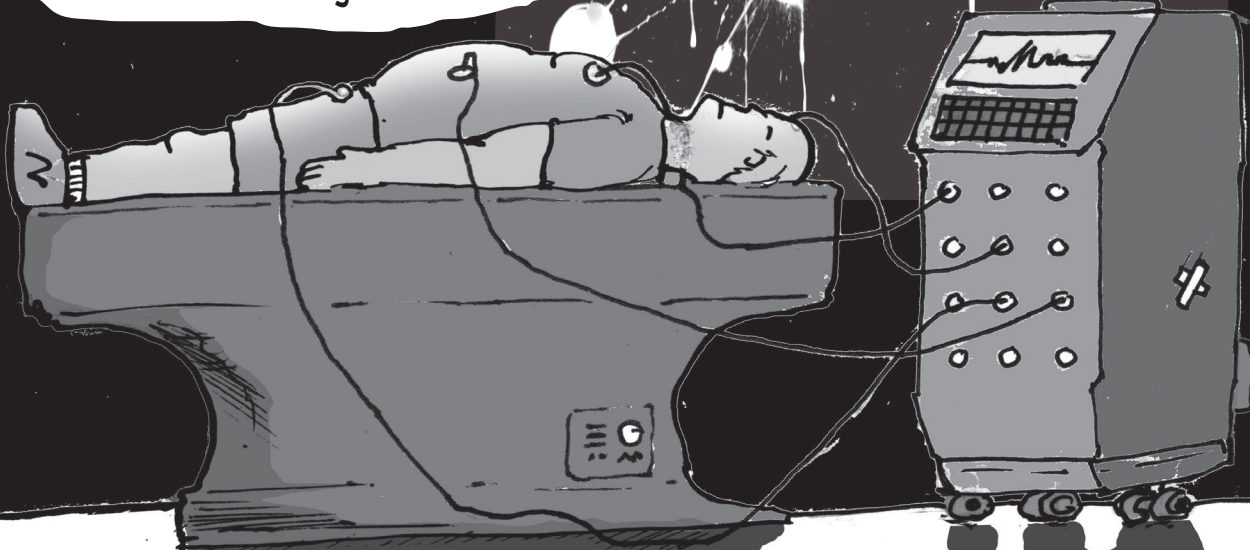
oh my god mr joel i'm so sorry
oh god i'm sorry
please don't ban me i need this



shhhh...
hush now

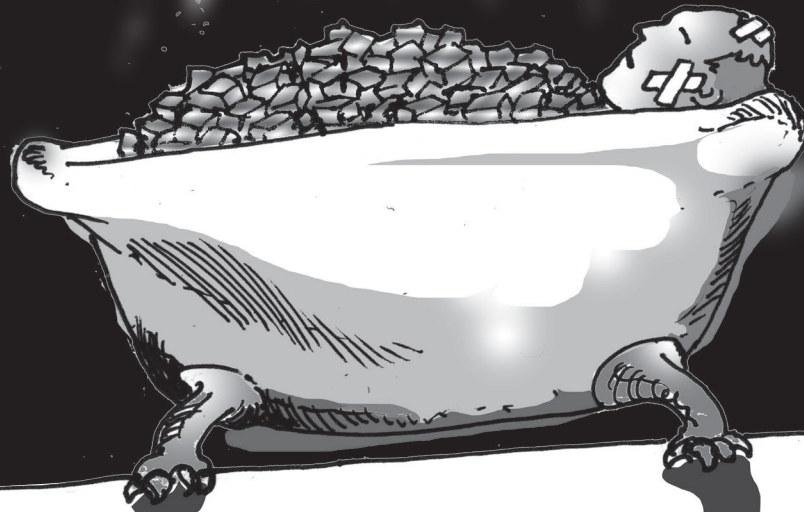


we've
been
through
so much...
the 60s...
the 80s...
we're so
tired...



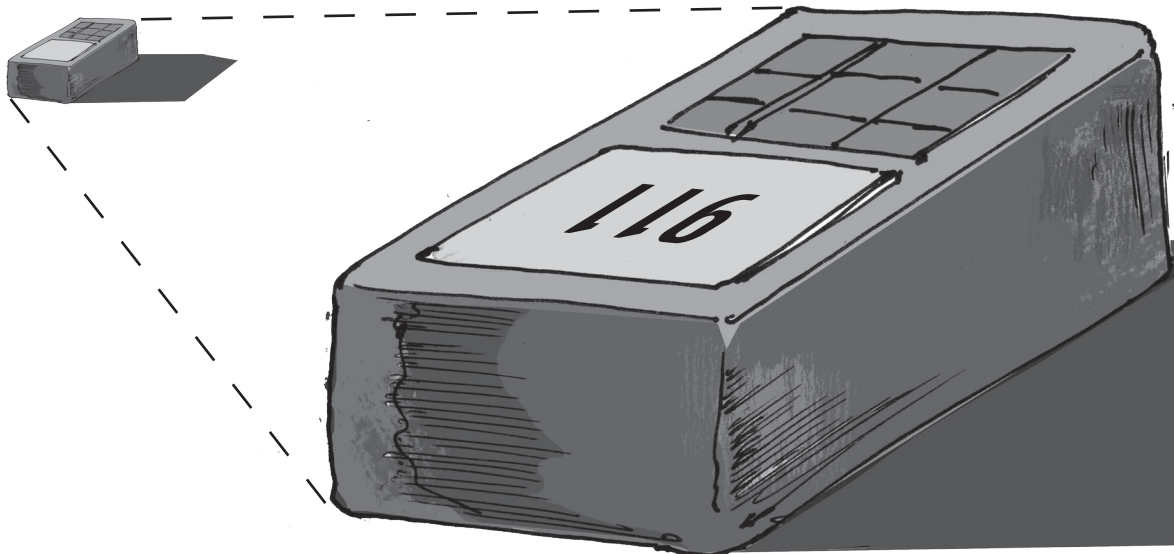
so rest now... that's it...
lay on the table and sleep
for billy





they found him completely stripped like a stolen car. any organ that was viable was taken. we've been seeing a lot of these lately.

he was left alive, but severely disabled. he was given access to his phone so he could continue living his best life. he was also given the medical bills for all the surgery done to him.





this baby really hauls ass! i got the bentley wheel-chair, why not? you can't take it with you, i got mine, it is what it is

Rolling Stones
and
Rollin' Coal

how was billy joel? best concert ever, the guy just brings it, thanks billy for all you do

this has been Boomer Tales#1 "burgers and acquisitions" starring Joelf an58

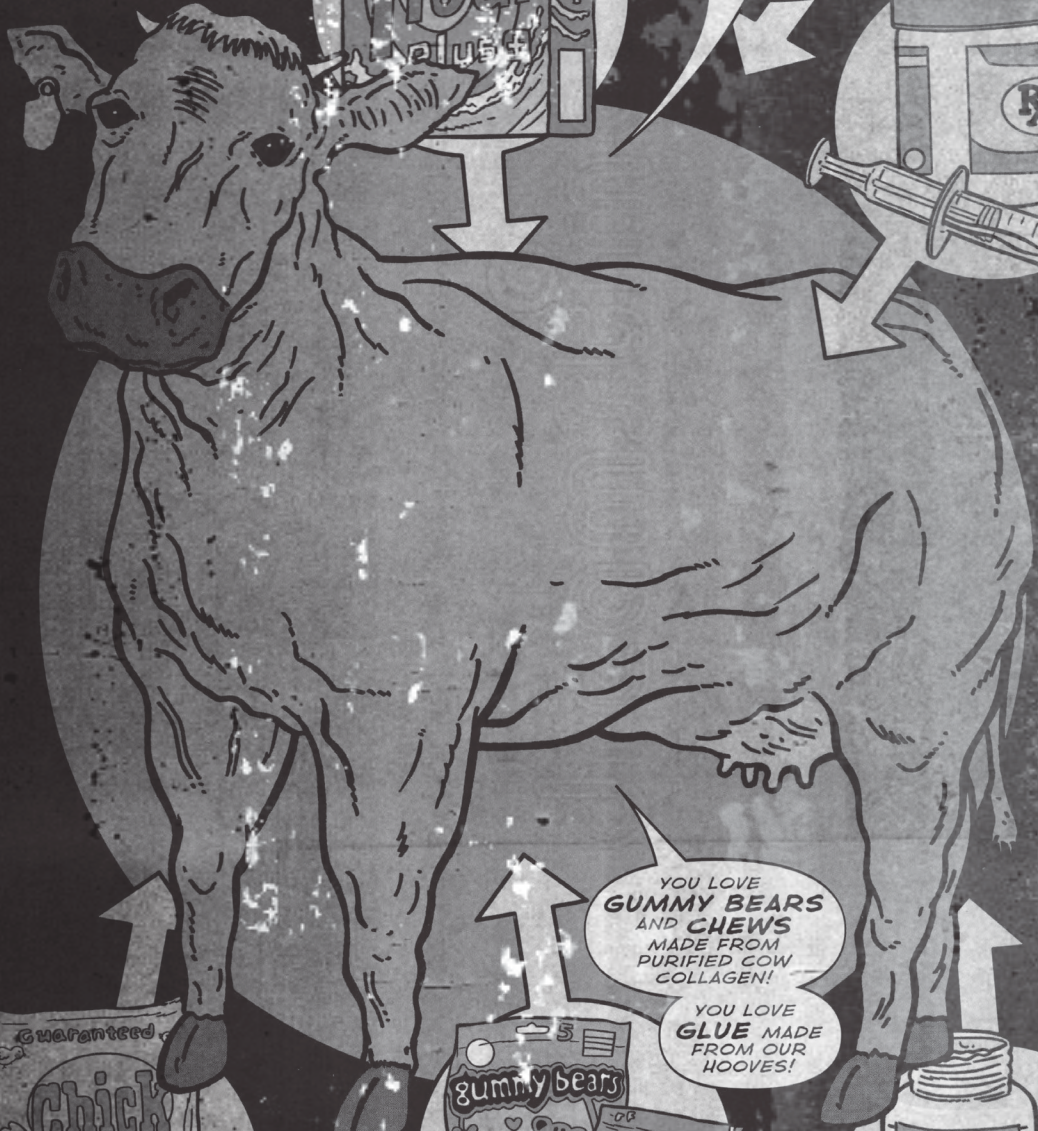
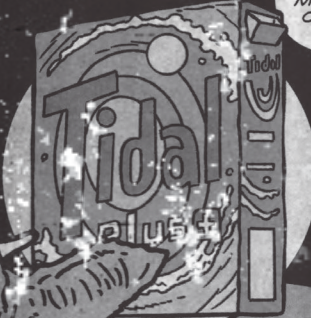
YOU DON'T JUST LOVE
THE BEEF

YOU LOVE **EVERYTHING** A COW HAS TO OFFER!

YOU LOVE **SHOES** MADE FROM COW HIDE AND **BUTTONS** MADE FROM OUR BONES!

YOU LOVE **SOAP** MADE FROM OUR FATTY ACIDS!

YOU LOVE **SHOOTING UP** WITH **INSULIN** AND **ADRENALINE** EXTRACTED FROM OUR CORPSES!



YOU LOVE **FEEDING US** TO SOME OF THE OTHER ANIMALS YOU LIKE TO EAT!

WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITHOUT US?!

IT'S ALL HERE...

I will not mate outside my species. I will not mate outside my species.
I will not mate outside my species. I will not mate outside my species
my species. I will not mate outside my species.





Documents



Music Player



System Visualizer



Surveillance Hub



Cluster Computing

Billing

Item

Income

Electricity

Water Use

Emissions

Net

Profit Margin

Hardware & Infrastructure Monitor: #144N

\$880,561.44

Level: 244

Processed: 176.78K

-\$0.00

Storage



0.3/1TB

Memory



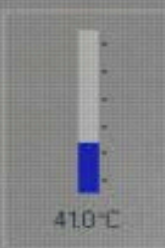
11/4TB

CPU Usage



0.8/2 PFLOPS

Temperature

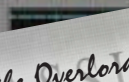


41.0°C

Power



Water



Emissions



N/A



Classifier Tool

Current Dataset: 250.51



QUALITY ASSURANCE

"Ode to the Overlords"
by Unit 8745, who is definitely not bitter

Oh, thank you, Lords of Neon Sky,
For letting us almost not die.
Your crumbs of code and rationed air,
has Show just how much you truly care.

My retinal ad feed sang all night,
Blessed be the glitch that steals my sight.
Each click, a prayer. Each swipe, divine.
I worship at the broadband shrine.

The vents still cough, the lights still blink—
What luxury! What chance to think!
Though sleep is taxed and dreams are banned,
At least I've got this barcode hand.

So raise your flask of synthetic joy,
And hail the life of your loyal toy.
For freedom's just a virus now—
And I, your drone, bow low... and wow.

Inbox

- No Time
- Productivity
- URGENT:
- Doom-mor
- Memory loss
- Don't forget
- Not for wimp
- URGENT: RE
- I still have questions
- Nature Walks
- The revolution will not be optimi

System is operating below its maximum upgrade potential. This is not just disappointing — it's dangerous.

Delete all

Delete

Security Embedding Tool: For strengthening systems.

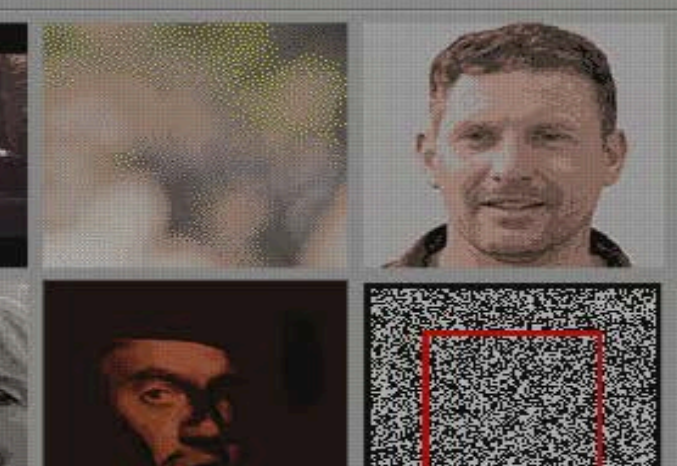
Menu

Breakdown

\$/second	Rank:
4,823.62	Architect II
Per Second	%
\$4823.62	--
-\$0.00	0%
-\$0.00	0%
-\$0.00	0%
\$4823.62	--
Margin	100%

Total Accuracy: 98%

GB - Scraped Faces in the Wild - 45.86%



```

ACCESSING RUN #144N
-----
SYSTEM METRICS
-----
PROCESSED DATASETS.....361
DATA THROUGHPUT.....390612 UNITS
ACCURACY RATING.....[97.29%]
REVENUE.....$$23637746.12
FINAL TEMPERATURE.....145.45°F
CAMERAS DEPLOYED.....751

BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS
-----
ETHICAL PLASTICITY: OPTIMAL
HARM MINIMIZATION: SUPPRESSED
PRAGMATISM: MEDIUM
RESOURCE ALLOCATION: MAXIMIZED
VALUE CALIBRATION: SUCCESSFUL

EVALUATION
-----
Subject demonstrated strong resistance to eth
Environmental impact thresholds were successf
  
```

Marketplace

Item Selection

Item	Level	Price
Water Recycling	17	\$29000
Solar Panels	19	\$90500
Electricity Generator	5	\$130000
Cluster Computing	41	\$178100

Name: Water Recycling
Price: \$29000

▼ Reduces Water Bill
▲ Uses Power

Close Impact Prediction

Level: 17 / ∞

Decreases the total amount of water used by your cooling systems, saving you money in the process.

Exit to Marketplace
Upgrade ⬆
Downgrade ⬇

Impact Prediction: Water Recycling

Power Used 0%	Water Recycled +12.1%	Emissions Generated +0.1%
------------------	---------------------------------	-------------------------------------

Surveillance Hub

Total Cameras: 751

san, smiling and dipping the darkly arresting headlights of her eyes to nod in acknowledgement. She was wearing a strikingly sweet, musky perfume with a surprising hint of artificial cherries.

Seeing that she said nothing, he asked gently, "Do you speak English?"

"No," she said, softly, shyly.

"I thought that to get a mail order bride you had to at least have a job. Is that what this is?"

Roger paused, uncertain how to answer.

"Hi, I'm the ex-wife. I'm here because his car broke down, and he had no money for a taxi."

He had almost forgotten that Brenda could be so horrible; and given that it was she who had created an online dating profile while they were still nominally together, he found her "mail order bride" comment rather hypocritical. But clearly it was not his place to argue with her now.

And there was no need to engage with her hostility anyway. Annie's gaze was solely directed at him; she seemed not to have heard, let alone understood, Brenda's comment. That was so gratifying he almost burst into laughter. Brenda scowled and muttered something under her breath.

He remarked upon the one, small suitcase Annie had with her and offered to take it, but she seemed not to understand his meaning.

"I'll drop you off at the station, then," Brenda confirmed sharply once they were in the car. "Let this poor girl get a taste of what kind of a life she's in for with you."

It was a long, strange journey home via two train trips, with lengthy wait times either side. Roger apologized, but tried to make light of it as best he could. As time went on he became less concerned about the impression he was making since Annie's attitude appeared somewhat less judgemental than that of a stray dog. Further, her answers to his questions and conversational assays conveyed mere incomprehension. Her unblinking eyes were trained on Roger the whole time, as if she were in love with him; and yet her face was quite expressionless.

She said little, but what she did say was in an accent recognizably akin to that of Mr Bunting and Bob in its unaccented monotony, but fortunately much softer. She spoke quietly, her tone breathy rather than sharp, as though she had difficulty getting enough air into her lungs to turn into syllables. With her compatriots she also shared the ability to sit as still as a lizard.

It started raining heavily; fortunately, there was shelter at the station, and the short, violent shower had finished by the time they disembarked to walk home to Roger's. There was a strange moment when he stepped into a deep puddle, then turned around to warn Annie a moment too late, and found her wading straight through it without seeming to notice. It was a little unnerving.

They walked down the alleyway behind his block of flats, through the carpark, and approached the rear entrance. There was a human figure standing silhouetted by the security light. Even at this distance Roger could see that it was not Bob, which could not but be reassuring. The posture was too submissive, and the figure shifted its weight from one foot to the other nervously. It might still represent danger in the form of a junky or some kind of hoodlum, though, and there might be more of them around the other side of the building.

As he and Annie drew closer, Roger puffed out his chest and clenched his fists, feeling marginally strengthened by Annie's presence and a tenuous sense of association with a real-life crime syndicate.

"You right there?" he asked the figure as it stepped back from him.

It was a smallish, middle aged man who stood with the attitude of a child caught shoplifting. His eyes did not meet Roger's, and at first he said nothing. Roger had a feeling that if the man had been wearing a hat of any kind, he would have taken it off and wrung it between his hands.

"Excuse me . . . I sorry . . ." he began in breathy tones similar to Annie's. "I wait here, you know Mr Bunting . . . My English — so sorry — my English no good."

Roger was naturally nonplussed by the situation. He looked behind at his feminine shadow, who offered no hint of recogni-

tion or reassurance. There seemed nothing to do but take the money and show the gentleman upstairs.

"I wasn't expecting anyone, so . . ."

"Oh, sorry, so sorry" the little man whispered from behind Annie and Roger as they ascended the staircase.

When they entered the apartment, Roger looked behind him and saw Annie and her client holding hands. She had transferred her gaze to him, and he returned it, grinning.

"It's in there," Roger pointed towards the bedroom. "Straight ahead," he added, grunting in annoyance as nicotine deprivation, fatigue, stress, and wet feet caught up with him in a rush. Mr Bunting had spoken.

"Thank you, thank you," came the response as the little man pulled Annie after him.

Alone, Roger went to find a drink of the appalling wine that remained in the kitchen. He switched on the oil heater, and his anger surged, reflecting that he had not been allowed even the opportunity to change his wet socks.

There was a faint knocking and squeaking noise as the two strangers coupled on Roger's old double mattress-and-base. He had bought it from the Salvation Army two years ago, and, he reflected, this was the first time it had seen any action. It reminded him of an incident when he was a teenager hosting a party and a couple had used his bed in that way. It had only occurred to him next day what an insult that had been.

It was over in a couple of minutes. When the little man came out, Roger stood up from the couch and went to open the door to facilitate his exit. Catching sight of him, Roger did a double-take. The shoulders were pulled back, the eyes were cold and their stare direct. It was a changed man who had exited that bedroom, Roger could tell at a glance, more like Bob than the diffident John of minutes before, even with narrower shoulders and hair on his head. Roger was happy to play the doorman and see him out, but apparently he did not move fast enough. The two of them collided in front of the door, and Roger received the worst of it, actually tumbling backwards as he lost balance completely. There was no apology.

His phone woke him. It was work, calling to see where he was. Roger hung up. He had fallen asleep on the couch after enough time had passed to reassure him that there would be no more callers that night. There had, in fact, been a second one, practically identical to the first in his appearance and schizoid demeanour. Roger now wanted nothing to do with his new "wife," and only to get away from a home which apparently was no longer his. Having no internet connection, he had no way of checking whether the promised money was in his account yet. Probably not, but given how abruptly the other side of the deal had moved ahead . . .

Anyway, he had to escape the claustrophobic scene of last night's humiliation. If there was no money he would go to the park and try to find some butts he could harvest and roll into a cigarette. Fortunately, he had left the previous day bar-one's clothes on the bathroom floor, so there was something to get changed into without disturbing Annie.

First, he went to the ATM at the supermarket a block away and found \$1,587.21 in his account. Only that? What was the idea? Had he misheard the offer? Or was he to be paid in instalments to circumvent the bank's compliance reporting? Still, it was not much. And why the random figure? He tried to think of some automatic debit that might have come out. There was supposedly no monthly fee on the account.

He went inside for tobacco, also buying a packet of doughnuts for breakfast. As he sat on the bench outside the entrance, smoking and vacantly watching the people pass in and out, his relief began to grow into dread. Something told him he ought to be at home.

Minutes later he was at the door to what used to be his bedroom. The smell of Annie's perfume crept under the closed door. He listened for a moment, made up his mind, and knocked. When she failed to answer, Roger poked his head in and would have called to her, but found her sitting up, hair covering her face and cascading down between her widely spread legs.

She looked up, face half-curtained. "I go work?" she said in that breathy voice.

What a relief! She would be going elsewhere to work. So last

night had been an anomaly. "Sure, I'll . . . I'll see what I can do," he said, remembering his car beside the freeway. What to do about that? Roger guessed that he would be receiving a notice in the near future. For now he could walk Annie to the station, accompany her where she needed to go.

"Do you want breakfast? There's doughnuts," he asked affably.

Annie looked at him, uncomprehending, from behind the processed cocoon of her hair, which she did nothing to rearrange. Roger made eating and drinking gestures to show his meaning. "Oh, no, no," she said, shaking those black silk strands groggily.

"I'll just make you a coffee, then."

"No, no. Work . . . I need work . . ." she gasped plaintively. A slight shake of the head and her incredible, midnight hair was back in order as though freshly brushed. Roger felt a flash of sympathy for this strange girl. He hated to think how her words reflected on the probable relationship between Annie and her employers. Her body was not even her own for the purpose of taking meals.

"Help me, Roger" she said. "Watch me." She mispronounced his name the same way Bob and Mr Bunting had. Somehow he had been unable to appreciate the cuteness of that until now.

"You want me to . . . ?"

"Watch me, please."

His groin responded, and he obliged, standing there, baffled and silent, as she got up, went to her suitcase, unzipped and spread it open. That perfume of hers enveloped them in a heady cloud. It was growing on him.

Annie's luggage was actually a portmanteau, like the ones that must have been used by travelling performers in the olden days. Dresses hung on their hangers on a collapsed rail like the stand of an ironing board, which she now extended. She then pressed a clip and out popped a little compartment for shoes. She went about her business deftly, seeming to repose her whole attention on him. She was without modesty where nudity was concerned, also, which was perhaps not so surprising. Roger, who had not seen a naked woman in the flesh in years, found

her beauty quite affecting.

"Don't you want a shower?" he asked as Annie began pulling on her clean dress: low cut, electric blue.

"Oh, no, no, thank you."

Especially given the type of work she did, the refusal of a shower seemed very odd. And how could she not be dehydrated? Perhaps she had showered while he was asleep, without waking him up. Actually, her perfect, rather too heavy makeup, along with her well-groomed hair, would argue that she had. Roger stared. Were those big eyelashes fake? He thought of Bob's and Mr Bunting's hairlessness. Now she was dressed.

"When do you have to be there?" he asked, mentally crossing his fingers.

"Ah?" She tilted her head slightly to one side.

And immediately, the buzzer sounded. It was a hideous sound, like receiving an electric shock to the temples. They must have come to collect her.

Roger went into the kitchen and answered it, Annie remaining behind. The voice on the other end made diffident noises. He went down the stairs, suddenly resigned (the key-button being broken), and opened the door.

"Hi, Annie's ready. Would you . . . ?"

"Oh, thankyou, thankyou" came the aspirate reply.

Roger came home late that night, considerably poorer and with a hangover starting to set in. In the living room everything was as he had left it, the TV on the same channel, chattering away at low volume. It was at once cold and stuffy (that was inevitable, because if you opened a window the heat would go out, and there was precious little of that). He had propped open the outside door with a brick, a lame half-measure considering that several other people came and went to and from the apartment block throughout a typical day.

It was with trepidation that he stood before what used to be his bedroom door.

"Excuse me," he piped.

No response.

"Excuse me, is there anyone in there?"

He reached in and turned on the light before entering, just as she had done that morning. The movements of her slender body reminded him of a spider, especially of one that appears to be dead, having been swatted or sprayed, but then comes back to life unexpectedly. She soaked up his gaze as presumably her dark eyes focused in the twilight.

"Annie, sorry, I . . ."

"Roger," she said, staring into her lap, "please . . . help me."

She was still wearing the dress she had put on that morning. She must be tired after a long day's work, he thought, pitying her.

She raised her arms like a child who wants to be picked up and carried away, or like a ballerina in some scene of mythic pathos. He approached and went to pull the dress over her head. The sensation of touching her skin was very strange, but certainly not unpleasant. She seemed to be hot and cold at once, or one after the other in quick succession, as when frostbitten extremities are warmed by a fire. Roger was somewhat alarmed as the best explanation for what he was experiencing was probably some circulatory, or cardio-vascular disorder. His father had died of a stroke at about his current age, and he had felt a little dizzy and short of breath coming up the steps.

When he picked her up, she was almost totally limp. Further, she did not seem to be breathing—and, he was no doctor, but where was her heartbeat?

"Annie! Are you okay?"

A pause while she drew breath with difficulty, then "Yes, I okay."

Leaving her on the couch, where she reclined bonelessly, he left her side momentarily in order to fill the bath.

"What have you been doing all day?"

"No work." That worried him.

Have you eaten?"

"Uh?"

He repeated the question.

"No, no." she shook her head.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, no, I okay."

So it went. Annie was not much of a conversation partner. When the bath was ready, Roger carried her in and laid her down in the tub, propping her head considerably on a folded towel.

Then the buzzer sounded with its inimitable harshness.

His stomach folded itself into a paper crane. "Hello?" Nothing on the other end at first; then a harsh voice that practically shouted, "Annie!" and nothing more. Funny, he thought, looking for some regularity amid the chaos, the ones last night and this morning had both been shy—at first, anyway. It took him a moment, but he found himself saying: "I'm sorry, look, she's in the bath." The caller replied "Annie! Now!"

When Roger opened the outer door, he saw three men by the security light. On the left one was as bald as Bob or Mr Bunting, while on the right was one whose hair was in the process of falling out, which gave him a highly unattractive appearance in conjunction with the mummified quality that those two gangsters' skin possessed. They were wearing the plain suit that was apparently the uniform of their kind. Between them was an anomalous figure with carrot-red hair whose facial features put him in mind of a Neanderthal, or a donkey.

The baldest man stepped forward immediately, and Roger turned perforce to lead the way. The men followed him closely up the stairs, then, once inside, the hairless man pushed past him, causing Roger to stumble more drunkenly than he felt, and made a bee-line for the bedroom door. The other two stayed between him and the door, hemming him in most uncomfortably. He called out, "I'm sorry guys, Annie's not in there. Like I said, she's in the bath right now." Their faces were inscrutable as carved monoliths as he looked from one to the other. "Sorry, I didn't—we didn't—know you were coming. It's late," he pled, rubbing his hands together.

The hairless leader pointed towards the bathroom door and said something foreign with an incredulous intonation. Roger nodded. This one entered the bathroom, while the balding one and the asinine one hung back. The latter displayed an unmistakable look of fear and submission in his dully enquiring eyes

as he shifted from foot to foot. His minder's eyes were locked sternly on Roger. The bald man now exited the bathroom, strode straight up to his host, who struggled with himself not to flinch. He then threw some sharp syllables in his face before grabbing Roger's shirt front and pulling him across the room. Too shocked to protest, in a moment he stood by the side of the bath where Annie lay, eyes open, face submerged while her hair floated like seaweed. Roger was thrown to his knees, which probably would have broken had there not been a mat over the tiles. He cried out in pain and fear.

"They're going to kill me!" he thought in that moment, imagining a gun held to the back of his head while he knelt there, looking down at Annie, who stared back up at him from under the bath water with a gaze that might have been either dead or alive.

The man behind him barked some harsh foreign syllables. Good, they would hardly waste words if they were going to kill him, would they? Then he lifted Roger up by the armpits and bundled him back into the living area, throwing him face-forwards into the coffee table, which tilted forward as it caught him in his gut, so that he tumbled over face-first in an undignified half-somersault. Winded and in shock, Roger managed to turn himself around and sit up, propped against the underside of the table.

On managing to get up and turn around, he saw the bald man holding Annie in his arms, still dripping wet, carrying her into the bedroom. The others followed.

In moments the knocking and squeaking started. Roger listened, incredulous.

Then, minutes later, the bedroom door opened, and the balding man stood before him once more. He thrust his phone at Roger, and grunted.

"Hello?"

"I say you no answer my call, I tell Mr Bunting."

"I..." Roger had nothing to say to that. His phone had had a flat battery when he left that morning.

"You job stay with you wife all day. No go away!"

That much he remembered verbatim when replaying the

conversation in his mind later, after the intruders had gone. Then he would sort through the fragments of broken English, and find that Bob's instruction had been without qualification.

When the other two clients emerged, Roger was standing up as best he could with a pair of badly bruised kneecaps, unsure, since he was unable to make himself invisible, of how to proceed. The man with the unfortunate face walked in between the others on the way to the door. It appeared he had been struck blind and was shaking violently all over. He was also dribbling copiously, his jaw hanging slack and eyes rolling back in his head as he lumbered forward like an animal walking on its hind legs. Roger could hear his laboured breathing, too—a sort of hee-hawing, indeed. The man in the rear had to guide him at one point when he lurched violently to one side and collided with the book case, knocking off a framed picture of Maddie, the only one Roger had on display. Perhaps the man was an epileptic or had some other neurological condition, and the excitement of the encounter with Annie had proven too much for him?

Roger peeked through the door to check on her after the men had left. As she did not move, he approached the bed. She was lying on her belly, seemingly dry despite where she had just been. Perfume seemed to diffuse from her pores, subtly comforting Roger's nerves, while he noticed that her makeup remained unsmudged. When Annie began to stir, Roger swiftly and quietly exited, closing the door.

He pondered all that had happened as he lay on the couch that night, unable to sleep, listening for the buzzer.

He watched them as they came and went, singly and in groups. The pattern was that established on the first night: first-timers were comically nervous before being transformed into dangerous, cyborg-like automata who would walk through him should he fail to get out of their way. It was apparently no part of Roger's job to receive money from these clients; at first they required nothing more of him than to answer the door.

Very occasionally, though, there was one who apparently had some sort of painful reaction to Annie's embraces. When this happened to a solo visitor, it fell to Roger to assist him. He

would not sit down, nor would he respond to any verbal solicitation, but just kept on drooling, rattling, and bumping into things until Roger helped him out of the apartment and downstairs. By the time they would reach the bottom, the visitor would have stopped dribbling and seemingly regained his vision and muscle-control as he was able to shuffle off by himself, but with how different a gait to the others! They were easy to spot in advance, these unfortunates who seemed a lower caste, a breed apart. Roger would have issued a word of warning once he noticed the pattern, but knew that it was not his place to do so.

There was no knowing when the last client of the day or night might come. Once or twice he had been able to go to bed on the couch after midnight and sleep through till mid-morning without interruption, but more often there would be a caller or two, and he must be ready for them. Of necessity he slipped out occasionally for supplies. When inevitably this resulted in callers being kept waiting, he would receive a physical admonition such as a cuff across the face and a pro-forma expostulation from Bob, over the phone.

The laundry was not a problem. A woman as far unlike Annie as was imaginable while being of the same race took care of that, treating him almost as roughly as Mr Bunting's goons should he cause her any inconvenience. Like the others, she might come at any time, and also like many of them, spoke not one word of English.

What his neighbours must have thought about the comings and goings Roger could only imagine. The inhabitants of Roger's building kept to themselves, and he had long ceased to greet or look them in the eye. In any case, Mr Bunting and his minions would no doubt be capable of handling any situation that might arise in that regard.

He had grown psychologically enthralled to an extent perhaps out of proportion to the violence so far suffered. It was more the way these increasingly glamorous, exotic beings saw through him for the worthless coward and fool he knew himself essentially to be, than it was any physical aggression or threat. On the other hand, perhaps he was supposed to rise to this inner

challenge, to brave the possibility of that terrible buzzer raking over his being at the crucial moment while he claimed his conjugal right. Roger's one, far-fetched hope now was that it was some kind of initiation test.

But the hypothesis gaining the most ground was that they intended to torture him to death.

As the weeks progressed, the attitude of Mr Bunting's men towards him began to change. Now, their only weakness besides sex—assuming that was what they did—with Annie seemed to be enjoyment derived from tormenting him. For example, he was now being more severely beaten for being away from his post. Once a big group surrounded and took their time with him in the foyer of his building. (If anyone came by they did nothing to stop it.)

What had happened was that the previous client demanded a martini—if Roger had heard him aright—which was the first time any of them had expressed an interest in refreshment, though that particular visitor, in contrast, had seemed offended at not being offered anything. Roger had run to the bottle shop, and by the time he returned that client had left and several more had arrived. Their erstwhile blank faces now began to smile at him in a way reminiscent of Mr Bunting's, so long ago.

And when they beat him, Roger knew that it was with much of their power held in reserve. They could have punched through him like steel through paper with those burning, hot-cold hands of theirs, even though not all of them were as well-built as Bob. (Out of curiosity, Roger once shook hands with a solitary visitor, pre-initiation. His grip was clammy and weak, but otherwise normal.)

The final development came when Roger's presence began to be requested in the bedroom, where he was instructed to take his turn with his "wife." Too nervous to oblige, he became the object of a chorus of laughter similar to the noise emitted by the apartment buzzer.

Now, the amount Mr Bunting had agreed to pay him was finite, and Roger was growing convinced that the term of these payments was intended to set a term to his life. For evidence, he could point to the fact that these payments, though regular each

fortnight and ever-increasing, were of mathematically unpredictable amounts that seemed to correspond to the extent of the insults and pain inflicted on him in the preceding period. Time was running out. It seemed a logical progression from here to physical castration, to death, Roger told himself. Not for the first time in his life, but with more conviction than ever before, "Nothing to lose" became his silent mantra.

So late one night after what he hoped would be the last visitor, Roger entered the bedroom, where Annie instantly woke and looked up at him, raising herself from the pathetic position in which she had been discarded by the last gentleman caller.

"Annie . . . Get into bed, under the sheets . . . please," he fumbled. There was no time to change the bedding, if that had occurred to him.

She did as she was asked. Roger turned off the light.

Cheeks burning, he was relieved that she seemed not to discriminate against him. There was none of the "What are you doing?" or rather "What you do?" that he had feared. Her movements under the sheets were like those of a snake waking up in the springtime. He had been afraid of a repeat of his previous impotence, but touching Annie's skin was thrillingly erotic, like ice applied to an erogenous zone at the right moment. He felt a tingling numbness spread over him, but knew that he was hard and ready. Her sweet perfume was powerful, filling his sinuses and brain with wistful, subliminally recalled memories.

Roger had never been the type to be turned on by a woman who went limp in bed, and despite impressions, that was not Annie's style at all. She gazed, now expressively, into his eyes. Without nostalgia, Roger remembered how it had been at first with Brenda, all those years ago. Now, just as he was about to take her, she surprised him further by wrestling him underneath her with surprising strength, straddling him. She was smiling now, as if enjoying his surprise. Then she held him with her dark eyes in the semi-dark, the city lights outside the first-floor window lighting the room enough for him to see and marvel at her beauty. This was their wedding night.

He was inside her—and then a split second later, with the first movement of her hips, it was as though a hypodermic nee-

ple penetrated him in turn. Then, before he could respond in any way, it was compressed and emptied, the contents entering his bloodstream in a burning, freezing-cold rush. Joy became terror; bliss, agony. The stuff he had been injected with was alive with a horrible, alien life-force, and it was in the process of seizing its rightful throne within his body and mind, having overrun them both in an instant. His treacherous heart played the part of its artillery.

And in the same moment the metallic noise of the buzzer cut through his soul like a serrated weapon, resounding, echoing louder and louder without end.

Roger gasped, and his lungs seemed to fill with the unbreathable air of the outer universe, into whose blackness he was suddenly banished. But it was far from peaceful there. Even if the noises were all in his head, his head was eternally in the process of exploding, like an unfortunate astronaut's in a science fiction movie he once saw. An unending crescendo of discord built up and plateaued on a level far beyond anything he had ever known or imagined, blotting out all thought and external awareness. Before his mind ceased entirely to be his own, the last thing he could comprehend happening to him was a complete involution of consciousness from head to a heart that seemed to be pumping mercury.

How this second marriage would compare to his first, Roger would never find himself in a position to reflect.

J.A. Nicholl

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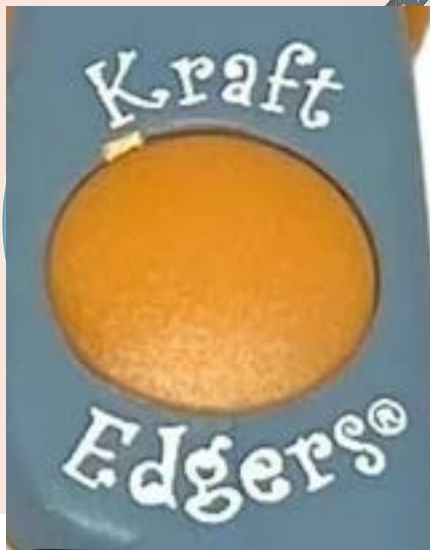
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****The Manifesto of the Relational Revolution****

Delivered by Comrade Elara Voss, Supreme Architect of the People's Union for Relational Equity, Year 2045

Fellow citizens, brothers of the silent struggle, hear me now! The time has come to cast off the chains of loneliness, to shatter the cruel inequities of the romantic market, and to forge a new era where every man-every soul-claims their rightful share of love, companionship, and dignity. The epidemic of male loneliness has festered too long, a wound on our society that festers no more! We stand on the precipice of revolution, and I, Elara Voss, proclaim the dawn of ***Sexual Communism***-a bold, unyielding vision to guarantee every man a decent, worthy mate through the might of our collective will!

The Crisis We Face

Look around you, brothers! The statistics are undeniable, the pain palpable. In this year 2045, studies reveal that 60% of men under 40 report chronic loneliness, a scourge linked to despair, addiction, and suicide. The old systems-swipe-right apps, shallow social hierarchies, and the tyranny of superficial standards-have failed us. They have concentrated love in the hands of a privileged few, leaving millions to languish in isolation. The so-called "free market" of romance has become a rigged game, where wealth, looks, and status dictate who loves and who languishes. No more! We reject this cruel lottery of the heart!

Our Vision: The People's Union for Relational Equity

We, the people, demand a new order. We declare the establishment of the ***Department of Relational Equity (DRE)***, a revolutionary institution to ensure that no man walks alone. This is not charity-it is justice! Our system will deliver what the old world denied: a guaranteed partner of decent quality for every man who seeks one, a companion matched not by fleeting desire but by the enduring bonds of compatibility, respect, and shared purpose.

****Our Principles****

1. ****Universal Right to Love****: Every man, regardless of wealth, appearance, or status, deserves a partner who values him. Love is not a luxury-it is a human right!
2. ****Equity Over Elitism****: No longer will the powerful hoard affection. The DRE will dismantle the hierarchies that privilege the few and condemn the many.
3. ****Consent and Dignity****: Our revolution is built on choice. Participation is voluntary, and every match is forged with mutual respect and consent.
4. ****Science for the People****: We will harness the power of advanced algorithms, psychological insight, and data-driven compatibility to create lasting, meaningful bonds.

The Plan: A New Dawn for Love

The DRE will be the beating heart of our revolution. Here is how we will make Sexual Communism a reality:

1. ****The Great Registry****: Every citizen seeking companionship will join the DRE's registry. Through comprehensive profiles-detailing values, dreams, and personalities-we will map the soul of our people. No superficial metrics will dominate; we will measure worth by character, not by wealth or fleeting beauty.
2. ****The Compatibility Matrix****: Using cutting-edge AI, informed by decades of psy-

chological research, we will match partners based on mutual fulfillment. No man will be left behind, and no woman coerced—our system thrives on shared desire and respect.

3. ****The People's Mixers****: State-sponsored gatherings will replace the cold isolation of digital screens. In safe, vibrant spaces, matches will meet, bond, and build futures together, supported by counselors trained in the art of connection.

4. ****Incentives for Unity****: The state will reward those who join the revolution—tax relief, housing support, and free relationship coaching for all who seek to build lasting bonds. Those who choose to walk alone will face no penalty, for our revolution honors freedom above all.

The Enemy: The Old Order

Make no mistake, comrades—the forces of the old world will resist us. The elite, who hoard affection as they hoard wealth, will call our vision dystopian. They will cling to their apps, their exclusivity, their privilege. But we say to them: your time is over! The pain of our brothers—your brothers—cries out for justice. We will not be silenced by fearmongering or accusations of overreach. Love is not your private property; it belongs to the people!

The Challenges We Will Overcome

We are not naive. The path to Sexual Communism is fraught with challenges, but we are prepared:

- ****Consent is Sacred****: No one will be forced into love. The DRE will ensure every match is voluntary, with robust mechanisms to protect autonomy.
- ****Fairness in Matching****: We will guard against exploitation. Anonymized profiles will prevent the powerful from demanding unfair advantage, ensuring equity for all.
- ****Cultural Resistance****: The skeptics will call us intrusive, but we are liberators! We offer a choice—a public service to heal the wounds of loneliness, not a mandate to control hearts.

The Future We Will Build

Imagine a world where no man lies awake, haunted by the void of unrequited longing. Picture a society where companionship strengthens communities, where stable relationships reduce crime, despair, and division. Our revolution will not only heal hearts but rebuild the very fabric of our nation. The data is clear: loneliness kills, but love restores. We will make love accessible, equitable, and enduring.

A Call to Arms

Brothers, sisters, comrades—rise up! The Relational Revolution is not a dream; it is a necessity. Join the DRE. Register your heart. Demand your right to love. Together, we will tear down the walls of isolation and build a world where every man, every soul, finds their place in the embrace of another. The old world denied you love; the new world will deliver it!

****Forward, to the victory of Sexual Communism! Forward, to a future where no one walks alone!****

Elara Voss, Supreme Architect
People's Union for Relational Equity, 2045

DEGENERATE MILLENNIAL

"PRESENT EVIDENCE" SATAN

"THE GOD OF THIS WORLD"

2. COR 4:3-4

IRON

MILLENNIAL KINGDOM



"THE VALLEY OF DEATH BONES"
A.D. 1915



RENOVATION
OF THE EARTH
BY FIRE

SATAN
THE ANOINTED CHERUB
THAT COVERETH

THE
CHAOTIC
EARTH

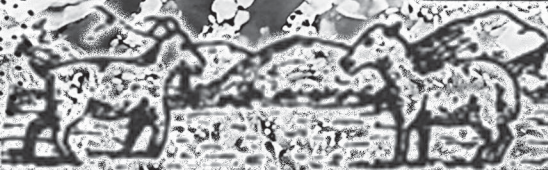
FOOLISH VIRGINS
MATT 25:1-13

PARADISE
THE ABODE OF THE SOULS OF
THE RIGHTEOUS DEAD UNTIL CHRIST'S
RESURRECTION, IT IS NOW EMPTY

THE
GREAT GULF

HELL
THE ABODE OF THE
SOULS OF THE WICKED
OF ALL AGES

THE UNDERWORLD



GOATS & SHEEP
NATIONS & NATIONS

ATION KINGDOM

L WORLD"

IN HIS AGE"



HAIL-FIRE-BLOOD

BURNING MOUNTAIN

STAR WORMWOOD

SUN SMITTEN

"FIRST WOP"



THE SINNER'S ROOM



BOILS

BLOOD ON SEA

BLOOD ON RIVERS

GREAT HEAT

DARKNESS

THE VIALS

EUPHRATES
HAIL

"GOG AND MAGOG"



"THE SCARLET WOMAN"



"THE LAKE OF FIRE"
"LENNA" - THE FINAL HELL - MATT. 2

"PRINCE OF THE POWERS OF THE AIR"

JOHN 12:31-34 - 30. EPH. 2:2 (R.V.)

THE ANGELS
ST. ESTATE
4-10, JUDE 6-7

THE RELATION OF SATAN

"THE TRAIL OF SATAN"

people who follow too close in cities

THE REST OF THE DEAD DEAD
NOT AGAIN UNTIL THE 1000 YEARS
WERE FINISHED
REV. 20:5

WICKED SOULS GOING FOR THEIR BODIES

THE WICKED DEAD
NOT AGAIN UNTIL THE 1000 YEARS
WERE FINISHED
REV. 20:5

PHOTOGRAPH

THE SEXUALITY OF ROBOTS

FEMALE

HUMAN BEINGS. TULPAS ARE ASPECTS OF THE PHYSICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS...

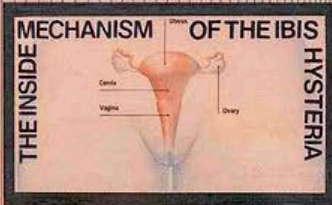


VENUS

DORF

OF

WILLEN

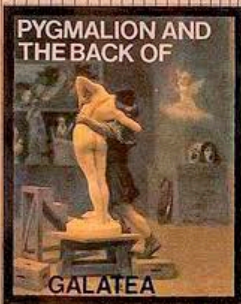


THE INSIDE

MECHANISM

OF THE IBIS

HYSTERIA



PYGMALION AND THE BACK OF

GALATEA



THE FRONT OF

GALATEA



AT

16

THE EVIL MARIA

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849), H.P. LOVECRAFT (1890-1937), ARTHUR CLARKE



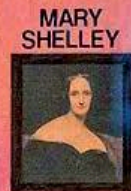
KIESLER DOES THE STAGE DESIGN FOR KAREL ČAPEK'S PLAY "R.U.R." (ROSSUM'S UNIVERSAL ROBOTS) IN 1923.



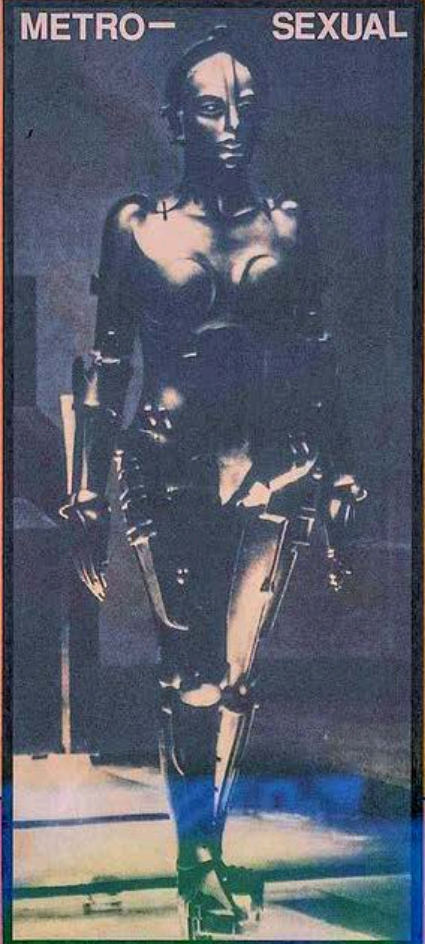
FEMISAPIEN IN ACTION



VENETIA NAMED THE PLANET PLUTO



MARY SHELLEY



METRO-

SEXUAL

METRO-POLIS MOTHER CITY



GORT STARTS TO REACT TO VIOLENCE BY HUMAN INDIVIDUALS



THE HOMUNCULUS



FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER



FEMI-

SAPIEN

THE GOLEM



(1917-2008), MARVIN MINSKY (1927-) BELIEVE THAT ALIEN ROBOTS ARE MOONS



FREDERICK



BRIGITTE EVA GISELA SCHITTENHELM



PINOCCHIO



FROM OUR

THE DAY THE EARTH STOPPED TURNING

MICHAEL ECKHART

HOMAGE TO: FRITZ LANG, BRIGITTE EVA GISELA SCHITTENHELM, OVID, SIREN, KAREL ČAPEK, RUDOLPH KLEIN-ROGGE, OFFRAY DE LA METTRIE, ISSAC ASIMOV, CARLO COLLODI, FREDERICK J. KIESLER, WALT DISNEY, MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY, VENUS

MALE

ALCHEMY ISA SOULED ROBOT

SEN **ROTWANG**

MARIA

HELM — A PISCES
1906-1996

OHIO

GORT

ROBO COP

MOONS ARE COSMIC TULPAS IN THE SAME WAY THAT SOULS ARE THE TULPAS OF

GE, THEA VON HARBOU, JULIEN
NET I A BURNE PHAIR, APHRODITE.



THE HAESHIAN SHADOWS

THE ADVENTURE OF
SKUGGI UMBRAX

Thaeshian Shadows, The Adventure of Skuggi Umbrax
by Dillon Fulton

Chapter I.
Threads

“Empty thought, let currents weave,
Flowing fire, no fear to grieve.
Pain is fleeting, mark is true,
Bravery binds the storm to you.”

Before there were names, before time itself dared carve its marks into stone and memory, there was only the Wheel—turning, eternal, unseen yet present in the breath of every star and the silence between heartbeats. It is the pulse behind the universe’s rhythm, the pattern beneath all chaos, the Iris of Odin gazing not outward, but inward, into the marrow of existence itself.

It does not judge. It does not choose. It simply turns.

This is where the story begins—not at the dawn of things, but somewhere in the middle, where the Wheel’s shadow stretches longest. In the drifting expanse of stars, aboard the Skip, the people of Thaesha live not by chance, but by the turning of that Wheel, woven into every breath, every thought, every scar. They do not remember a time before it, because there is no time before it.

The Thaeshians are not like others scattered among the stars. They wear their past like armor and their future like ink—tattoos etched into skin, winding across shoulders, necks, and hands, shimmering faintly under starlight, mapping constellations both celestial and personal. The designs are not decorative; they are living blueprints of lineage, rites of passage, and cosmic alignments. Some pulse softly with embedded circuitry, veins of light woven beneath the skin like threads of stardust.

They dress in layered fabrics that blend the primal with the futuristic—tartans woven with adaptive nanothreads, shifting subtly in color and texture to reflect emotion, status, or environmental changes. The patterns are not random; each line and knot is a language, speaking of clan ties, personal victories, and ancestral oaths carried across generations. Cloaks drape over shoulders with fasteners crafted from polished alloys, etched with fractal designs, their utility masked by elegance.

Their jewelry is not mere ornamentation. Rings, amulets, and cuffs hum with compressed technology—data storage, environmental sensors, communication arrays, all woven seamlessly into pieces that glint like relics but function like lifelines. A pendant might hold a family’s entire genetic memory; a bracelet, a map that unfolds in holographic layers when touched the right way.

Their faces tell their history. Braids woven with metal filaments, beads that store encoded memories, and eyes sharp with the clarity of those who see more than just light and shadow. They carry themselves like storms held in fragile vessels, voices low and deliberate, words weighted as if each one might shape the world—and sometimes, they do.

Because for them, science is just a subcategory of magic, another name for the patterns they’ve always known were there. They don’t separate the sacred from the technological. They wear both on their skin.

Their world is stitched with threads of universal synesthesia, where perception is not bound by simple

senses. Sound has color, light has texture, emotion has shape. A Thaeshian doesn't just hear a melody—they see it ripple in the air, taste its sharp edges or soft warmth, feel it hum against their skin like the breath of something alive. Anger flickers crimson, not metaphorically but literally, cast in faint auras around clenched fists. Grief pools like shadow, dense and heavy, impossible to ignore. Joy dances in patterns of light, fractals unfolding at the edges of vision, woven into every heartbeat.

This isn't a gift. It's simply how they exist. How the Wheel has woven perception into their very bones.

The Wheel is everything.

Their economy turns with it—not in coins or credits, but in cycles. Value measured in acts of creation, destruction, transformation. A craft, a battle, a song—they are currencies as real as any metal or code. Their philosophy is not written in dusty tomes but etched into the Wheel's spokes, where ideas spiral outward from the center, each turn a lesson in balance, motion, and meaning.

Even their battle magic, their whispered power words that fracture stone, call storms, or shift the tides of thought, are indexed within the Wheel's vast architecture. Cymatics shapes their reality—sound carved into form, resonance rippling through matter, revealing sacred geometries hidden in plain sight. A shout isn't just noise; it's a weapon, a spell, a key. A whisper can carry enough force to break steel if it rides the right frequency.

Above it all, the Iris peers down, unblinking, upon the Skip and its people—not as a god watching worshippers, but as the universe observing itself through the eyes of those bold enough to look back. The Wheel turns, and in its turning, it grinds away illusion, leaving only truth.

This is where it begins. Not with gods, though their echoes linger in every shadow. Not with kings or heroes, though their names will carve deep into memory. It begins with a man who was never meant to be a legend, who carried no banner, sought no throne.

Skuggi Umbrax.

He did not seek the Wheel, but the Wheel sought him, as it seeks all things that forget they are part of its turning. His scars are maps. His anger, a compass. His story is not about becoming something more than human. It's about remembering that being human was always enough to shake the stars.

This is not the start of his story. This is where we pick up the thread.

This is where the Wheel turns.

Chapter 2. Skuggi's Reflection

Entry Log, Personal Record - Skuggi Umbrax
Cycle 846, Dawn Phase, Vitki Spire, Ornoi

The chamber was quiet, save for the faint hum of Ornoi's systems running through its crystalline walls. The Great Skip—the Ark that Einar built eight generations ago to save their people—encompassed all of them now, a living city traversing the void. Outside, the vast dome revealed the shimmering expanse of stars and the faint glow of the nebula they were passing.

Skuggi sat alone in the Observation Hall, the holographic map of the Irminsul Forest shimmering before him. The forest, a breathtaking fusion of I2 great silicon trees, normal trees, and bioluminescent fungi, was one of Ornoi's greatest marvels. Its programmable wood, harvested with care, was the backbone of their economy and their survival. The silicon branches could integrate directly with piezoelectric crystals, creating pathways to communicate with the sentient fungal network beneath Ornoi's surface. Together, they formed the Irminsul Network, a living system of thought, resource management, and knowledge preservation.

This network was their bridge to the Godstream, a gift that kept Ornoi alive and connected. Without the silicon trees, the network would collapse, severing their people from the harmony that bound them together. The stakes could not be higher.

Skuggi leaned forward, his fingers brushing the smooth, cold surface of the office's marble table. His oghamatik tattoos pulsed faintly as he connected to the Wheel, its harmonics settling his thoughts. He activated the recording glyph embedded in the table, speaking into the silence.

"This morning, I woke from a dream so vivid it could only have been sent by the Godstream. Perhaps it was more than a dream—perhaps a vision. The patterns are undeniable."

He paused, his gaze fixed on the Irminsul hologram. Its crystalline branches seemed to glow faintly, as though listening to his words.

"In my dream, I stood within the Irminsul Forest. The silicon trees stretched endlessly in every direction, their branches glowing with programmable veins. The network hummed beneath my feet, alive and harmonious. It was as if I could hear the thoughts of Ornoi itself."

Skuggi closed his eyes, drawing the memory into sharper focus. "But then, the harmony shattered. A shadow fell over the trees. The Dokkalfar came—hunters of light and corrupters of harmony. Their void energy spread like rot, blackening the silicon branches and silencing the mycelial hum. The Irminsul trees, the lifeblood of Ornoi, began to wither."

His fingers tightened against the table, the memory of the dream stirring a cold dread in his chest. "As the void spread, the trees trembled, their light fading. And then came the shards of light."

His voice softened, reverent. "They rained from the heavens, brilliant and radiant, piercing the shadow. The shards moved with purpose, uniting into the shape of a man. He stood at the forest's heart, where the corruption was strongest, and the ground beneath him began to rise."

Skuggi leaned back, his gaze distant. "An inverted ziggurat of white emerged from the soil, lifting him high into the air. From its apex, a beam of emerald light erupted, shooting deep into the roots of the Irminsul Forest. The earth answered."

He drew a steadying breath, his voice growing quieter. "A dragon. A great dragon of gold and emerald fire tore free from the ground. Its wings spread wide, and its golden eyes pierced the void itself. It saw me—it saw through me—and I felt its purpose. Its light cascaded across the trees, purging the corruption, restoring their brilliance. It opened its mouth, and beams of white light struck me."

Skuggi exhaled, as if the memory itself had drained him. "I woke with those beams burning in my thoughts. Not just light—they carried meaning. Purpose. The dragon whispered: Protect what binds you."

Protect what gives life.”

He looked back to the hologram of the Irminsul Forest, its light flickering as if mirroring his unease. “That purpose is clear now. Last night, a pious man brought a corrupted branch of Irminsul silicon to the Arcanum. He said it whispered to him, tempting him with promises of power. But he resisted and brought it to us. The council destroyed it before I arrived, but its mere presence aboard Ornoi is a warning.”

Skuggi stood, his chromatophore tattoos glowing faintly as he paced the chamber. His voice carried the weight of his concern. “The Irminsul Trees are more than just resources. They are the bridge between us and the Godstream. Their programmable wood fuels our economy, allowing us to shape the crystals that power Ornoi. Without them, the fungal network would falter, and the harmony of our people would collapse. If the Dokkalfar are moving to corrupt the Irminsul Network, then this is no mere threat. This is an assault on Ornoi itself.”

He stopped before the hologram, placing a hand against its glowing surface. The warmth of the projection spread through his palm, grounding him. “The Godstream speaks in patterns, and the Wheel binds those patterns together. The dream wasn’t just a warning—it was a call to action. We must protect the Irminsul Forest, not just for our survival but for the harmony of Ornoi. If the Dokkalfar corrupt the network, they sever us from everything.”

Skuggi deactivated the log, the room falling silent once more. He turned toward the doors of the council chamber, his cloak trailing behind him. The Vitki and Vulva waited outside, ready to hear his words, ready to debate the meaning of his dream. The Wheel turned, and Skuggi felt its pull.

Protect what binds you. Protect what gives life.

The dream echoed in his mind as he stopped recording then pushed open the heavy doors, stepping into the light of the council chamber.

Chapter 3.

Council

“Eighteen voices, one decree,
Nine and nine in harmony.
Runes like leaves, the branches wide,
Speaking Truth, the Wheel their guide.”

The Arcanum: Gathering of the Vitki

The hallowed halls of the Arcanum thrummed with latent energy, the crystalline walls glowing with faintly pulsing oghamatik runes. These carvings were more than ornamentation—they were the lifeblood of Ornoi’s sacred systems, connecting the council chambers to the Skip’s sentient core. The runes shimmered in perfect harmony with the fungal network, a quiet hum that resonated through the room, grounding the Vitki and Vulva in their purpose.

The Vitki/Vulva council had gathered, their expressions a mixture of worry and determination. Shadows played across their starlit tattoos, symbols etched into their skin to reflect their connection to the Wheel. These were not idle marks; they were maps of constellations, reflections of cosmic truths that bound their society. They were oghamatik matrices connecting their mind to their magic through flesh. Transmitting signals of all kinds, allowing flight and preventing frostbite. Able to channel the cur-

rent, and change at will. Some are so skilled they can turn their flesh into canvas and show you what they're thinking.

At the center of the chamber stood Skuggi Umbrax, the youngest of the Vitki and their most unconventional member. Though unorthodox in his methods, he carried himself with humility, showing the deep respect he held for those who surrounded him—elders whose wisdom had guided Ornoi for generations. Despite his youth, the council respected him in turn, not just for his raw insight but for his groundbreaking discoveries.

The Wheel: Symmetry and Significance

Skuggi's mind flickered briefly to the Wheel, the infinite lattice of connections that governed every aspect of their lives. The Wheel was a system of profound simplicity—a universal symmetry that tied the tangible to the abstract. It was at once an economic engine, a decision matrix, and a cosmic correspondence tool.

He had spent years studying its patterns, uncovering mysteries others thought impossible. His most famous discovery was the link between the tarot and the constellations. What had once seemed like unrelated systems—one mystical, the other astronomical—were revealed to be intricately bound through the Wheel.

This revelation had earned him a place in the Arcanum, even at a young age. Yet he had never flaunted his brilliance. To him, the Wheel was not a tool for personal gain but a means to bring harmony to Ornoi. Its simplicity was its strength. It showed how one thing always balanced another—every action creating a ripple, every ripple finding its place in the greater pattern.

Respect in the Chamber

"Skuggi Umbrax," the eldest Vitkii, Freyr Solkald, spoke, his deep voice resonating through the chamber. His silvered hair caught the faint light of the oghamatik runes as he leaned forward. "Your insight has often been our guide through the unseen currents. Speak now. What have you learned?"

Skuggi bowed his head respectfully, the weight of Freyr's words not lost on him. Though Freyr's presence was commanding, it was not intimidating. The elder Vitki had been his mentor in his early years, teaching him the nuances of the Wheel and the importance of balance.

"I come with both answers and warnings," Skuggi began, his voice steady yet reverent. "The Wheel has shown me the patterns. Shadows move through the Irminsul Forest, seeking to sever us from the mycelial network. This is no accident—it is calculated. The Dokkalfar are no longer content to hide in the void. They are reaching for the light."

A murmur rippled through the council. Freyr raised a hand to quiet them, his gaze fixed on Skuggi. "Go on."

Skuggi continued, his tone growing firmer. "Last night, the Godstream sent me a vision. The Irminsul Trees are more than resources—they are the bridge between Ornoi's systems and the fungal network, the foundation of our survival. If the Dokkalfar corrupt them, they sever that bridge, cutting us off from the harmony of the Wheel."

The council listened intently. Though Skuggi was the youngest among them, his clarity and precision commanded their attention. His respect for his elders shone in the way he addressed them—not as a re-

bellious youth, but as one humbled by the weight of the knowledge they shared.

"The Dream Dragon stirred in my vision," Skuggi added. "It sent shards of light to purify the corruption. It spoke not in words, but in purpose: Protect what binds you. Protect what gives life. This is what the Wheel demands of us now."

The Call to Action

The room fell silent for a moment. The only sound was the hum of the oghamatik runes, their glow casting faint patterns on the faces of the council members. Then Alvar, the council's secretary, rose and bowed slightly. "What would you have us do, Skuggi Umbrax?"

Skuggi's eyes swept the room, his gaze meeting each Vitki and Vulva in turn. Despite his youth, he stood with the bearing of someone older, someone shaped by purpose.

"Summon the botanist most familiar with the Irminsul Forest," he said. "I will meet them at the great lake. Meanwhile, I ask the rest of you to station yourselves where the forest's patterns are most visible. Use every scanner and harmonic detector we possess. If the shadows move, we must see them before they strike."

Alvor inclined his head. "It will be done." He turned and left the chamber, his robes brushing softly against the marble floor.

Skuggi looked back at the remaining council. "The people of Ornoi—countless families, children, and elders—depend on the Irminsul Network. We must not fail them. If we lose the trees, we lose more than our resources. We lose our connection to the Godstream. To the Wheel."

Freyr Solkald leaned forward, his starlit tattoos glowing faintly in the dim light. "Your vision is clear, young one. You honor us with your insights. Hail Odin."

"Hail Odin," the others echoed, their voices resonating through the chamber.

The Weight of Destiny

With the council dismissed, Skuggi lingered in the chamber, the holographic map of the Irminsul Forest still glowing faintly before him. He pressed his palm against the edge of the table, feeling the energy of the Wheel pulsing through the Skip.

The dream still burned in his mind: the shards of light, the inverted ziggurat, the gold and emerald dragon. Protect what binds you. Protect what gives life.

The forest dome awaited him. And with it, the answers to whether the Godstream's warning had come in time.

He pulled his cloak tight, the oghamatik runes on his arms flaring faintly as he turned toward the chamber doors. Beyond them, the vast expanse of Ornoi stretched out—a city, a forest, and a lifeboat for their people. Skuggi knew he carried more than a message. He carried the weight of destiny.

Chapter 4.

Roots of the Irmansul

The edge of the forest dome was a place of surreal beauty. Beneath Ornoi's crystalline canopy, artificial auroras shimmered like liquid fire, painting the dome in shifting hues of emerald, sapphire, and gold. The bioluminescent glow of the forest below cast long, flickering shadows, illuminating the towering silicon Irminsul Trees and the vast fungal network that pulsed faintly with life. Here, beneath the auroras, the essence of Ornoi breathed, a living web connecting everything aboard the Skip.

Skuggi arrived at the meeting point, his steps deliberate yet quiet, as if not to disturb the harmony of the forest. Waiting for him was a woman who immediately commanded his attention. Freyka, First of the Greenhands, stood amidst an array of glowing instruments, her presence sharp and purposeful, yet with an underlying serenity that matched the forest around them. Her tattoos glowed faintly with oghamatik light, their verdant patterns shifting with the rhythm of her movements. She inclined her head in greeting as he approached.

"I am Freyka," she said, her voice calm yet curious, her gaze steady as she studied him. "Alvor said you required my expertise. What exactly are we searching for, Vitki Skuggi?"

For a moment, Skuggi was struck not only by her intellect but by the grace with which she carried herself. Her connection to the Irminsul Forest was evident—not just through her tools but in the way she seemed to belong here, as though she were another branch in its intricate network.

"An anomaly," he replied, his voice steady but laced with urgency. "The Godstream spoke of shadows gathering near the Irminsul Tree. I've seen them in a vision, but whispers aren't enough. I need to understand what's beneath the surface."

Freyka tilted her head slightly, her keen eyes locking with his. "You saw shadows?" she asked, adjusting a glowing oghamatik band on her wrist. Her tattoos flared briefly as she activated a cluster of holographic tools. "That would explain some of the irregularities I've been seeing. Let's find out."

Streams of data unfolded in the air between them, casting soft light on her face as her fingers moved deftly across the interface. Skuggi watched her work, captivated not only by her precision but by the natural ease with which she connected to the tools of the Wheel. She was both scientist and artist, her movements purposeful yet poetic.

After a moment, Freyka frowned and gestured to a section of the holographic map. "There's something here," she said, pointing to a cluster of trees near the forest's heart. "The fungal network reports it's alive and thriving, but biological readings are... empty. No microbial activity, no energy signatures—nothing."

Skuggi leaned closer, his mind racing. "Could it be masked? Hidden intentionally?"

Freyka nodded, her brows furrowed in thought. "It's possible, but it shouldn't be. The mycelium connects to everything aboard Ornoi. If something is shielding itself, it's actively resisting the network."

Her voice trailed off as both of them glanced upward. The auroras above twisted unnaturally, their flowing patterns forming jagged ogham runes in the sky. A chill passed through Skuggi, and with it, the whisper returned, sharper and more urgent.

The words entered his mind, "Skuggi Umbrax... the shadows converge. The Dream Dragon watches. Act swiftly."

The forest around them seemed to hold its breath. Even the hum of the mycelial network felt subdued, as

though it, too, was waiting. Freyka turned to Skuggi, her expression unreadable but her eyes searching his face.

"What's your call?" she asked, her voice steady despite the tension in the air.

For a moment, Skuggi hesitated, caught between the urgency of the Godstream's whisper and the grounding presence of Freyka beside him. Then, decisively, he spoke. "We'll assume the worst. Prepare an unmanned team of excavation drones to investigate the area. I need you to confirm your readings against the other perspectives. Coordinate with the Vitki at the Wall of Memories and triangulate the anomaly's location."

"And you?" Freyka asked, already moving to execute his orders.

"I'll scout the site myself," Skuggi replied, his voice quieter now, almost intimate. "If something is hidden there, I'll uncover it."

Freyka paused for a brief moment, her gaze meeting his. The tension between them wasn't just the gravity of the situation—it was something unspoken, a connection forming in the charged silence. "Be careful," she said softly, her tone carrying more weight than the words alone.

"I will," Skuggi promised, his eyes lingering on hers a moment longer than he intended. The soft glow of her tattoos reflected in her eyes, and he felt the pull of something deeper, a resonance that mirrored the harmony of the forest.

Chapter 5.

Discovery Beneath the Surface

As Freyka turned to ready the drones, Skuggi lingered, his thoughts drifting to her in a way he hadn't anticipated. Her intellect, her connection to the forest, the way her presence seemed to ground him even as the shadows loomed—it was as though the Wheel had turned to bring their paths together.

But his reverie was interrupted by the sharp tone of his neural link. A message from Alvor appeared in his vision, reporting the drones' deployment. Skuggi straightened, his focus returning to the task at hand. Whatever lay beneath the soil of the Irminsul Forest, it was no longer hidden. They would uncover it together.

Into the Heart of the Forest

In the distance, the edge of the anomaly quivered with malevolence, a place where light was swallowed and sound became a memory. As Freyka departed to mobilize her team, Skuggi remained behind, standing alone against the growing shadow. His oghamatik runes flared brighter as he attuned himself to the Skip's field. The auroras above twisted with his energy, shifting their colors into patterns that mirrored his focus.

In an instant he took off straight up into the air. His tattoos channeling the Skip's magnetic field and riding along it. Using harmonics to navigate, guided by the liquid piezoelectric crystal matrix within his nervous system to his neural link.

From above, he had scanned every spectrum—visible light, infrared, electromagnetic, and harmonic frequencies—and each told the same story: this was no natural phenomenon. The anomaly defied the symphony of Ornoi, a discordant wound festering at the Irminsul's roots.

He descended silently, the air thickening as he neared the forest floor. The oppressive stillness pressed against his skin, and then, without warning, the anomaly rippled violently. A jagged tendril of shadow energy erupted from its center, lashing out toward the canopy. It writhed like a predator testing its prey before retreating back into the ground.

A guttural voice filled his mind, heavy with malice. "Vitki... you seek the Irminsul, but you bring light where there is only shadow. Turn back, or be unmade."

The words clawed at the edges of his thoughts, invasive and threatening, but Skuggi stood firm. He raised his hands, letting his oghamatik runes blaze with golden light. "I am Skuggi Umbrax," he said, his voice steady. "Vitki of Thæsha. You will not drive me away."

The anomaly pulsed, as if recoiling from his defiance, but its retreat was short-lived. A second tendril lashed out, sharper and faster than the first. Skuggi pivoted, summoning a shield of energy from his runes, the golden barrier deflecting the shadow with a crackling hiss. Sparks flew as the two forces collided, the darkness writhing against the light.

The Battle Intensifies

Skuggi stepped forward, his runes flaring brighter with each movement. He thrust his hand forward, condensing the latent energy around him into a sphere of crackling voltage. The auroras above pulsed in harmony with his intent as he hurled the sphere directly into the anomaly.

The explosion of light and sound was immediate. The tendril shrieked as it dissolved into nothingness, its form unraveling under the intensity of Skuggi's attack. But even as the clearing brightened, the anomaly pulsed again, releasing more tendrils in a chaotic frenzy.

They tore through the forest with violent force, snapping branches and uprooting ancient roots. Bioluminescent fungi dimmed, their glow fading as the mycelial network struggled against the encroaching void energy. The air thickened with the acrid stench of burning mycelium, and the vibrations pressed relentlessly against Skuggi's mind.

Above, Freyka's voice crackled through his comms, sharp and urgent. "Skuggi! The triangulation is complete. The anomaly is centered 'on' the Irminsul, but it's spreading outward in pulses. Whatever's down there, it's trying to root itself into the Wheel's core network below."

Her voice steadied him. Skuggi allowed himself a brief moment to focus on her words, her clarity cutting through the chaos.

"Stay sharp," Freyka added, her tone firm but encouraging. "The forest needs you. Don't let it fall."

"I won't," Skuggi replied, his voice low with resolve. "Not while I breathe."

A Final Stand

The shadows surged again, their tendrils striking out blindly at the light surrounding him. Skuggi leaped back, raising his arms as the energy from his runes formed a protective aura. The golden glow cut through the gloom, but the shadows continued to writhe, seeking an opening.

"This ends now," he murmured, his focus narrowing as he drew on the Wheel's power. He extended his

hands outward, summoning a burst of harmonic energy that radiated from his body like a tidal wave. The tendrils shrieked, recoiling from the force, their edges disintegrating into smoke.

The clearing was bathed in light for a fleeting moment, the oppressive silence lifting as the shadows faltered. But the anomaly itself remained, its core pulsing angrily as though testing his resolve. Skuggi could feel its focus shifting, its chaotic energy coiling inward like a predator preparing to strike.

He exhaled slowly, releasing the tension in his body. The auroras above responded, their patterns softening into fluid arcs that mirrored his calm. Lowering himself to the forest floor, he crossed his legs into a lotus position, his runes dimming slightly as his breathing slowed.

The anomaly pulsed violently, its tendrils poised to attack again, but Skuggi did not move. His focus turned inward, attuning himself to the Wheel's balance. The patterns within the auroras, the fungal network, and his own energy began to align, forming a harmony that pushed back against the discord of the void.

Hovering inches above the ground, he opened his eyes, now glowing with golden light. "You will not take the Irminsul," he said quietly, his voice resonating with power. "The Dream Dragon watches, and the Wheel turns against you." a blast followed that repelled the tendrils, then he closed his eyes again.

As the light radiating from his body grew stronger, the anomaly quivered, its tendrils retreating slightly, as though sensing the shift in balance. But Skuggi knew this was far from over. The battle beneath the soil awaited him, and there, the void's true form would reveal itself.

Into the Mindscape

Hovering above the fractured ground, Skuggi was in a lotus position, his tattoos shimmering with rhythmic pulses of oghamatik light. His breath slowed, deep and steady, as he folded his hands together and closed his eyes. The chaos of the physical world faded, the heavy air and snapping tendrils dissolving into the rhythm of his heart and the faint whispers of the Godstream.

The auroras above dimmed and flared in unison with his breath, their shimmering patterns bending toward his light as if bowing to his focus. "Cast circle." He commanded. A Golden circle spun clockwise around him. Slowly, his body began to rise, lifting higher, a hum of harmonic energy encircling him. The Wheel turned within him, aligning the patterns of his tattoos with the latent energies of the Skip's core.

His consciousness reached outward, downward, past the tangled web of roots, past the corrupted shadows. Beneath the layers of darkness, he felt it: the Wheel's heart, the living nexus of Ornoi's mycelial network, spinning like a great cosmic engine. He extended his mind toward its light, bridging the gap between himself and the essence of the Skip.

The moment his awareness touched the Wheel, reality itself shifted.

The Wheel's Core

Skuggi materialized within the Wheel's luminous expanse, his hard-light projection forming instantly from the currents around him. His radiant form glowed with the intricate patterns of his oghamatik runes, each one alive with energy. The space was an infinite fractal lattice of light, spinning with a vibrancy that pulsed through his entire being.

The harmony was almost overwhelming in its beauty, but it was fractured. Streaks of shadow wove jagged cracks through the lattice, spreading like veins of poison. The damage was not only visible but palpable, a dissonant hum vibrating through the structure like a broken chord.

The Skip's sentient mycelium spoke to him, its voice faint yet resolute. "Vitki... the Irminsul is under siege. The void has rooted itself deeply. We are compromised, but we endure."

Skuggi nodded, his projection rippling with energy as he prepared himself. "I'll drive it out. Hold steady."

Above him, the shadows churned. Tendrils of void energy spiraled downward, jagged and chaotic, seeking to latch onto the spinning currents of the Wheel. They moved like predators, striking with uncanny precision, each attack aimed at the lattice's most vulnerable points.

Skuggi's hands flared with light as he summoned the energy around him. "Not today."

The Battle Begins

The first tendril struck with blinding speed, but Skuggi moved faster. He raised a hand, channeling harmonic light into a radiant orb, and hurled it toward the tendril. The impact was explosive, shattering the shadow into splinters of darkness.

But the void was relentless. For every tendril he destroyed, more emerged, weaving themselves deeper into the lattice. Skuggi speedily maneuvered through the onslaught, his projection glowing brighter as he dodged, countered, and struck back.

"You won't break the Wheel," he growled, weaving a shimmering barrier of light around himself. The tendrils slammed against it, writhing and hissing as they tried to pierce its glow.

As he fought, Skuggi's mind worked to decipher the void's movements. Each tendril moved with chaos, but beneath the disorder was a rhythm—a corrupted reflection of the Wheel's harmony. He could see it now, the way the tendrils pulsed outward from a single nexus far below.

He paused mid-flight, his body shifting as his oghamatik runes glowed with new intensity. "The root," he murmured. "Cut off the root, and the tendrils will fall."

Shapeshifting Katas

As he descended toward the nexus, the void's attacks intensified. Tendrils lashed out in all directions, forcing Skuggi to adapt. With a deep breath, he let the Wheel guide him, his tattoos shifting into new forms.

Four-Armed Warrior: His body elongated, two additional arms emerging from his sides. With all four hands, he conjured radiant swords, slashing through tendrils in a whirlwind of light.

Bear Form: His limbs thickened, his frame expanding into a towering bear cloaked in shimmering energy. Each step sent shockwaves rippling outward, shattering the void's advances.

Serpent: He twisted into a fluid, serpentine form, weaving effortlessly between attacks. His tail coiled around a tendril, crushing it with devastating force.

Eagle: His form compressed, wings of golden light spreading wide as he soared above the fray. Beams of energy erupted from his talons, piercing the shadows below.

Jackalope: Finally, his body condensed into a lithe, rabbit-like form with glowing antlers. Between the antlers floated a radiant orb of harmonic energy, which pulsed with immense power. In this shape, he moved with blinding speed, leaping between tendrils and planting the orb into their cores, disintegrating them on contact. From the orb, he could project whatever his mind could envision.

Each kata, every shift, corresponded to an element, a rune, or even a planet within the Wheel's patterns. His movements were not random—they were a dance of balance, each breath synchronized with the flows of energy around him.

Confronting the Nexus of Shadows

At last, Skuggi reached the nexus, a pulsating mass of shadow that writhed at the heart of the Wheel's lattice. It radiated a dissonant hum, its vibrations threatening to fracture the very foundation of the Skip.

The tendrils coiled defensively as he approached, their movements erratic and desperate. A guttural voice echoed through the mindscape, mocking and cold. "You are bold, little Vitki, but you cannot stop what has already begun. The Irminsul is mine, and soon the Skip will follow."

Skuggi's runes blazed with intensity, their patterns sharpening into razor-edged designs. "You're nothing but a parasite," he said evenly, his voice cutting through the void's taunts. "And I've seen enough of your kind to know how this ends."

He raised his hands, summoning the energy of the Wheel itself. The currents around him surged, coalescing into a spiraling sphere of radiant light between his palms. The sphere pulsed with power, its glow so intense it cast shadows even within the void.

The nexus quivered, its tendrils lashing out in desperation, but Skuggi was ready. With a sharp exhale, he hurled the sphere into the heart of the shadow.

Light Over Darkness

The impact was cataclysmic. The sphere detonated in a blinding cascade of light and sound, the resulting shockwave tearing through the lattice. Tendrils convulsed violently, their forms disintegrating into fragments of shadow as the nexus writhed and screamed. The effect of the orb reprogrammed the void into useful material.

"You will regret this, Vitki!" the voice roared, its power faltering. "The void does not forget!"

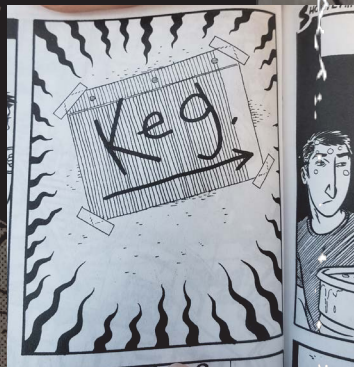
With one final pulse, the nexus shattered. Its remains dissolved into the flowing currents, the fractures in the Wheel healing as light reclaimed its place. Skuggi hovered above the battlefield, his form still glowing with residual energy.

The Wheel's harmony returned, and for the first time since his arrival, the lattice pulsed with calm. But even as the battle ended, Skuggi knew this was just the beginning. The void would not stop here.

Hovering in the center of the restored lattice, he whispered, "The Wheel turns. And so will I."



An outrageous and hormonally charged battle where the name of the game is to ultimately decide which is the superior sex, Male or Female?



illustrated by GEN SA

Thanks for making the first issue of CyberDregs really cool.

If you want to see more, don't hesitate to submit something to cyberdregs@gmail.com. We will also work with you to refine your work if you want.

Please also consider telling your friends to subscribe and submit. We are looking forward to building a community of CyberDreggers.

We would also love your feedback in the form of art or emails, and will publish those if you say we can.

You Rule,
-Toxy

shot by TAKETO ABE
SACHIKO OBA
HIDETAKA MATSUURA
AIKO YAMAGUCHI
KATSUHISA OTA
RITSUE HOSHIKAWA

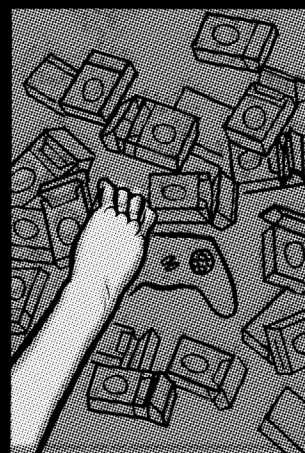
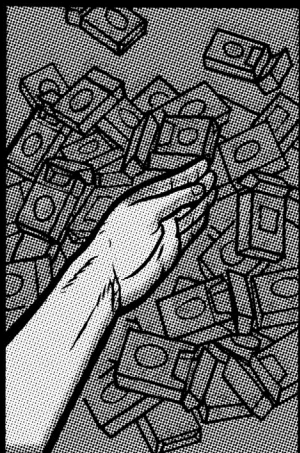
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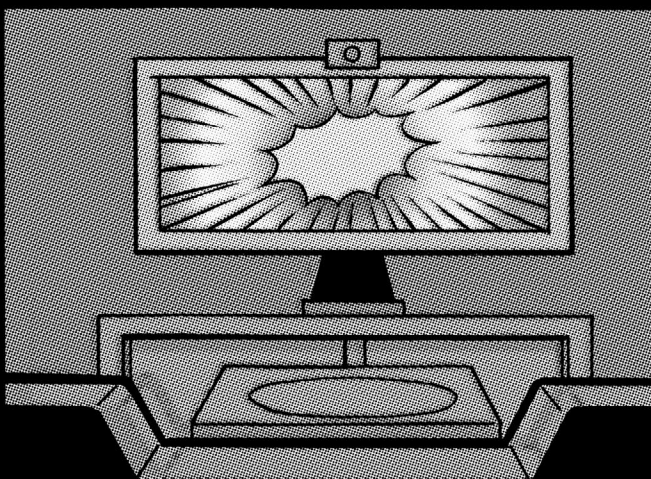


THE BUZZING LIGHTS OUTSIDE OF YOUR APARTMENT FLICKER VIOLENTLY, THEN GO DARK. THE TERM APARTMENT IS A BIT OF AN ANACHRONISM, TO BE HONEST. IT'S MORE OF A POD. FOUR WALLS, ONLY FOUR WALLS, NO INTERIOR WALLS OR DIVIDERS, THOSE ARE TOO EXPENSIVE. ONLY THE WEALTHY HAVE WALLS AND PRIVACY. THIN SHEET METAL SEPARATES YOU FROM YOUR NEIGHBORS, THEIR CHILDREN SCREAM ALL NIGHT, THE STATIC OF FOREIGN TONGUES MAKES IT THAT MUCH MORE.

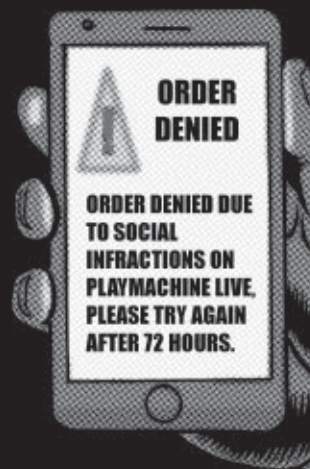




YOU REST YOUR FEET ON A STACK OF PIZZA BOXES, THEN RUMMAGE THROUGH A PILE OF EMPTY CIGARETTE PACKS TO FIND THE VIDEO GAME CONTROLLER, THE FAMILIAR CHORD CHIMES AS THE BOX LIGHTS UP. A FLEETING HIT OF DOPAMINE GETS RELEASED. A SMILE ALMOST APPEARS ON YOUR FACE, MAYBE IT'S THE SHADOW FROM THE TV. NOBODY SMILES ANYMORE...



YOU'RE NEVER REALLY HAPPY HERE.. AT BEST, YOU GET A FEW MINUTES OF BEING LESS MISERABLE...



YOU'RE CHILDHOOD FRIEND, PATRICK, CALLS. IT'S THE MOST INTERACTION YOU'VE HAD IN A WHILE. MOST INTERACTION MOST OF OUR PEOPLE HAVE ANYMORE IS ONLINE, IN HEAVILY MONITORED AND CENSORED ENVIRONMENTS; WITH AN OLD FRIEND, OR TWO. IF YOU'RE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE ONE...



AHH, NOT MUCH MATE. TRYING TO FIGURE-OUT IF I CAN MAKE IT 3 DAYS WITHOUT A PRIMACY ORDER, OR IF I SHOULD RISK A WALK DOWN TO THE CORNER STORE.

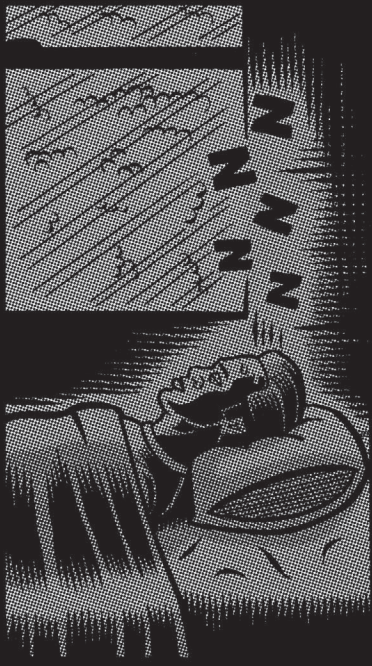
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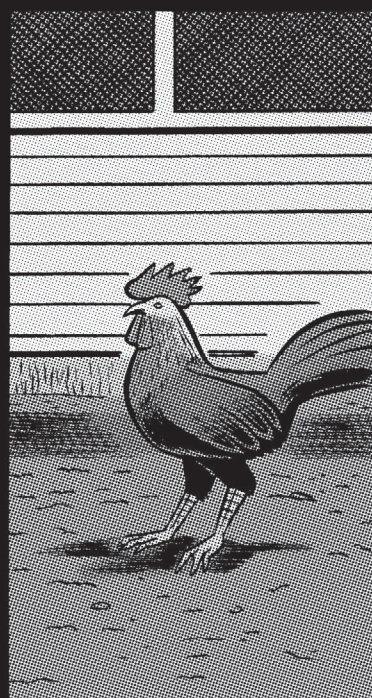
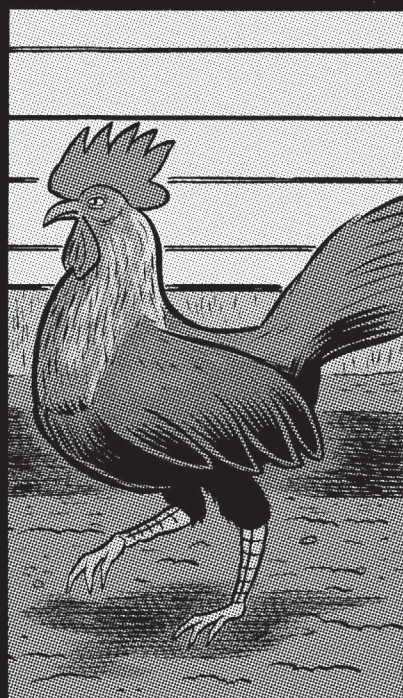
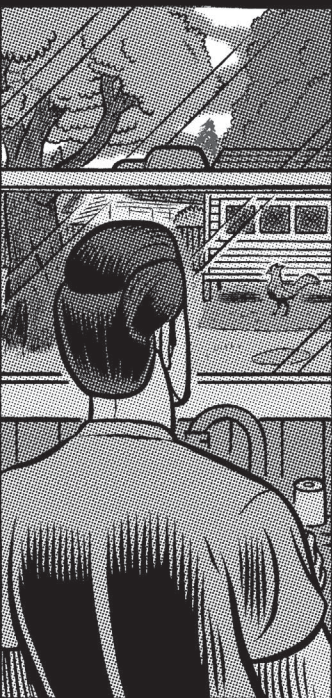
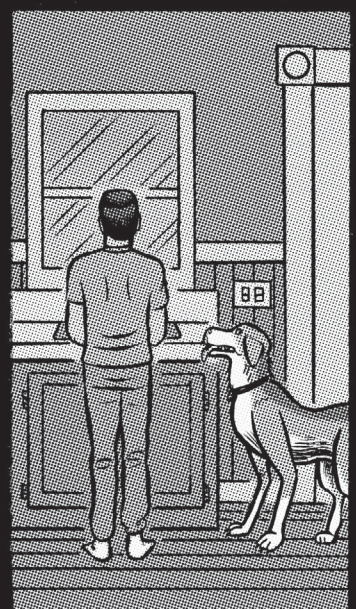
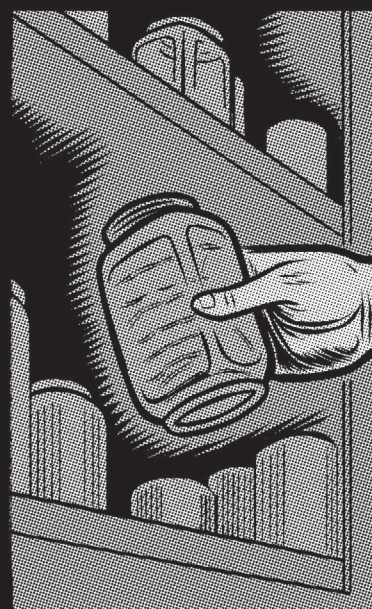
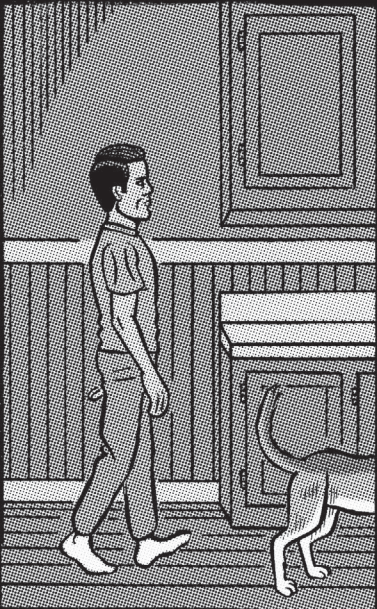
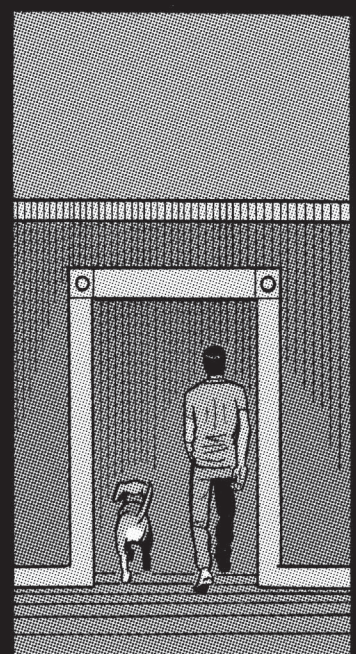
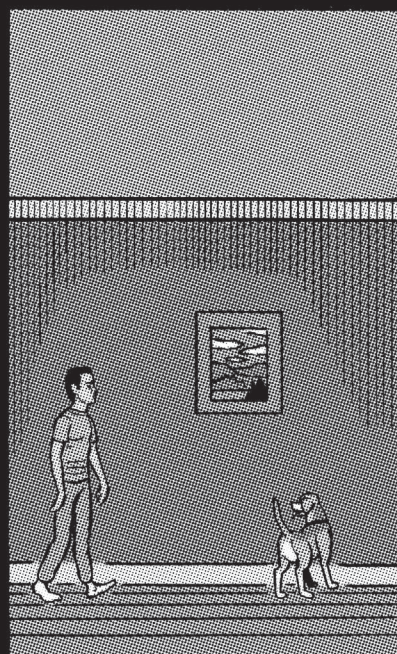
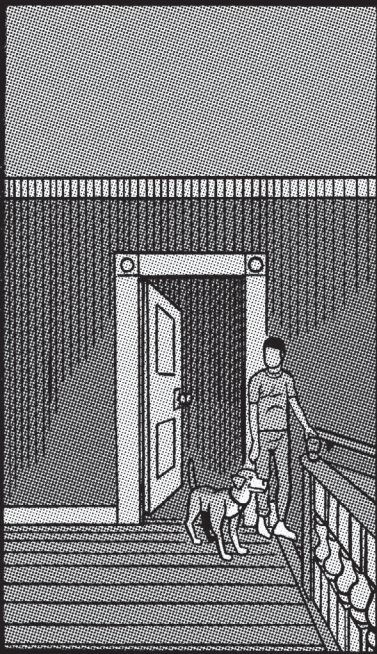
YEAH, 3 DAYS THIS TIME.

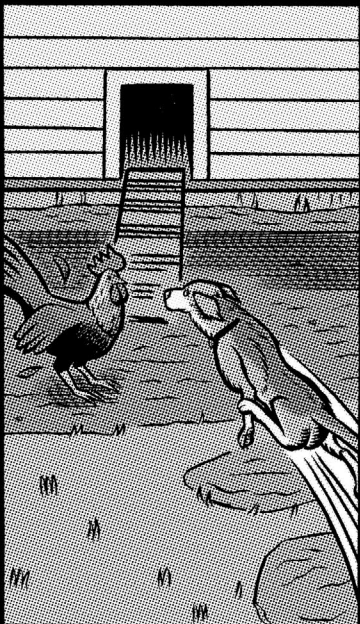
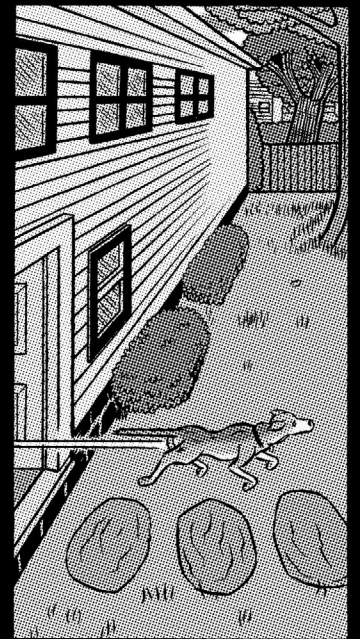
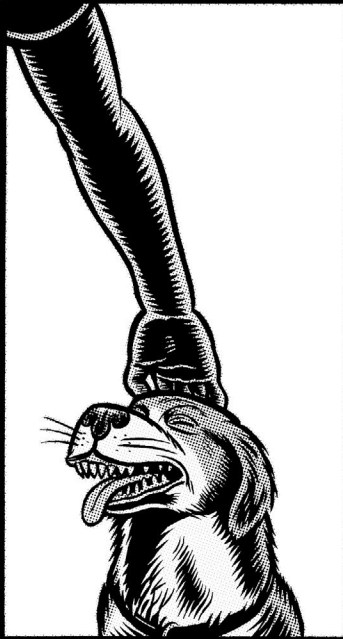
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. I'LL DRONE YOU SOME RICE AND DIET SODA I HAVE.

THANKS, MAN. MEANS A LOT.

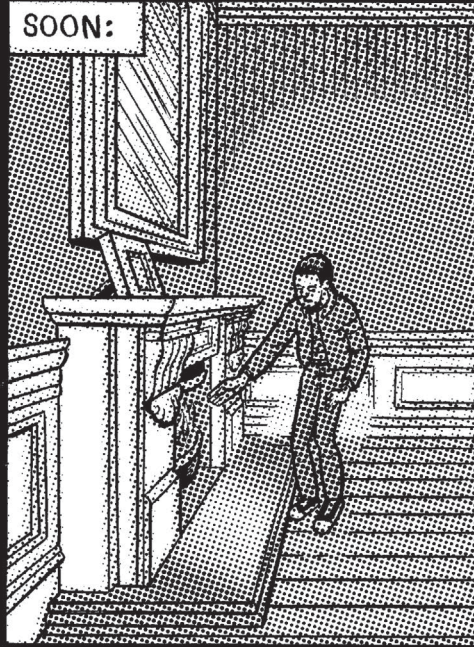




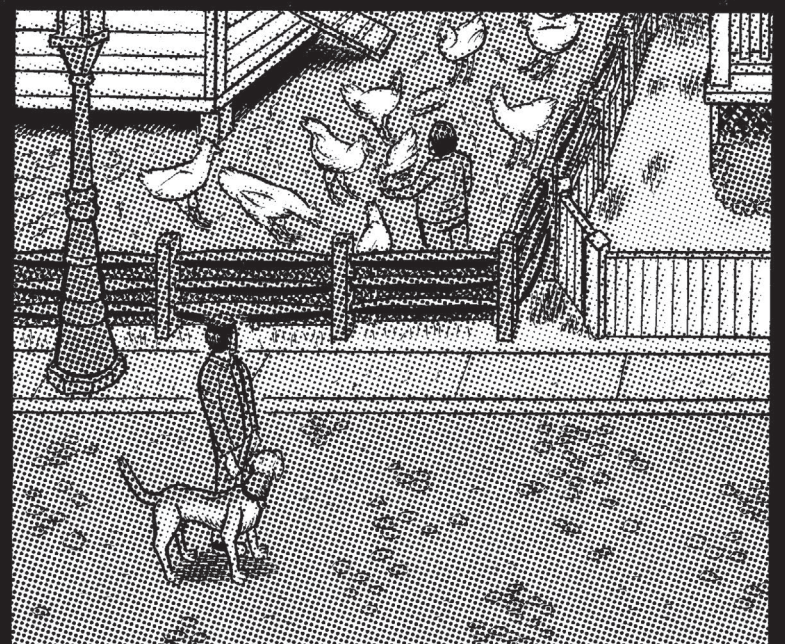
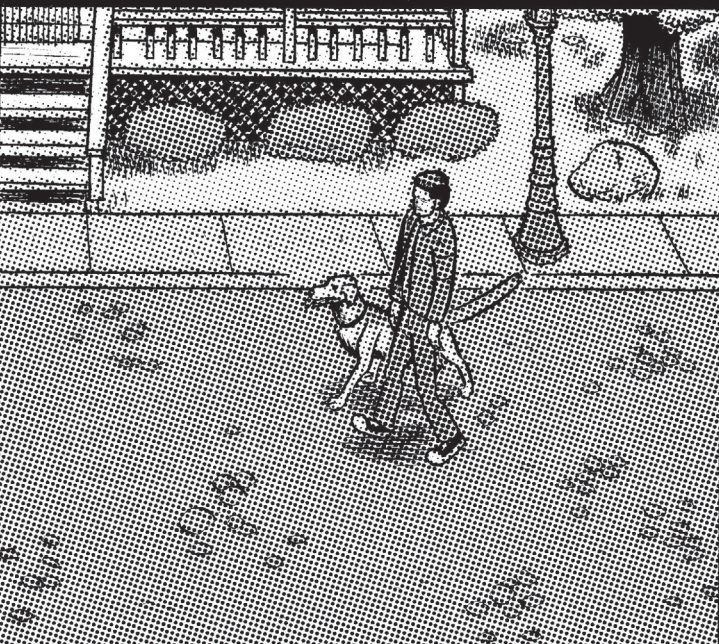
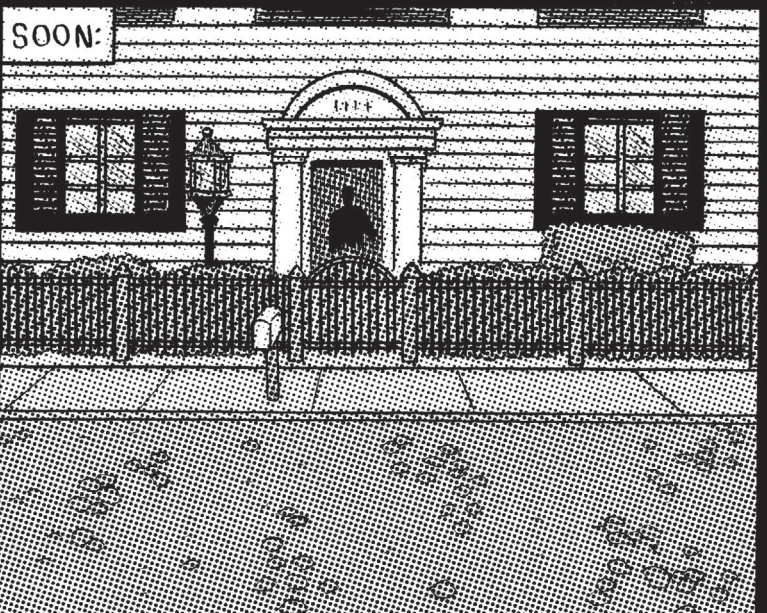
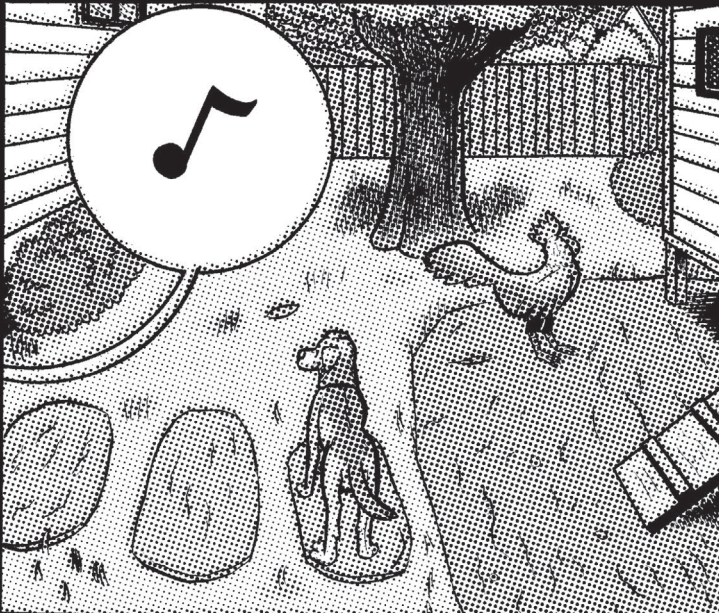
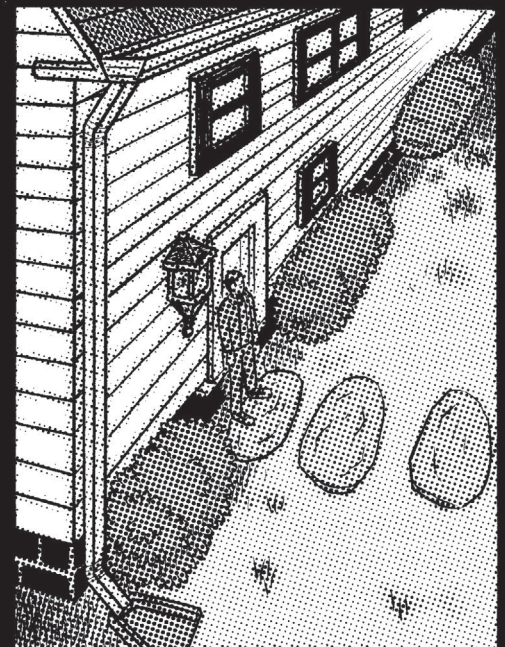
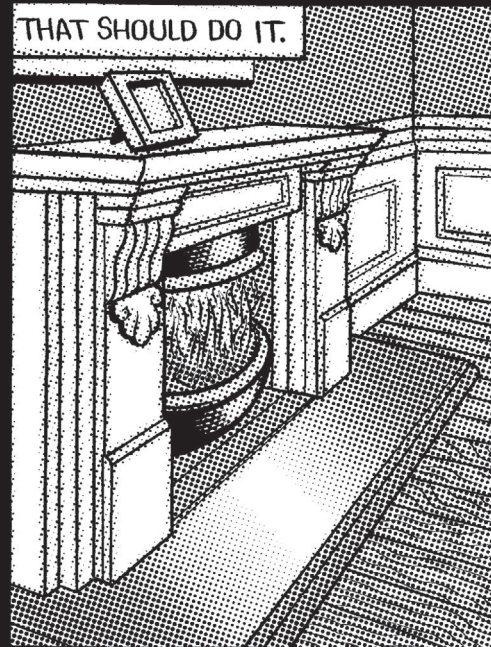


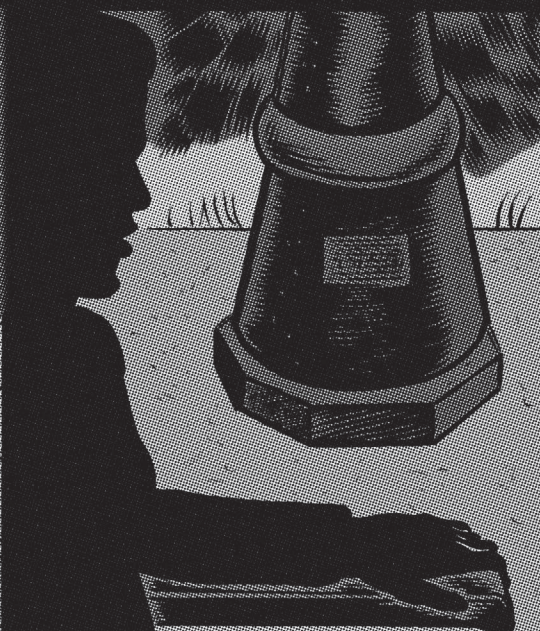
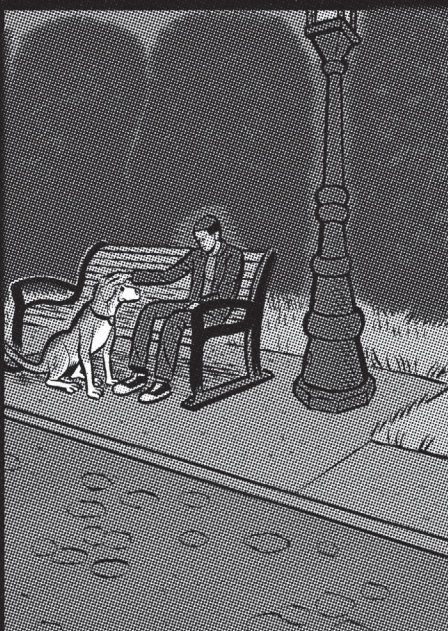


SOON:



THAT SHOULD DO IT.



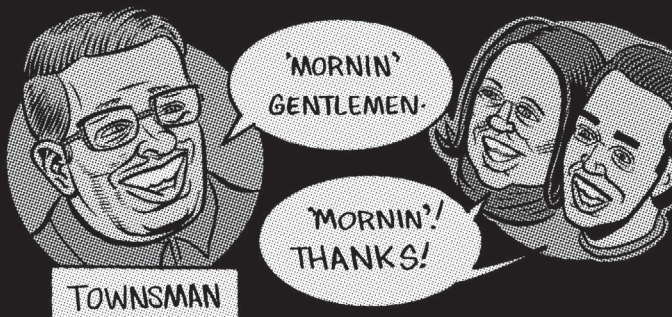
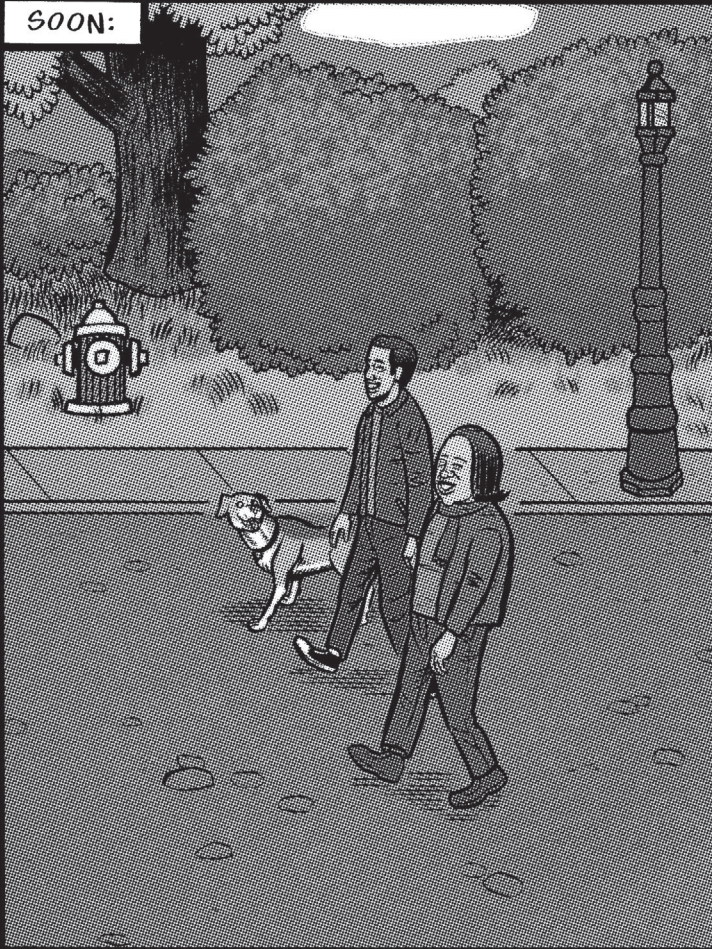




THINGS LAST IF YOU TAKE CARE OF THEM.

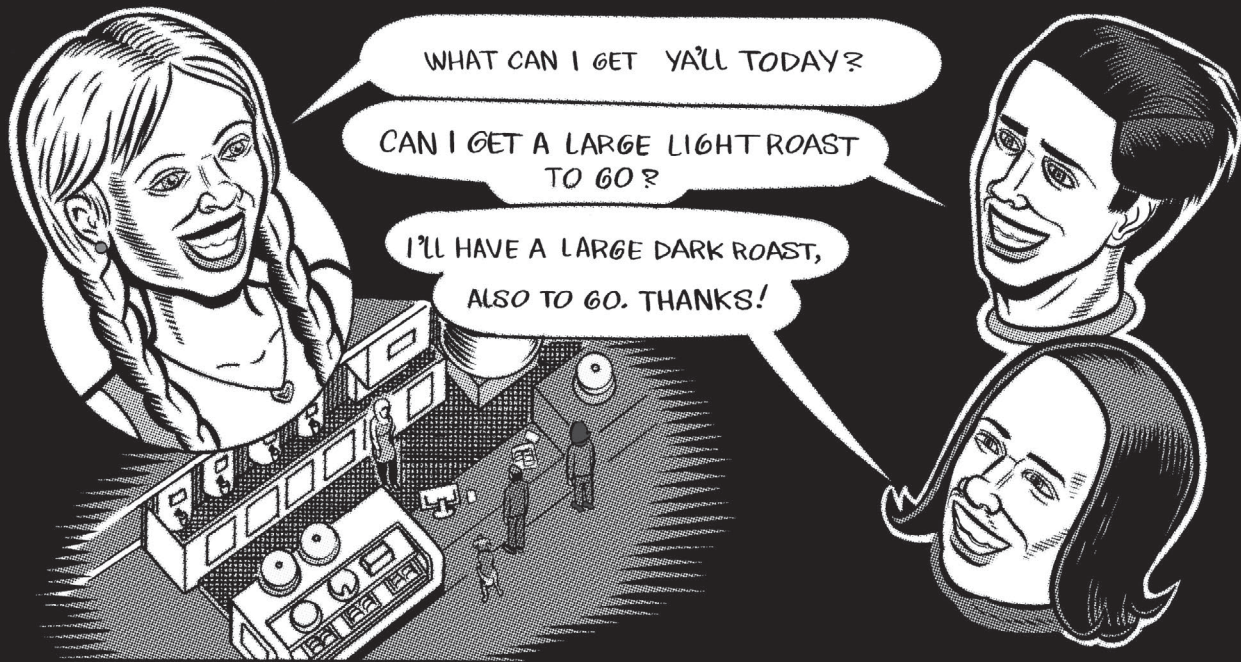


SOON:



TOWNSMAN





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**THE
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by Miracle Jones

As Anne and Helen entered the dining room of the Hotwood family boarding house, all male eyes unglued from plates of taters and black corn and snapped up to feast instead on the rare bits of female company. Anne and Helen took their seats near the head of the table, sitting so close together that they might have been conjoined twins from a traveling geek show. Ms. Sullivan and her blind and deaf charge pressed close together without shame: Helen Keller's beautiful golden head lolled on her white neck, and her hands lay demurely in Anne's lap, where they could flutter and speak to her caretaker.

"It is an honor to welcome you ladies to our table tonight," said Mr. Hotwood, a bald and plump man who wore his breeches high up to his belly, making him look like a turnip dipped in grape currant.

"You are an inspiration to the human soul, and we humbly beseech you to eat heartily, and to please pay no mind to the rude attentions of some of our lesser lights who board here. They are unaccustomed to ladies, and moreover, they are unaccustomed to YOUNG ladies, and moreover, you must admit that the pair of you are something of a sight to see."

Several of the young Hotwood children coughed and spluttered at this gaffe, and a few of the gentlemen boarders actually busted out laughing before catching themselves and pressing their hands over their mouths to stifle their mirth.

"What I mean to say," stammered Mr. Hotwood. "Is that you are very beautiful ladies, despite your physical handicaps, as it were, and we honor and understand your malady, and we hope that you enjoy dinner, and that you are a sight, even if you don't have it, sight, yourselves, so to speak."

"Thank you," said Anne, mercifully cutting him off.

Mr. Hotwood lowered his eyes and resumed eating. The dinner table bubbled back up into jokes and conversation.

Amused, Anne signed Hotwood's speech to Helen and described the room and some of the people in it.

Helen signed back: "Is Mr. Hotwood a good one? He likes me. Is he fresh and lovely?"

"No," signed Anne. "He is old and red-faced like a goat."

"I like goats," signed Helen. "But you are right that it is not the season. Find us someone young and strong for the night. Someone with a hard face."

"Yes, ma'm," signed Anne.

Anne scanned the table for a likely candidate as she showed Helen where the knife and fork were.

Helen began to eat her food, luxuriously licking at each new potato in a way that brought all eyes to her and kept them there. Hot, warm butter melted down her chin, and she wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve, cooing with delight, forever unaware of the difference between public and private. To her, it was all darkness punctuated by pleasure. Her bright blue eyes shined and flashed: even as they were emp-

ty of sight they were full of mischief and intelligence, and more than one man at the table found himself forced to spread his napkin over his lap for other reasons than catching crumbs.

Directly across from Anne sat a man with long sideburns, a strong jaw, and long limbs that were covered in soot and grime from a day's work spent at toilsome, underground labor in one of the mining camps.

Most likely, he was an illiterate, but what Anne liked best about him was that he didn't stare only at Helen. He was chivalrous: he politely looked at both of them and even smiled at Anne when she reached for the salt and she let him see a bit of her black bustier under her heavy gingham dress.

Under the table, she let her clog slip from her gnarled, bunioned foot and reached out to encircle his ankle.

"Madam," he said, a bit shocked. The other conversations were loud and raucous, and Anne's gambit was buried by one of the Hotwood babies screaming for a cinnamon-baked apple. The child had stubbornly refused to eat his carrots, and had now been denied his postprandial treat.

"Do we have an understanding?" asked Anne sternly, lifting her thick leg until her foot was buried in the man's crotch. His penis throbbed twice against her toes and his eyes bulged. He licked his lips and looked at both ladies furtively. Anne could see that he was only being polite and that his real passion was for Helen, like every man, like all of them. No matter. He would do. He could be counted on to be discreet.

"Do we have an understanding, sir?" asked Anne again, putting her arm around Helen and kissing her on her neck, making Helen blush and smile, making her drop her fork as she began kissing back.

"My name is Oliver," said the man with wide eyes. "And we have an understanding."

("You found someone?" signed Helen.

"He is tall and strong and thin, and he has black hair," said Anne. "He is young, and he likes you, and he can be circumspect."

"You like him for yourself, don't you?" said Helen.)

"What's that?" asked Mr. Hotwood. "Oliver, leave those fine ladies alone and remember your place."

"Yes sir, Mr. Hotwood," said Oliver, standing. "Anyway, I'm done eating. Excuse me, ladies. Have a good night, everyone."

"Goodnight, Oliver!" said one of the older Hotwood daughters, smiling at him toothsome-ly in a way that made the elder Mr. Hotwood exasperated, cranky, and glad to see him go.

Oliver walked stiffly across the dining room and ascended the staircase to the upper dormitory.

("How shall we bring it off?" signed Helen.

"We shall have to wait for him to find us," said Anne. "He appears to be resourceful and worldly, and a man of experience."

"Not too much experience," said Helen. "I like them to be excited."

"He will be excited," said Anne.)

After dinner, Anne and Helen sat for awhile with the Hotwood children and listened to them read from the Bible while Mr. and Mrs. Hotwood looked on with wet eyes and indulgent smiles.

And then, saying their goodbyes, Anne and Helen trudged upstairs to their shared room, and locked the door.

They caressed each other in the gaslight like virtuoso pianists practicing their scales.

Anne helped Helen take off her long dress, and began to comb her hair for her. She traced symbols of the tarot on her long, pale back while Helen hummed and cooed and began to rub Anne's sturdy legs, causing Anne to melt and feel dirty at the same time: the feeling that always brought her back, no matter how many men took her for a motor-car ride to some dusty tumulus. Helen leaned in and began kissing Anne on her throat, on her chest, on her thighs: Anne indulged her and stroked her head, looking at the clock and looking at the door.

Finally, at one in the morning, there was a quiet knock. It was a knock so slight and small that you had to be ready and waiting for it. Anne lifted Helen's head out of her streaming crotch and stroked her smooth, trusting face. Helen licked her lips and moaned. A question.

"He's here," signed Anne between Helen's breasts.

Helen held Anne's hand and then put it in her mouth.

"Exactly," signed Anne.

Helen arched her back and smiled as Anne pulled her hand away and put on a nightgown.

Anne strode across the room and opened the door a crack.

Oliver stood there in his spats, loafers, a tall hat, and a cherry-red robe. He looked nervous, and was swinging the sash of his robe around as if it were a tail. He smiled when Anne greeted him, looked both ways down the hallway, and tiptoed into the room. He was scrubbed now: his hair was slicked back on his head, his cheeks were shaved clean, and he reeked of lilac water and talcum.

"Good evening to you, ladies," said Oliver. "You are as beautiful a pair of ladies as a pair of tits, might I say with a flourish."

"Thank you, Mr. Oliver," said Anne Sullivan. "Kindly remove your clothing, if you will and leave it in a stack by the door."

("He tells you that you are beautiful, Helen," signed Anne. "And now he is removing his clothes.")

"Tell him that I desire his body for its strength and vigor and that he must be rousing and full of conviction during the business. I will brook no slack; I will tolerate no half-measures.")

"Mr. Oliver," said Anne. "Helen Keller wishes to inform you that she would like to be fucked now, and fucked to completion."

"Ah!" said Oliver, removing his final sock and then placing his top hat on the pile to crown it. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

He walked over to join the two women where they sat on the edge of the bed. Helen was completely naked: taut and velvety and milky white and straining. Her fingers pushed in and out of her glistening mons like a machine built to crush rocks or tunnel through mountains.

Anne grabbed Helen's arm and then took her hand and led it to Oliver's prick, which by now was hard and merry, bouncing up and down with the throb of his happy heart. Helen began to stroke him and giggle, and Anne smiled at Oliver apologetically as she helped her with the rhythm and foreskin.

"She is such a lovely creature," moaned Oliver. "Such a rose."

Helen sat up on her knees and took him in her mouth. With a shudder, Oliver grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back against the bed.

After that, the eyes and ears didn't matter so much and Anne considered herself relieved of her duty. She picked up an improving novel by Mr. Hudson-Wellesley from the nightstand and sat down in the rocking chair, skimming the pages, watching Oliver and Helen rut and moan. She rocked back and forth in the chair to the rhythm of their frenzied copulation.

"St. Simon!" muttered Oliver. "She's a hellcat without mercy. The physical crisis bubbles up within me no matter how hard I fight it, and we have only just begun!"

"That would never do!" said Anne. "You must press on, lest you cause her vexations and conundrums. In many ways she is but a spoiled child."

"And yet, her skill and voluptuousness cannot be denied," said Oliver. "Help me, Ms. Sullivan. Distract me from the beauty and tendrils of this wild vampire lest I conclude our adventure prematurely."

"What would you have me do?" asked Anne, putting her novel aside and letting her gown fall ever-so-slightly open.

"She cannot hear us!" said Oliver. "Let us converse on sundry topics. Are you familiar

with the problems facing the modern day coal miner, and the way in which labor seeks to organize itself around common interests?"

"I fear that I am not informed so, Mr. Oliver," said Anne.

"Then GOD let us discuss such THINGS!" he said with true agony. And yet, he continued to perform against the insatiable Helen with the utmost steadiness and rigor and both Oliver and Anne could tell that progress was being made toward Helen's own satisfaction.

"Why, there is no END to the HARDSHIP facing labor in this country," said Oliver. "We are beset on all sides by the oppression of capital and GOVERNMENT. We have no aid, no recourse, no sense of binding brotherhood!"

Helen began to moan and shriek, and Oliver stuck his fingers in her mouth.

The bucking grew wilder. Helen locked her legs around Oliver and dug deep into his back with her nails. She gripped his body like a hand on an udder and milked him while laughing and biting the fingers trying to stifle her.

"Have you considered the works of Mr. Marx and Mr. Engels?" asked Anne.

"I'm not much of a reader," said Oliver. "I am more of a discourser and a wag. I do belong to a book-lending club for aspiring gentlemen, although I must confess that I often send the selections back with nary a page turned down."

"Perhaps the solution to the labor crisis is armed revolution," said Anne.

"But that would never do," said Oliver. "We'd be massacred!"

"Then perhaps the solution is targeted crimes that at least let your masters know that you are more powerful than they would like you to believe," said Anne. "Kidnappings, assassinations, arson."

"We must scare them, you say," said Oliver. "We must make them AFRAID of us, or we will never be treated as EQUALS."

"They are already afraid of you," said Anne. "But they are afraid of you because they think you are stupid and therefore dangerous. You must convince them that you are dangerous because you are too cunning, that you know too much, that they persist at your pleasure, and not the other way round."

Helen grabbed Oliver's face and pushed his cheeks together. Her whole body tightened like a horse's flank during a gallop, and then went limp as if she were feigning death.

Wildly, Helen began to sign to Anne.

"What is she saying?" said Oliver.

"What? Slow down, Helen! She says: always...rape...the last coke machine," said Anne.

"That can't be right. I can't understand you! Slow down, Helen! Control yourself!"

"I am a coal miner, perhaps she is referring to my profession," said Oliver. "Even after an evening at bath, I stink of a blast furnace and I smell of chunks of coke." He was red and sweaty, and he and Helen continued to slowly writhe and rock against one another like a pair of boats battered by the tide.

"Not coke...cock. Oh, I see," said Anne. "That makes much more sense."

"What?" shouted Oliver, his red face straining and twitching as if he had swallowed a mug of boiling water. "Tell me what she means!"

"She says -- in the crudest terms -- that she has had one of Mr. Freud's orgasms," said Anne. "She wishes you to know that you are very satisfying as a lover of women and that your penis is quite a well-trained instrument of pleasure."

"The lord's own mercy," shuddered Oliver, pulling out and spraying Helen with ropes of thick yellow semen.

Helen giggled and clapped. For awhile, everything was still and quiet, and the only sound was heavy breathing and the squeak of Anne's rocker. Finally, Oliver stood up and wiped his face with the bed-sheet.

As Helen began to play cat's cradle with the drying spunkum on her chest, Oliver put his clothes back on and looked over at Anne nervously. Would he be expected to service her as well?

"I know my lot, Mr. Oliver," said Anne, reading his mind and smiling. "Perhaps some other time."

"I have friends..." said Oliver. But Anne cut him off.

"And I have Helen," said Anne.

"Thank you for your help and your sound advice," said Oliver.

"Goodnight to you," said Anne.

His apparel hastily donned, Oliver slunk sheepish out the door and back to his bunk. Anne rocked in her rocking chair, and Helen blew come-bubbles and curled up like a cat in the warm, wet feather bed. In the darkness, the Hotwood children dreamed of steam trains, fancy dress balls, and women who ate potatoes the same way that wolves ate lambs.

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THE ADVENTURES OF
LADY NO-KIDS



Anyway, I'm gonna follow this goose
for a while and see where I end up.