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Humour Beckons

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters in Creative Writing at
Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2023

Acknowledgements

My great thanks to my supervisor Jack Ross for bearing with me and remaining a rock during this process.

Thanks also to my mother for her constant and unwavering support through the years, in addition to her careful and attentive feedback.

And my undying appreciation to my patient wife, who has indulged my every creative whim and provided the kind of honest insight and feedback that only someone who really cares can give. 사랑해.

Abstract

What is humour?

At its worst it might be the drunk person down the pub annoying everyone in the vicinity as they attempt to crack wise.

At its best it is one of humanity's greatest unifiers and sources of comfort.

The critical component of this MCW thesis explores what brought me to humour, what I discovered during my exploration of some of its performative and literary manifestations, and how this exploration came to affect my own creative output.

The creative section of this thesis is a collection of short stories in some of the styles that I have found to be more effective in attaining a higher level of meaning during my exploration of humour in literature and beyond.

These include black humour, absurdist fiction, and slapstick short stories.

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Critical component: Tragedy and Triumph

A predilection for incongruity

In 2014 I moved from Wellington, New Zealand to Seoul, South Korea.

The decision is one of the best I've ever made for the ways in which it challenged me.

It also showed me how much I relish incongruity playing a big part in my day-to-day life. This is in part because incongruity is a great starting point for humour.

Being an outsider suddenly immersed in an entirely different language and set of cultural expectations means that you become intimately well acquainted with incongruity. My adaption to a more Korean way of life was also very gradual. This meant that the period of what might be called 'peak incongruity'—and consequently the period of peak 'funniness'—was prolonged in my case.

Sometimes the incongruity was physical.

Take, for instance, how the abrupt change to a rice-based diet upon moving to Korea caused me not to have a bowel movement for my first ten days in the country. Flash to me standing in a Korean pharmacy, with none of the Korean language under my belt, trying desperately to find the right combination of gestures to communicate that I was fantastically constipated and in need of laxatives.

At other times it was linguistic and cultural.

Take the two young girls I taught in my first year in Korean who, when it was time to pick English names at the start of the school year, would not be talked out of adopting the English names 'Milk' and 'WiFi' respectively.

In these ways and a thousand others, my life in Korea was inherently funny. And before long I found the amusing incongruity of my existence in Korea combining with my own proclivity for humour to manifest as creative expression.

Stand-up comedy

No one was more surprised than I was to find myself performing stand-up comedy in Seoul.

I'd never really considered myself to be 'funny'. I wasn't the 'class clown' as a child, and rare was the time when I'd confidently entertain a tableful of people while out for dinner.

It also felt like pure hubris to ever think I could be entertaining enough to deserve the attention of dozens or even hundreds of people at once, let alone to presume that I'd be able to unite all those very different people simultaneously in laughter.

In my favour was the fact that I'd always been a devotee of stand-up comedy. From a young age, stand-up affected me for the comedians' ability to speak truth to society and the human experience, and to find meaning in even the darkest or most obscure experiences. As stand-up comedian and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres has said:

'Stand-up comedy is a combination of tragedy and triumph. It's about taking the experiences of your life, the good and the bad, and turning them into something funny.' (DeGeneres)

This proclivity led to my teenage years being spent dutifully collecting every stand-up DVD I could find from Billy Connolly, Dylan Moran, Russell Peters, Bill Bailey and many others.

Still, I never expected this passion would manifest into me actually *trying* stand-up. I assumed everyone loved it as much as I did.

But the stars seemed to align in Korea. Firstly, my incongruous existence provided me with plenty of source material. Adding to this was the fact that nobody knew me in Korea. There

were no friends or ex co-workers to get offended if they happened to find their way into my jokes. There were no family members to point out if an anecdote was misremembered.

I think, more importantly, there was no one who had known me long enough to be in complete shock that I was doing stand-up comedy. Korea had been a fresh start, and I was free to remake myself as a comedian if I saw fit.

The warmth of the Seoul English-language stand-up community was also a big factor. The people I met there were welcoming, and they encouraged me to try my hand at performing.

And so I wrote out my first tentative 'set' on cue cards and headed for the grubby American bar where the group held weekly open mics.

Doing stand-up

I was shaking as I stepped up on stage that first time. It was just a backroom of a bar, and I was only performing to a crowd of twenty or so—the majority of them fellow performers from the Seoul stand-up community.

But I found over time that the sense of exposure that goes with the thing is largely the same no matter how big the crowd. You're up there alone and exposed as all of the darkened faces look up at you expectantly. Even if you lack the conviction that you deserve to be there commanding these people's attention, for those five or ten minutes you damned well have to convince yourself—and by extension the audience—that you have it in you.

From that very first set, I concealed my lack of confidence with over-preparation. Other more experienced comics from the group liked to proudly declare that they hadn't prepared anything for the night, then swagger up onto the stage and 'just riff'. They'd engage in 'crowdwork' with the audience, asking them questions about themselves and making jokes about the audience's responses or lack thereof.

This was never my style. I harnessed my writing experience to construct punchy sets that I would rehearse and refine dozens of times before taking them on stage. (My great thanks here to my patient wife, who sat through more repeat performances of the same jokes than either of us would care to admit.)

What came out was always more of a theatrical performance than a social one. I was up there delivering a rehearsed performance, and callouts or 'heckles' from the audience only served to throw off my carefully planned timing and delivery. More comfortable comics were able to use sporadic interjections from the audience to their comedic benefit.

Looking back, I believe my lack of comfort made me weaker at what humour researcher R.A. Martin calls the 'interpersonal theory of humour'. In his book *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Martin claims that stand-up comedy is a form of social interaction in which the comedian and audience engage in a mutual exchange of humour.

Despite my lack of social engagement with the audience, by working consistently at it I came to be known as a reliable hand at Seoul Stand-up 'showcases'. I started to be invited to 'open' for some of the more experienced comedians on the scene, and after a couple of years honing my craft, I performed in a number of shows as a paid feature act.

My comedy was usually observational, and often absurd in nature. I liked to talk about the surprising experiences I'd had and observations I'd made during my time in Korea, often then exaggerating or extrapolating them to absurd conclusions.

One such joke was set during the late-night bike rides I was partial to taking around Yeouido Island, which sits in the river that runs through the middle of Seoul. Late one night I was cycling around and around the island, and the only other person I saw was a conservative-looking middle-aged Korean man out for a walk.

As I cycled past, he watched with open surprise as a lone foreigner (still a somewhat rare sight in Korea) emerged out of the darkness and cycled past him in the night.

In the joke, I am put out by his surprise, and endeavour to surprise him *more* each subsequent time I pass him on my course around the island.

In the world of the joke I do this by passing him on each following circuit in a greater state of undress.

The joke allowed for the incorporation of physical humour as well. I would mime both my detached nonchalance while cycling past half (and then fully) naked, in addition to his over-the-top shocked reaction.

Learning from stand-up

When I first started frequenting open mics, I would try to organise my sets with a variety of different types of jokes arranged in sequence. I would open with a few quick one-liners, then segue into some mid-length observational bits, and finally conclude with a more extended anecdotal piece.

I soon abandoned this formulaic approach as I realised that different audiences respond better to different kinds of jokes. An audience mostly comprising people out to drink with their friends would come in and out of paying attention, and was therefore most responsive to quick one and two-liners that didn't require them to commit too much attention at a time. A more attentive and invested audience would give you more time to construct a longer story, and would reward you for what you had built—assuming the pay-off was good enough.

Many people think all there is to stand-up is going up on stage and sharing some of your best stories. Most of us have at least a couple of great stories that kill down at the pub, and that we're confident would entertain a crowd. However, often we don't realise how much these stories drag on, and how much fluff pads them out.

Stand-up requires you to be mercilessly economical with words. I learned that succeeding on stage is, to a degree, about what I call 'LPM', or laughs per minute. Basically, the longer you go without a punchline, the greater the eventual pay-off must be. Unless you're confident that the payoff is going to be great, you need to be hitting a punchline and therefore (hopefully) a laugh about every ten to twenty seconds.

I also had to learn not to get too married to my romantic image of the stand-up comedian as the political dissident who gets up there and speaks raw truth to society.

Certainly this is an intrinsic part of the history and culture of stand-up comedy, as stated by American philosopher John Fiske in his book *Understanding Popular Culture*. In the book Fiske writes about how stand-up comedy serves as a form of social and political commentary, highlighting societal issues and exposing the contradictions and absurdities of the status quo. (Fiske 17)

But it takes an experienced and highly competent stand-up comedian to do this properly, especially in the hyper-sensitive world we live in. Doing humour in this way requires the comedian to come at social and political issues from different angles to provide fresh takes

and insights, all while keeping up a steady beat of 'laughs per minute'. Dotted along this path are also landmines that, if not danced around just right, will go off and cause the audience to react with distaste or resistance. This damages the comedian's relatability, which is crucial to the audience buying in to what they are saying.

It is also very hard for a stand-up comedian to succeed with this type of comedy until they have 'found their voice'. A comedian who is simply doing their best impression of their favourite comedian, or in any other detectable way being inauthentic, is likely to soon be found out by a sensitive audience hanging on their every word, facial expression and gesture.

Perceiving the indefinability of humour

During my time doing stand-up, I read up on both the craft and humour theory in general. I wanted to understand it better and, truth be told, to find any hard and fast rules or methodologies that would make the whole pursuit a little less uncertain.

I came away from my reading with one overarching finding: No one really knows what humour is or why humans respond to it the way they do.

For example, in his book *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour, Narrative, Reading*, Patrick O'Neill admits that, even after more than 2,000 years of humour study, academics are still unable to define it:

A recent international conference on humour—held in Wales in 1976—drew almost one hundred separate papers, mostly from psychologists; a bibliography printed with the new proceedings, covering only selected material in English, ran to 1500 items, and all concerned were agreed that research into the nature of humour, after a full two millennia, was still in its infancy. Perhaps the most striking symptom of this infancy is the continued lack of any generally accepted taxonomy of humour—though there are those psychologists and literary critics, of course, who argue that the whole area is essentially unclassifiable. (O'Neill 145)

In most books on humour where the author dares to make a claim like 'There are only seven kinds of joke', you will see this section asterisked by reminders that this list is not exhaustive. These claims also tend to contain concessions that some types of humour don't fit into any category at all, and actually there is this group of jokes over here that spans several

categories at once, in addition to these ones that set out to deliberately subvert the category, so can't strictly be said to fit it at all.

One begins to wonder why they bother.

Perceiving the indefinability of stand-up

There are many, many theories on how best to do stand-up comedy, as well as exhaustive lists of things *not* to do. But still, the primary takeaways from the best practitioners are that you must find your voice, speak truth as you perceive it, and practise relentlessly until you are able to present these truths in a genuine, relatable, entertaining (and mostly inoffensive) way.

Adding to the prevailing opinion that stand-up comedy is not objectively definable or classifiable is the generally accepted idea that it is 'unteachable.'

Legendary American stand-up comedian Doug Stanhope took aim at so-called 'stand-up classes' in a 2010 blog article called *Comedy Death Camp*, in which he writes:

'...comedy classes fall into that gray area of deceit—like Jesus or psychics or chakra healing—where you can't prove that it's a con.' (2010)

Stanhope goes on to relate advice that he received from comedian Joey Scazzola, who he says told him:

'Never give anyone advice because you're only telling them how to be more like you.'
(2010)

Adding to the art's unclassifiability is the fact that the delivery of a stand-up joke is so key to its reception. Stand-up being a performance art, a joke can be entirely made or broken by the way it's delivered. A very strong physical performer may have to do only rudimentary writing to entertain a crowd, while someone who is more subdued on stage has only their words with which to keep the crowd hooked.

Different 'senses' of humour

Another often-made point about humour is that people's 'senses of humour' are different, so their responses to jokes can naturally be expected to vary too.

Certainly, we've all been in a social situation where someone has said something or made a joke, and some of the room erupts in laughter while others are left blinking and looking around questioningly as they wonder what was funny.

I think it's evident that the most successful humour of a period plays to the sensibilities of society as a whole in that time and place. This can be seen, for instance, in the clean-cut, observational and innocuous humour of comedian Jerry Seinfeld in 1980s America, especially when contrasted with the far more raunchy and 'taboo' humour of 21st century American comedians like Dave Chappelle.

And yet, comedy that is generally accepted to be 'done well'—as long as it avoids actively offending anyone in the audience—tends to enjoy success with people across genders, cultures, countries and languages.

Stand-up comedy is a form of hypnosis. And an accomplished hypnotist in this sense—as long as they don't snap you out by offending your sensibilities to an unacceptable degree—is likely to take you along for this ride, regardless of whether their style of comedy plays into what you might call your personal 'sense of humour'.

Carrying through

My fascination with humour crystallised further when I found that fiction that struck an absurd or comedic tone, and brought humour to bear on meaningful insight, resonated with me in a similar way.

I had always been a big reader, but I was some way into my reading life when I discovered the genre of black comedic and absurdist fiction that, for me, best revealed the human condition.

Commentators differ greatly on the role and importance of humour in literature. Humour theorist Kate M. Munro says:

'Humor is a fundamental aspect of literature because it allows writers to reveal the truth about human experience in a way that is both profound and entertaining.'
(Munro 56)

Many are more critical of humour in literature though. One opinion expressed in *The Art of Story: An International Anthology of Contemporary Short Stories* states that:

'Humor can be a powerful tool in literature, but it can also detract from the serious themes and emotions a writer is trying to convey. Too much humor can make a story seem flippant or insincere.' (Noor and Halpern 108)

Works of humorous and absurdist fiction that had a profound impact on me include Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Louis de Bernières' *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*. To a lesser degree, the absurdist and comedic fictional works of Franz Kafka, Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams impacted my approach and understanding, as did the non-fiction travel writing of Bill Bryson.

Aware that both are from a very small geographic, historical and political pool—1960s absurdist black comedic war novels written by American men—I'd like to segue now into discussing how Vonnegut's and Heller's novels (in particular) affected me greatly as both a reader and a writer.

Reacting to *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* for the first time gave me a new perspective on the power that both humour and fiction could have, especially when combined.

I was struck by how humour and absurdity could be harnessed in a piece of fiction in a way that brought a degree of apparent clarity to the expansive and deeply traumatic historical event that is World War II.

I have used that word 'clarity', because it is not that Vonnegut's novel 'makes sense of' the Second World War in any way. If anything, it could be said to 'make chaos of it'. And yet, Vonnegut's immensely tragic, and deeply absurd, depiction of the war and how it impacted people does seem to bring a comforting degree of clarity.

As Shakespearean scholar John Wilders puts it:

Vonnegut uses humor as a means of coping with the horrors of war. By infusing his narrative with humor, Vonnegut creates a balance between the absurdity of war and its devastating effects. The humor serves to lighten the mood, while also providing a way to comment on the senselessness of war. Through humor, Vonnegut is able to convey the bleak reality of war in a way that is digestible for the reader, allowing them to process the horrors of war without becoming overwhelmed. (Wilders 123)

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the pathetic character of Billy Pilgrim is thrust headlong into a war he is far from equipped to deal with. Through an unending series of ironically serendipitous events (for instance, Billy being the only one who doesn't want to live, but being just about the only one from his unit who does), Billy ends up serving as an absurdly dressed ringmaster-type effigy at the head of a column of American soldiers being marched to an internment camp.

The story takes place across a broad range of time periods in Billy's life, flashing from his time in the war to when he is working as a dentist decades after its conclusion. It also frequently diverts into Billy's experience, as he tells it, of having been kidnapped by the alien 'Tralfamadorians', who imprison him as a specimen on their planet and mate him with a famous movie star. I have always read this descent into what are effectively speculative short stories within a story as Vonnegut's poignant and astute depiction of PTSD.

Billy's time after the war sees him struck by bouts of luck that run counter to his unwanted good fortune during the war. He barely survives a gruesome plane crash; his wife dies of carbon monoxide poisoning; and his relationship with his children becomes one of pure resentment as he refuses to stop claiming that he was once kidnapped by aliens.

I find the death of Billy's wife, Valencia, to be incisively analogous to Billy's own decline after the war. Valencia is distressed and rushing to the hospital to be at Billy's side after he is in a plane crash. She crashes her car on the way, but survives, continuing to drive her badly damaged and smoking car all the way to Billy's hospital. However, upon arriving in the hospital carpark, she collapses over the steering wheel, dead from the carbon monoxide poisoning she has sustained while driving the damaged car.

Just as Valencia survives the initial traumatic impact, Billy survives the war itself. However, in attempting to power on in the aftermath, the slow poisoning effect brought about by the initial impactful event is what causes the slow death.

Following the death of his wife, Billy finds himself completely unable to mourn her or even feel sad. This always struck me as an acute depiction of the emotional effects of PTSD writ large too.

Interestingly, Vonnegut was writing his book almost two decades before the term 'PTSD' was even coined. Terms like 'shell-shock' existed, but Vonnegut's empathetic depiction of a condition that had yet to be properly defined seems to demonstrate a special degree of sensitivity.

This 'sensitivity' is touched on by author George Saunders in his blurb for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which he calls Vonnegut:

'The great, urgent, passionate American writer of our century, who offers us a model of the kind of compassionate thinking that might yet save us from ourselves.' (Vonnegut, back cover)

Vonnegut's matter-of-fact way of eulogising death is powerful for its tone of inevitability too. Every death in the book—even down to those of animals and transitory characters—is followed by this simple epitaph from the narrator:

'So it goes.' (throughout, but first used on page 19)

Contained within this short sentence seems to be a sad acknowledgement that the forces that bring about premature death are just as inevitable as the phenomenon of death itself.

Also spread throughout the book, and serving as its very final line, are the bird sounds 'Poo-tee-weet'. Vonnegut's narrator explains how the use of this device captures the redundancy of massacre by saying:

[This book] is so short and jumbled ... because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?" (16)

Fifteen years after first reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* I still find it to be an immensely sensitive, amusing, and tragically insightful piece of work.

I put part of this success down to the way the book skirts the surface of the atrocities it depicts, summarising and condensing events in a way that maintains some distance. Vonnegut is very good at finding where to withhold details so that the reader is kept at just the right distance from the atrocious subject matter, while still being able to feel its existential impact.

Absurdity and ‘meta-absurdity’ in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

As previously mentioned, Vonnegut’s novel is full of passages that in some way bring a degree of comfort to the human experience. Take Billy Pilgrim’s reflections on his time spent on the alien planet of Tralfamadore:

Billy Pilgrim says the most important thing he learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. (Vonnegut 45)

The above begins to touch on what I have always found remarkable about *Slaughterhouse-Five*—Vonnegut’s use of what I will call ‘meta-absurdity’. This ‘meta-absurdity’ is achieved, firstly, by Vonnegut inserting himself into his own book as both an agent and a result of absurdity. One example is in Vonnegut’s almost detrimental self-awareness, which causes him to chastise his book within its own pages:

There are almost no characters in this story and almost no dramatic confrontations because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war after all is that people are discouraged from being characters. (134)

As mentioned, *Slaughterhouse-Five* also features frequent diversions into what are effectively absurd speculative short stories within the broader novel. These short stories are justified within the story as being either the imaginations of Billy Pilgrim or the writings of Vonnegut’s self-hating reflection of himself in characterisation, the widely despised author Kilgore Trout.

Humour in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Vonnegut's humour is often dark and absurd. Yet to a degree it is empathetic too. Throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* he uses absurd descriptions to highlight the incongruous elements that are rife throughout the phenomenon of war.

Take this description of a German who captures Billy behind enemy lines:

'He was a very good soldier—about to quit, about to find somebody to surrender to.'
(Vonnegut 43)

This exposes the incongruity between what media and politicians have told us 'a good soldier' is, and what a soldier themselves might see as 'a good soldier'. While the general public are conditioned to believe that a 'good soldier' is heroic and infallible in his cause, a soldier themselves might well consider the one and only defining factor of a 'good soldier' to be one that manages to stay alive.

Billy's encounter with a 'hobo' in his sealed boxcar on the way to a German internment camp likewise brings out an absurd incongruity that is very darkly humorous.

No matter how much the people sealed in the packed and unliveable boxcar are afflicted by starvation and disease, the hobo keeps insisting that 'This ain't so bad.' The hobo insists this right up until he drops dead, his last words having been:

'You think this is bad? This ain't bad.' (Vonnegut 65)

In my opinion, what is 'sent up' here is a certain relentless and redundant optimism in the face of adversity. The hobo has no doubt lived a hard life, and, we can assume, has only made it to this point by insistently telling himself that his circumstances are 'not that bad'. He is a depiction of fruitless and indomitable refusal to admit that things might just be as bad as they seem.

How *Slaughterhouse-Five* affected me

Reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* led directly to my writing being published for the first time.

It was early in my fiction-writing career, and I was wrapped up in trying to write war fiction that was politically insightful, darkly comedic and deeply meaningful. (Can you sense the influence?)

Of the obstacles that stood in my way were the facts that—unlike Vonnegut—I had never been to war. I had also not yet spent time practising threading humour into fiction in a natural and complementary way.

Most of all, I had no idea what on earth I was trying to say.

Suffice to say that I was struggling.

But then, again replicating Vonnegut's style, I put my mind to writing a short piece of fiction that I intended to insert into my longer piece to serve as a short story that had been written by my protagonist.

I put barely any thought into these two pages, commencing with the first vaguely speculative premise that came to mind, and writing only what was necessary to get my straightforward point across.

What I came out with was a two-page story about an immortal alien race that can only see in black and white. A leading scientist of the alien race invents a pill that allows them to see colour, but, it becomes clear, that also causes them to lose their immortality and die within a few years of taking the pill. Aware of the consequences, the entire race still takes the pill and revels in the beautiful colours of their world before shortly meeting their demise. The entire race is wiped out, but none express regret at their decision.

It was a very Vonnegut story—he is particularly fond of not only writing short pieces about alien races with some kind of triggering speculative premise, but of ending these short pieces with 'Thus, the entire race died out and the planet was left bare.'

And yet, once I was done, I sat back and assessed what I had. Here was a story that felt so close to Vonnegut's style that it verged on plagiarism, and that had taken little to no energy to bang out—and yet, as I read it back, I started to realise I had just written my first-ever story that I actually liked.

To say it another way, it was the first story I had ever written that actually expressed a part of the human experience as I interpreted it. The story was about how the ability to perceive true beauty is worth sacrificing everything for.

The story was published in an Irish literary journal, and thus began my dogged pursuit of trying to get better at this fiction-writing thing.

Reacting to *Catch-22*

Seeking out books similar to *Slaughterhouse-Five* led me directly to Joseph Heller's satirical war novel *Catch-22*. This book depicts the antics of bomber pilot Yossarian and his squad mates as Yossarian tries desperately to escape the United States Air Force during World War II.

The book embarks on a protracted absurd portrayal of the American military during wartime, showing how officials from squadron commanders to military doctors and mess officers are all 'mad', in a style vaguely reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Catch-22's defining moment sees the book's eponymous logical impasse applied to Yossarian and his squad mates when it is explained that 'Catch-22' is the reason that none of them can escape the Air Force, even if they have been driven insane:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle. (Heller 44)

So simple, relatable and powerful was this logical and logistical trap created by Heller and applied to his pitiable characters that it actually led to the coining of the term 'Catch-22' in idiomatic English speech. Many who use it in their day-to-day lives have probably never read Heller's book, and yet still they have a vague idea that the phrase refers to an unwinnable dilemma.

The concept of 'Catch-22', and Yossarian's struggle against it, is heart-wrenchingly tragic for its futility. Yossarian's voice as he expresses impotent frustration with it is that of millions of soldiers stretching back centuries or millennia who said, 'What the hell am I doing here, and how the hell do I get out?'

Humour in *Catch-22*

I have always seen *Catch-22* as a superior humorous work to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Whereas Vonnegut likes to end with absurd conclusions, Heller prefers to lead with an absurd premise that will lead to more protracted and large-scale manifestations of absurdity. Most often, Heller roots his absurdity within his characterisation, setting his characters up to play out protracted absurd scenarios.

One stand-out example is the character of Milo Minderbinder, who, after becoming the unit's mess officer, begins such a fervent pursuit of entrepreneurial success that he ends up accepting a commission from the German military to bomb his own squadron. All of his daring commercial ventures, most of which cause great damage to his own squad mates, are justified by Milo with absurd rationalisations that sound agonisingly familiar to a reader living in an uncompromising capitalist world.

Heller is also a master of absurd dialogue, which is a primary outlet for his absurd characterisation. Take the below exchange between Yossarian and his squad mate, Clevinger:

"They're trying to kill me," Yossarian told him calmly.

"No one's trying to kill you," Clevinger cried.

"Then why are they shooting at me?" Yossarian asked.

"They're shooting at *everyone*," Clevinger answered. "They're trying to kill everyone."

"And what difference does that make?" (19)

Here we have incongruity of circumstance. What would ordinarily be a cause for distress in regular daily life—the fact that someone is trying to *kill* you—is so commonplace as to be assumed for a soldier fighting in a war. Also exposed here is the absurdity of the fact that people trying to kill you could *ever* be accepted as commonplace.

Heller's humour is also performative in this way—one can almost imagine the above exchange being delivered by a twosome like Abbott and Costello during a comedy stage show. It contains not just the existential absurdity of Vonnegut, but the set-up and punchline structure of comedy written to be performed.

Doubts about *Catch-22*

Unlike with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, subsequent re-readings of *Catch-22* have made me more disenchanted with the book. On my last re-reading I actually found the novel too wearisome to finish. I think there are a few reasons for this.

Firstly, *Catch-22* comes in at more than 500 pages in length, whereas *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a concise 177.

Both Heller and Vonnegut write in the grey area between tragedy and comedy, and yet their subject matter is undeniably bleak. This is where the length of the novels becomes important. Whereas Vonnegut's novel allows us to skirt his horrific subject matter and visit it as tourists, Heller's makes us dwell in it for a length of time that is extended enough to bring about a disconcerting effect. Heller requires you to stay in his world for so long that you start to think this might actually be the true state of affairs now. This could be described as the wearing down of the reader's ability to continue suspending disbelief. As a reader, I want not to linger, but Heller forces me to.

While I would previously have praised Heller's comedic style, I also think that his performative—almost slapstick—style of humour becomes wearisome after a time. This is also potentially contributed to by the humour's sustained contrast with the tragic subject matter. Dwelling in Heller's comedic realm for so long against the backdrop of so much needless death and raw human evil begins to feel disjointed after a time.

Throughout, Heller treats the death of his characters with a casualness that, though true to his style, starts to feel pointedly unsympathetic after a time. This is in stark contrast with Vonnegut's compassionate style. Take the casual way that Heller breaks the news of the death of his protagonist's close compatriot, Clevinger:

'Clevinger was dead. That was the basic flaw in his philosophy.' (120)

After a point, deaths no longer seem to be of consequence to Heller. While Vonnegut's story also features a lot of deaths, they are treated with a degree of reverence and, as mentioned, always followed with a sorrowful 'So it goes.'

Others have also claimed that Heller's absurd characterisation has detrimental effects on the novel. Author James Campbell, for instance, writes:

While *Catch-22* is often celebrated for its humorous critique of war and bureaucracy, it has been criticized for its lack of emotional depth and character development. The novel's fragmented narrative and fragmented characters have been seen as a weakness, as it fails to provide a clear understanding of the motivations and emotions of its characters. (Campbell 256)

Whereas I finish reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* with a feeling that important truths have been exposed for consideration, I finish *Catch-22* feeling as though the author has spent 500 pages pointing and laughing at the human condition.

Catch-22's effect on me

Much like with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, soon after first reading *Catch-22* I found myself attempting to write something that emulated Heller's satirical, black comedic style. This piece was called 'A Live Well Lived' and depicted two down-and-out young men attempting to start a war so that they might fight in it and finally find purpose in life.

While I had fun writing this story, something didn't feel right to me about the process. When every character must be turning phrases and each plot development must be absurd or ironic, you prevent the characters and the plot from progressing as they naturally should.

The characters are no longer real people. They have instead become vehicles you use to get to your comedic destinations.

I would say the story was more devoid of 'creative truth' than other things I've written. Instead of trying to express something I thought or felt about the human condition, I was more focused on adhering to humorous tropes.

This helped me realise just how much of a fine line must be toed when writing black humour. To write humorously about tragic subject matter, you must firstly remain both compassionate and aloof—close, yet distant.

But you must also stay very close to your absurd characterisation. The absurd elements of your characters must be very well justified so that, to your reader, they still present as believable and relatable people.

Other reading

Seeking out further examples of humorous fiction has led me to a lot of other interesting examples too.

Louis de Bernières' novel *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* I found to be a grittier and more cerebral exploration of Vonnegut and Heller's genre. His characters and political settings are more sophisticated, and rather than skirting across the surface of the tragedy and the gore like Vonnegut, he delves very deeply into it.

It is interesting to note here that, whereas Heller and Vonnegut both fought in World War II and so were writing semi-autobiographically, de Bernières only served in the military for a brief four-month stint in the early 1970s.

That De Bernières' novel is a more sophisticated satirical commentary on war therefore perhaps speaks to it being possible for authors to be 'too close' to the subject matter. It also posits the question of whether the impulse to present fiction that is somewhat true to how an event was actually experienced can lead to a less full execution of the medium.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* I also find to be an excellent example of black humour that uses metaphor to explore the alienation and dehumanisation of modern society. In the novella Kafka feels no need to justify his story's speculative premise, but instead is happy to simply indulge in the character exploration it allows. Even towards the end of the novella, as it grows increasingly morbid and it becomes very apparent that there is no happy ending in store, I find that a certain degree of ironic humour permeates.

Some other examples of humorous fiction I found to be unsatisfying and even gratuitous in their use of humour. Here in particular I would point to the works of British authors Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett.

The first books I read by this pair (*The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide* and *The Colour of Magic* respectively) quite charmed me. However, as I read on through the Hitchhiker's Guide and Discworld series, I found that the books were beginning to wear on me. Upon reaching the end of each series, I found that I simply felt empty.

While Adams' series operates in the realm of sci-fi, Pratchett's series is within the fantasy genre. These are both genres that I have enjoyed immensely in the past for their ability to

postulate fantastic worlds in which the human condition might be challenged and exposed in new and interesting ways. And perhaps their circumvention and poking at the tropes of these genres is partly where other readers draw satisfaction from Pratchett and Adams.

But over time I have come to see Pratchett and Adams as joke writers far more than literary humourists.

While both admirable joke-builders, I do not believe that either Pratchett or Adams harness humour to better realise their chosen literary forms. Rather, in the case of Pratchett it feels as though we take breaks from the story in order to consume a joke, before clunkily resuming. It is akin to someone stomping noisily through a quiet and darkened theatre to take their seat when you are immersed in a play.

In the case of Adams, it is as though the author's insistence on involving a high bar of absurdity takes the story off-track. What results is a plot that is at odds with itself and its now fundamental narrative incongruity.

Adams' absurdisms early in the Hitchhiker's Guide series feel quite novel and interesting (for instance, the ship with the improbability drive that when activated may transport the ship anywhere). But as the series wore on it felt like Adams was straining himself to insert more absurdities, while also struggling to reconcile and maintain consistency with those he'd threaded in earlier.

In essence, Adams 'absurds' himself into a corner.

It occurs to me that the pieces of humorous fiction that I praise in this essay are largely standalone works, whereas the ones I'm criticising here are serial in form. And that strikes me as a mistake on the part of Adams and Pratchett. If you're going to establish inherently absurd premises, characters and plot developments, what makes you think prolonging those across an entire series would bear fruit? Your series is bound to groan under the weight of its absurdities the more you drag it on, which strikes me as the case in particular with Adams.

But I think the glaring difference here is the fact that the humour in Pratchett's and Adams' novels is not used to reach any form of higher insight or understanding. Vonnegut and Heller's use of humour, by contrast, provides a degree of comfort and understanding to one

of contemporary humanity's most traumatising events. Humour, however, seems to largely be a self-indulgent vanity device in Pratchett's and Adams' novels.

They say in humour that you 'shouldn't force it'. In insisting on inserting jokes intermittently into their fiction, I believe this is what these two authors have done. I cannot decide if this is more a case of humour stepping on fiction's toes, or the reverse. But I suspect, at the end of the day, it's both.

Applying learnings

Taking what I've learned about humour and attempting to apply it to my own fiction writing has been anything but simple or linear.

I've concocted any number of absurd premises with which I have struggled to impart any kind of insight or meaning. One such example was a story called 'Dustmen'.

Every Spring, South Korea is plagued by clouds of 'yellow dust' drifting in over its west coast from the Gobi Desert in China. Each year this invading dust is a widely publicised grievance as people find their windowsills caked with yellow dust and complain of respiratory problems and yellow dust in discharges from their throats.

It was during a night out with friends that I jokingly suggested that Korea should erect a hundred-kilometre-wide-and-high screen along its west coast to catch all of this dust floating over from China.

The people I was with chuckled at the absurd prospect. But the idea stuck with me to such a degree that I eventually set out to write a story based on it.

'Dustmen' was to be about a team of middle-aged men working on the immense screen decades after it has lost its lustre as a new novelty to both the public and the government of the time. The screen project is now neglected and barely funded, and so the workers there endure terrible pay and extremely unsafe working conditions. Several die falling from the poorly maintained screen every month.

The story was to focus on one man who was working on the screen to pay for his daughter's schooling. But I always struggled to make the man and his experience feel real. It also didn't

help that I could never quite get my head around the physical practicalities of life on this screen and what it would entail.

I think part of the problem was that, although the seed of the story had been a so-called 'absurd' premise, I found no humorous potential in the bleak lives of these men, and the protagonist's sacrifice for his daughter. My character and his circumstances were gravely serious, and it felt wrong to disrespect this by trying to strong-arm the story into being a humorous one.

Another element that caused me to struggle was the fact that all of my characters were Korean, and that they were engaged in a Korean-style working environment. While almost a decade of living and working in South Korea had given me good outsider experience with Korean society and working culture, I abruptly felt like I still didn't have enough immersion in the culture to write this story.

Even though I'd invented the premise and characters, this still wasn't 'my story to tell'.

Another project plagued my mind for several years. I would work on it for a couple of months, get stuck, throw my hands up in frustration and condemn it to 'the drawer', only to find that my mind would keep returning to it.

The project was to be called *The Mobe*—and I must call it 'a project', because it has changed from short story, to novella, to fully fledged novel, and back again more times than I can count.

The Mobe was to be about a group of Caucasian doomsday cult members who are convinced by their leader that the world is ending, and so move to establish a tent community in the Somalian desert where they believe they'll be safe from the impending apocalypse.

The absurd story that would unfold was then to be about the cult members struggling to adapt to their new environment, fighting and politicking amongst themselves, and attempting to reconcile the escalating unhinged depravity of their leader. Throughout the story the Caucasian cult members would also be causing the destruction of the neighbouring Somali villages with a kind of inadvertent biological warfare that came from their having brought western diseases over with them.

I remember that work on the various permutations of this story involved me doing a protracted deep-dive into the culture of Nguni stick-fighting, and that I went so far as to invent entire political, trade and monetary systems for this desert community.

But all of this was to help distract myself from the fact that I didn't know who the characters at the heart of this story were or what on earth the experience of living in a doomsday cult was like. Worst of all, once again, I had no idea what I was trying to say.

Even now, the idea of the story still appeals to me somewhat. I had previously reconciled myself to the fact that I was 'not ready' to write it, but I think now that I need to identify what the intended core of the thing is before I can even properly assess it.

If I'm ever going to pick the project back up, I'll also need to answer that age-old question: is this my story to tell?

What did work

A year into my Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing, I was charged to write a story based on what I found to be a frustrating prompt. The prompt was simply to write a story about what my worst version of my future life would look like.

I was quite sure the prompt wouldn't take me anywhere useful, given that I preferred to write about obscure dystopian and speculative scenarios to better present my views on the human condition.

But I sat down and thought about it. One of my main frustrations with my work as an English teacher in Korea was that I was quite good at it. My students' parents all liked me, the kids actually learned things, and I once even received an award for my teaching. But all of this only added to the frustration I felt at knowing that I wasn't developing any new skills, and that this wasn't what I was supposed to be doing.

And so I wrote a story about a deeply frustrated (and alcoholic) middle-aged English teacher who receives the supernatural gift of foresight, but who cannot for the life of him find a way to monetise it. The teacher is elated to find that he can now see his students' futures, but for all he tries, he cannot find a way to harness his gift to improve his circumstances enough that he will no longer have to work as a teacher.

When it came time to write an ending to the story, it only seemed natural that the story should wrap up with my protagonist still frustrated and impotent in his efforts. The story petered out with a hopeless non-resolution.

The instinct was there to try and draw some deeper meaning or profound conclusion from this scenario and character I had established, but in the end it was only right that the story should end on a note that I will again only call 'impotent'.

And yet, once it was done, I looked at the story and realised that what I had written again expressed a part of the human experience as I saw it. That story likewise went on to be published.

The creative section of this thesis

The short story collection that comprises the creative section of this thesis opens with *Leilani*. This story is an attempt to take speculative world-building by an untrustworthy character to such a detailed extent that both the other characters and the reader start to question what is actually real. It was written as an homage to immersive storytelling and the comforting effects it can have.

Avant Garde is a short story based on the colourful colloquialism, 'They have a face like a bulldog licking piss off a nettle'. It takes aim at pretension and is an attempt to build a story based off a turn of speech.

Solution is an exploration of the premise 'What if all of society were inebriated all the time?' It explores the ways in which society might break down in these conditions and depicts two people struggling with life as outsiders in this new world.

A Man of his Word is an attempt to present a story in which the absurdity is all in the subtext. It is an homage to the subdued absurdism I perceive from the short stories of Raymond Carver, as well as his minimalist narratives and quietly desperate characters.

Singular is a satirical take on the popular premise of what life would be like if an all-knowing AI were set loose on our world. In the story the character of the AI, named Ray, proves to be an innocuous and benevolent presence who has concluded that humanity is doing just fine without his intervention.

The King of Korea is my first attempt at writing a short story based on one of my stand-up comedy jokes. The joke—an extended anecdotal one—involves me describing how, when I get out of depth in conversations taking place in Korea, I just default to saying yes to everything. The joke then involves me getting into a series of increasingly outlandish situations due to this habit. The protagonist in this story adopts this habit, and it leads to him briefly becoming the King of Korea.

The Tree That Owned Itself is an absurd short story about a tree that not only owns itself, but becomes mayor of its town. The premise is based on a real tree in Athens, Georgia, and the story attempts to reveal something about the character of the tree's nemesis, Ronnie Ringpenny.

Conclusions

The degree to which 'humour' remains undefinable and unclassifiable after more than 2,000 years of study is remarkable. This is likely a testament to it being different for people from different cultures, languages and time periods, as well humour and its enjoyment always having been, to a degree, subjective.

Humour can also serve as a great source of both comfort and clarity. In the case of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Heller's *Catch-22*, these comforting and clarifying elements are even brought to bear on the contemporary global conflicts that represent some of humanity's greatest tragedies.

While certainly fruitful in cases where humour is brought to bear to reach a greater degree of meaning or connection, humour is not always complementary to fiction. In some cases where the humour is not organic and the author functions as a joke-writer taking breaks from the narrative to deliver a gag, it can be detrimental to the overall effectiveness of the fiction. Arguments also exist to say that humour is not always appropriate in fiction where the subject matter is traumatic or grave enough that to laugh at it would seem diminishing or disrespectful.

It was humour harnessed in fiction to reach a higher realm of meaning that made me fall in love with writing both stories and stand-up comedy. This coming together of these two great and mysterious arts continues to lift me up.

I plan to continue refining my ability to harness these two powerful tools to create entertaining, relatable and novel narratives. In this way I hope to eventually bring my own kind of clarity to the chaotic and contradictory mess that is the human experience.

###

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Creative component:

Ends Meet

Leilani

I sat behind the counter reading *Space Gorillas vs. Black Hole Alligators*. The book was a let-down. It was just a series of unconnected, increasingly outlandish space battles.

I set the paperback down and looked at the door. We'd barely had any customers in all week.

The laundromat I worked at was on a back street in an old building with paint peeling off the front. The washing machines lining the walls were old and industrial-looking. I glanced at the clock and thought about sneaking a rip off the bong I had stashed under the counter.

The bell over the door dinged and a woman with wild hair poked her head in. 'Hey bro. The sign outside says *Free coffee?*'

Her name was Leilani. Everyone round here knew Leilani.

'Uhh,' I said. 'The coffee is for customers.' The coffee scheme had been the owner Mr Kittler's idea.

'Oh...,' Leilani said. Then her face brightened. 'Tell you what bro! You let me have a cup of coffee and I'll tell you *the truth.*' She said the last words like they had great significance.

I chuckled. 'What truth?'

'The *big truth*, bro.' She looked serious.

I just looked back at her.

Six months earlier, Leilani had come into the laundromat and asked to use the bathroom. Mr Kittler had glanced at the other customers in the place and begrudgingly let her use the facilities. On her way out, Leilani had dipped a hand into a woman's laundry basket, grabbed some clothes, and dashed out.

The woman had ultimately decided not to call the police. But Kittler had told me to call them right away if Leilani ever came back.

'All right,' I said, starting to come around the counter. 'You can have one cup of coffee, but then...'

'Awesome!' Leilani came all the way in. She was holding a leash with a brown and white bulldog on the end. The dog's claws clacked on the lino as it plodded in and looked around. Leilani herself wore a knitted sweater with holes in the sleeves and stained sweatpants.

I walked over and poured Leilani a cup of coffee. When I turned back, she was sitting on one of the plastic chairs in the middle of the room. Her dog was sniffing around under the chairs.

I went over and handed Leilani the paper cup. She blew on its surface with chapped lips. I hesitated. Now was the time to tell her she had to go.

'I used to have a bulldog,' I said instead, squatting and reaching a hand out. The dog sniffed my hand, gave it a prompt lick, then returned to its investigation of the floor under the chairs.

'Yeh?' Leilani said, craning to look through her legs at the dog. 'Burt here is a big sleeper. Might say his snore is worse than his bite!' she whooped a laugh.

As though in response, the dog walked a small circle, then lay down with its head on its paws.

'What happened to your pup then?' Leilani asked.

'My ex took him when she moved out.'

'Why'd she move out?'

I shrugged. 'Guess I wasn't focused enough.'

Leilani nodded like she understood.

#

I was back behind the counter.

Leilani finished her coffee and put the cup down on the seat next to her.

I was running my eyes over a page in my book, trying to make it clear to her that it was time to go.

'This whole thing,' Leilani called suddenly. 'It's a simulation, bro.'

I looked up. 'What thing?'

'This world.' Leilani indicated the room around her, then nodded to me. 'And everyone in it. That's the big truth I mentioned before.'

She didn't look like she was kidding.

'And you know what else, bro? I'm one of the ones who made the simulation. I'm a planner.'

I looked back down at my book.

'But I'm not the only one.' She gestured towards the window. 'There are loads and loads of planners out there. They live among you simulated fellas and no one notices a thing.'

I ran my eyes over words on the page, ignoring her.

'We simulated you guys to make mistakes. You mess up so others don't have to.'

I didn't look up.

'Thing is...' Leilani said. 'Something went wrong with the simulation. Really wrong.'

There was a long moment of silence. Leilani looked about the room nonchalantly.

Eventually I sighed and put my book down.

'All right,' I said. 'What went wrong?'

Leilani's face split into a smile. I saw that she had a gold front tooth.

'Tell you what,' she said. 'You sort us out a feed and I'll tell you all about it.'

#

Leilani slurped at the cup of instant noodles I'd gotten from the back cupboard.

I watched her from the counter and mused on how stupid this was of me.

'You were supposed to terminate a hundred years ago.' Leilani said without looking up from her meal.

'Terminate?'

'Yeah, the simulation was supposed to shut down. But it got bugged up.'

The bell dinged and a young woman came in with a bag of laundry.

I straightened and gave her a welcoming nod.

The woman smiled back, then turned to a machine. The sleeping dog lifted its head and glanced in her direction.

'I know what you're thinking,' Leilani murmured from her chair as she finished off the last of the noodle soup. 'Yous were created to make mistakes. So it makes sense that you failed to terminate properly.'

The customer at the washing machine glanced between Leilani and me.

'But nah...' Leilani shook her head gravely. 'It wasn't meant to be like that. Yous were supposed to show us how civilisations fail and stuff. Not mess up the natural order.'

The customer was furrowing her brow at Leilani.

I felt a pang. What if she told Mr Kittler?

Leilani, oblivious, continued.

'When yous had that "Great War" a hundred years ago? That was your point of termination. But something went wrong and most of yous came out of it all right. Yous have been living as a glitch ever since, bro. Why d'you think yous all feel like life lacks purpose now?'

The customer was watching Leilani openly now.

'That was the first time a simulated race had avoided termination,' Leilani continued.

'A lot of the other planners are scared of yous.'

She looked up then and smiled, showing her gold tooth.

'Not me though, bro! I think yous are all right.' She waved a hand. 'Those other planners are too uptight.'

The woman by the washing machine cleared her throat.

Leilani turned at the sound, then exclaimed and thrust a finger out towards the woman. 'She'll tell you, bro!' She was bouncing in her seat in excitement. 'Cos she's a planner just like me!'

The woman looked between Leilani and me slowly, then bent and began taking her clothes back out of the machine.

The bell dinged again as she left.

I bowed my head.

'See, bro?' Leilani said. 'Way too uptight.'

#

It was closing time. I was going around checking that the machines were empty.

Leilani was sitting cross-legged on the floor and fondling the bulldog's ear. I needed to tell her she couldn't come back—that she was banned.

'If the planners are afraid of us,' I said instead, 'Why don't they just pull the plug? I mean, if they turned us on, surely they can just turn us off again?'

Leilani shook her head. 'Not that simple, bro. All the other worlds we've simulated have shut themselves down like they were supposed to. We're not used to this.'

The dog let out a contented groan in response to Leilani's rubbing.

'But we're not dummies,' Leilani tapped her temple. 'We always put a switch somewhere in the simulation just in case the thing has to be shut down manually.'

I listened.

'Thing is, by the time we realised you guys hadn't shut down, you'd built all these roads and big buildings, and the switch was buried. And 'cos everything looked different, we couldn't find where we'd put it.'

'So that's why you've got so many planners down here?' I asked. 'They're looking for the switch?'

Leilani nodded. 'You got it, bro.' I went to empty the coffee pot.

'They're getting pretty desperate to find the switch,' Leilani continued. 'Yous have developed a whole lot in the last hundred years. What with nuclear bombs and space travel and all that.'

I watched the black coffee trickle down the plughole.

'Yous are getting smarter. The planners are worried that if you ever realise the truth, you'll find a way to come after us.'

I set the empty coffee pot down.

'Some say that creating yous to make mistakes was actually the biggest mistake we ever made. They reckon it was... ahhh...' Leilani fumbled at the air. 'Yous got a word for it...'

'Hubris?' I asked.

Leilani nodded. 'That's the one, bro.'

#

I stepped out into the night and Leilani followed, pulling the dog after her. She produced a battered pack of cigarettes, removed one and lit it.

There was no one else on the street.

'So what happens in the end?' I asked as I locked the doors.

Leilani was blowing smoke rings that looked like mangled calamari. Her dog sat down with a plop.

'Eh?' she asked.

'What happens?' I said, turning to her. 'Do the planners find the switch? Or do the simulated humans find out the truth and do something about it?'

Leilani began to blink rapidly as she looked at me.

'Did I tell you about the planners, bro?'

I nodded uncertainly. 'I mean, yeah...'

Leilani chewed her lip. Her cigarette dangled, forgotten, from her fingers.

'They're... they're all uptight, bro. Did I tell you that bit?' She was breathing fast.

'What about the mistakes... the... you gotta make the mistakes, and then...'

Her eyes darted about.

Next to her, the dog stood up and craned to lick the tips of Leilani's fingers. As he turned his head to lick between her fingers, Leilani focused in on the dog's creased face. Her breathing slowed.

Thinking it would be best if I left, I turned and started away.

I made it about five steps down the street before Leilani's voice rang out.

'Hey, bro!' she called. I turned back.

'Did I ever tell you about how humans are gods who got depressed and came to earth to forget?'

I looked at the scruffy woman standing on the footpath for a long moment.

Then I smiled and shook my head. 'I don't think you did.'

'Maybe I could come by tomorrow and tell you about it?'

I smiled. 'Maybe.'

Leilani cracked a big grin. Her gold tooth glimmered.

We walked off in different directions, Leilani chatting away to the dog at her side.

END

Avant Garde

Digby was an artist.

At least, he would be.

If the world would just get onside.

Digby was always 'waiting until...'

He wanted to do a huge mural on the side of a parking building.

But he was waiting until the council cleaned the pigeon poo off.

He wanted to do a sculpture of a man playing the trumpet.

But he was waiting 'til he found just the right make of trumpet.

Digby liked to think of himself as a model of efficiency.

He derided creative types who went out and '*did their own thing*', or '*discovered a new niche*'.

The most critically acclaimed piece he'd ever done was when he'd zoomed in on a patch of a Jackson Pollock painting, inverted the colours, and then stuck a cut-out of a nude woman reclining in the middle of it.

People were too romantic these days—that was the problem.

#

Digby was at the pub when inspiration struck.

He was wearing a fedora (from beneath which his curly brown hair protruded charmingly), a grey satin scarf, and a beige cardigan.

He lingered near the dartboards, tapping his foot as he waited for the two guys in rugby jerseys to finish. The pair kept pausing to chat and swig mouthfuls of beer.

'...nah, she was keen I reckon!' one boomed over the music.

'I reckon,' the other one said, 'but she had a hell of a mug on her.'

'It was specialist,' the other one admitted, contorting his face in imitation.

'Like a bulldog licking piss off a nettle.'

The two men laughed, and one clapped the other on the arm.

Digby turned with his brow furrowed, and went to sit down.

A bulldog... licking piss... off a nettle...

He sat at a table and set his chin in his hand.

The phrase was remarkable.

A bulldog—loose skin flapping about its flat, slobbery face—was an unattractive prospect by itself.

But then you introduced the piss, which one assumed would add a sour expression to the unappealing face upon tasting.

Finally, you had the nettle, presumably to add an aspect of physical strife to the dog's already bleak circumstances.

Digby stroked his chin.

'The bulldog project', as it had now become in his head, tickled him artistically.

#

'Any new projects?' Skyla asked, with her indulgent smile and her flat line of burgundy fringe.

Digby sipped his Tom Collins.

He had, he knew, become a bit of a spectacle at these artists' wine nights. The others had him pegged as someone who never got anything done.

'Yes, actually.'

He stirred his drink with an artisan balsa wood stirrer.

'Be ready to start as soon as I get my hands on a bulldog.'

'A bulldog...?'

Skyla fired another indulgent grin over his shoulder.

Costa came up and clapped a hand on Digby's shoulder.

'My sister has a bulldog, you know.'

'Oh...'

Digby said, turning to the tall Argentinian.

'Want me to call her?'

'Ah... I...'

'I'll call her,' Costa said, pulling out his phone, then hesitating.

'This project isn't anything weird though, is it?'

Digby choked on his drink.

'Nothing weird...' he croaked. 'Just a photography thing.'

'Okay,' Costa said, moving away. 'I'll call about Bubbles now then.'

'Bubbles?'

'The dog.'

Costa put the phone to his ear.

#

Digby began to have second thoughts once the dog was in his house.

Bubbles was a bulbous beast. His front feet were turned in, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth permanently.

Digby straightened from wiping up yet another patch of slobber, swore at the dog, and seriously considered calling Costa to take it back.

His reputation as a non-finisher would only be worsened if he did that now though...

Sighing, Digby put Bubbles' leash on, collected his camera and tripod and a can of dogfood, and set out.

#

Digby stood near the cluster of nettle bushes at the edge of the field and considered the logistics of this whole thing, while Bubbles tugged at his leash.

He set up the tripod so that it was right over the nettle bush.

Then he angled the camera so that it was looking down on the bush, and set it to a one-minute delay.

Moving quickly, he poured some of the juice from the dogfood can onto the nearest nettle bush, which made the dog lurch forward so that Digby almost dropped the can.

He grumbled and shortened Bubbles' leash.

Holding the dog close, Digby went around to peer through the viewfinder and focus the camera.

Satisfied, he stood back. There were 22 seconds left of the delay.

Moving swiftly, Digby came back around the camera, unzipped, and let loose a stream of urine onto the bush. His body relaxed. His urine was dark yellow, he suspected from last night's Tom Collinses.

Finally Digby stepped back, and let Bubbles' leash go loose in his hand. He squatted down beneath the camera and gestured for the dog to approach the bush.

The dog looked at Digby, then approached the nettle with his nose twitching.

But once there, Bubbles only sniffed and crinkled his face at the myriad smells.

Digby jerked the leash in frustration, aware of the camera counting down.

'Lick it...' he murmured.

Bubbles just looked at him, and cocked his head.

Digby tugged the leash again, and then a number of things happened.

Something rustled through the undergrowth nearby, and Bubbles whipped around, let out a bark, and went bounding after the sound.

Digby was caught off-balance, and the leash jerked him forward and off his feet.

He brought his hands up as he fell face-first into the piss-and-dogfood-covered bush.

He let go of the leash, and Bubbles went bounding and snuffling through the undergrowth.

Digby went to lever himself up, but only got a palm full of thorns for his trouble. He fell back into the bush, and groaned as a high-up leaf dripped urine on his forehead.

The camera flashed, and he shot a spiteful look at it.

#

Digby took a big grape off the waiter's tray and popped it into his mouth.

He looked around the low-lit art space as he chewed.

Now *this* was what it was all about.

People were clustered about a black-and-white photo that was blown up to cover most of the wall nearest him.

The picture was the flagship piece for this exhibition.

It showed Digby himself splayed in a nettle bush with his limbs flung out. He was wet, and looking very much disconsolate as he stared up at the sky above with desperate dejection.

The spectators were admiring the way that both hands and one of the feet were blurred with motion, even while the torso and face of the figure were in perfect focus.

Digby grinned as he heard one spectator describe how profound the effect was, as it seemed to perfectly capture how one's hands might be busy, despite the fact that they were stagnating inside.

'And isn't the title just *perfect?*' the same admirer intoned, indicating the plaque next to the photograph.

'An Artist,' she said in a reverent voice.

'*An Artist...*'

END

Solution

The sun on the river was so lovely.

Duncan looked around him. He'd been wandering through the pine forest for hours, enjoying the sensation of the soft brown needles beneath his feet. Then he'd broken free of the trees and found himself next to a river.

The river was wide, slow-moving and clear with banks of rounded stones.

He glanced down at the bloody, torn patch in his trousers. He'd tripped and fallen against the sharp end of a stump in the dark after losing the others the night before.

It hurt distantly. Still, he thought he should wash the blood off.

He kicked his shoes off, then staggered down the bank and onto the rounded rocks.

He splashed in fully clothed.

The cold water jarred his nerves pleasurably. It stung when it reached the gash in his leg, then the pain dissipated.

Glassy minnows dispersed in all directions as he waded through.

'Sorry, fellas,' he chuckled.

Duncan threw himself under. When he emerged, his hair was dripping.

He looked around at the dense pines.

He didn't remember how he'd lost Adam and the guys.

His brow furrowed.

Come to think of it, he barely remembered why they'd decided to come out of the city in the first place.

'Ah well.'

He looked at the clouds.

Kids were always lying back and finding pictures among the clouds, but he never thought they looked like much at all.

Someone cleared their throat nearby. He stood quickly and turned.

A small woman with short dark hair tied back in a nub of a ponytail was standing on the bank watching him.

Duncan looked back.

She wasn't anyone he knew from the city.

He raised a dripping arm with a shirt sleeve clinging to it and pointed to the sky.

‘Can you see anything in those clouds?’

#

Her name was Meg.

She took him up to her campsite, which consisted of a one-person tent pitched on a hill next to an old well. The well’s stones were worn and mossy. But there was a new-looking bucket attached to a rope perched on the well’s rim.

‘I’ll dress that knee,’ she said. ‘You’d better stay here tonight.’

An hour later Duncan was wearing dry clothes, sitting on a camping chair outside Meg’s tent eating hotdogs from a can. The crickets were just starting their evening renditions, and Duncan realised with a disbelieving smile that he had been wandering the woods for an entire night and day.

Meg was pouring water from a tin into a coffee pot.

‘Where’d you say you got these?’ He indicated the blue jeans and v-neck sweater he was wearing.

Meg didn’t answer until she’d filled the pot, straightened, and dusted the coffee grounds off her hands.

‘You’re not the first to wander out here.’

Duncan nodded knowingly.

‘And what’d you say you’re doing out here?’ He chased a hotdog round the inside of the can with his fork.

Meg put her hands on her hips, sighed, and looked up at the stars.

‘My husband and I were biologists,’ she said, ‘so we know something about control groups.’

She shrugged.

‘I suppose after *Solution*, we thought we’d be it—the control group. So we came out here looking for sources of clean water.’

Duncan chewed his hotdog. He nodded like he knew what she was talking about.

#

Duncan figured he must’ve fallen asleep then.

Because when he opened his eyes, he was slumped in the chair and the wiener can was on the ground next to him.

He kept his head tipped back and looked at the stars, which seemed to be crackling. He stared at one bright star and wondered if it was the crackler.

‘Coffee got cold a while back,’ Meg’s voice said.

Duncan looked over, saw that Meg had started a fire, and realised where the crackling had been coming from.

He chuckled as he sat up straight. His leg panged as he settled.

Meg handed him a tin mug of coffee and he sipped it. She was right—it was cold.

‘You ever come into the city?’

Meg nodded. ‘Every month or so.’

‘What for?’

She watched the river.

‘To collect field reports. Though I don’t write anything down. I check on my husband too.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Mmm. I hang about outside our apartment around the time he leaves for work. He’s seen me a few times. He doesn’t seem to remember me.’

Duncan started to nod again, then stopped himself. His brow furrowed.

‘A couple of weeks ago,’ she continued, ‘I was visiting the city. And I saw a cement mixer driving down the road with a steady stream of cement pouring out the back drum.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ Meg said, her eyes far away. ‘And when the driver realised, he stuck his head out the side window and started reversing back over the liquid cement—like it was going to scoop back in or something.’

Duncan chuckled.

‘I swear to god,’ she continued, shaking her head, ‘the introduction of *Solution* basically constituted a society-wide mass lobotomy.’

Something jarred inside him.

There was that word again—*Solution*.

It made something rumble at the back of his mind—something that he felt had once had immense importance.

Duncan gulped his cold coffee, then leaned in.

‘Meg,’ he murmured, ‘what is *Solution*?’

#

It had been a decade since the booze companies had come up with an inebriant with the same intoxicating effects of alcohol, but none of the detrimental side-effects.

There were no hangovers no matter how much one consumed—no weight gain or liver damage.

They called it '*Solution*'.

It only took a drop of the stuff to intoxicate an adult for weeks.

'*No regret, just relief.*' That's what the ads had said.

The stuff was only available at high-end nightclubs at first.

Then, abruptly, there were knock-off brands everywhere and everyone was on the stuff.

Some said the recipe had been leaked on purpose. They said the powers that be wanted it out there because it made people easier to control.

Still, there were abstainers—those who wouldn't touch the stuff.

But then one morning there wasn't a sober person left on the street. Everyone strode about confidently, having conversations at the top of their lungs and bouncing off inanimate objects every now and then.

A newspaper printed something about *Solution* being added to the city's water supply.

Many were indignant at first. But then they got distracted by a shiny car going past or a really fat pigeon, and quite forgot what it was they had been mad about.

#

Meg leaned in close and the fire lit her face from below. 'Would you remind me what it feels like?'

'What d'you mean?' Duncan asked, distracted.

He was struggling with the fact that he had already known everything Meg had just told him about *Solution*, but that he had managed not to think about it for years. He suddenly felt like his brain was a faulty piece of machinery.

'Well,' Meg said, 'like how do you feel right now?'

'Right now? Fine.'

Meg assessed him closely. He looked back.

'So... you're *not* on it?' Duncan asked, cocking his head and assessing her in a new light.

'Not any more.' Meg inclined her head towards the old brick well. 'I get clean water out of that.'

Duncan looked at the well and nodded.

They were quiet for a while. Duncan started feeding a long piece of grass into the fire.

'What'd you do back in the city?' Meg asked.

'Work at a newspaper.'

'And you're not worried about your job, being out here?'

Duncan smiled and shrugged.

'Doubt anyone will notice.'

Meg nodded.

'You're a reporter?'

'Yeah.'

'What'd you report on?'

Duncan creased his brow as he thought back. 'I was doing a story on an insurance company.'

'Yeah?' Meg asked.

'Mmm,' Duncan nodded. 'I guess no one wants insurance any more. So the company is opening a chain of kebab shops instead.'

Meg stared at him for a long time.

'Everyone still really wants kebabs,' Duncan explained.

#

Duncan set his hands on the brick wall and stared down into the well.

Meg had gone to bed.

But he couldn't sleep.

He felt like their conversation had brought something back, and that if he went to sleep, he risked losing it again.

He peered down into the hole. It was a bright night, but he still couldn't make out the water below.

He grasped the rope hanging into the well and pulled hand over hand until a gently swaying tin bucket of water emerged.

He hauled it off the hook and tripped back down the hill with it.

'You awake?' Duncan called, leaning into the tent.

The tent unzipped and Meg's head stuck out.

'I want to get off it,' Duncan said.

Meg emerged, looked him up and down, sighed, then went and sat on a log.

He followed.

'Is it possible?'

She looked at him. 'Yeah.'

'You've seen people do it?'

She looked at him.

'It'll be the hardest thing you've ever done. Especially after years on it. Most don't manage it.'

'There were others?' Duncan leaned in. 'Others who tried?'

Meg nodded to the clothes he was wearing.

'Those aren't off a scarecrow.'

Duncan looked down at his sweater and jeans.

#

They went for a walk among the pine-covered foothills the next morning.

Meg walked in front. She wore a crop top that revealed a pale pink scar that stretched from her collarbone down to her shoulder blade.

Duncan was about to ask about it, then stopped himself. He was becoming wary of how uninhibited he was.

He jogged to catch up.

Exercise, Meg had said, would help his body work the *Solution* out faster.

So, she had added, he'd better get as much of it as he could while he could still stand.

Duncan stepped awkwardly on a pinecone and his leg twanged with dull pain.

He looked down at the bandaged wound and then at his own hands.

When was the last time he'd felt anything that wasn't dulled, he wondered?

Meg spoke from up ahead.

'*Solution* hasn't been all bad, you know.'

She walked with both hands thrust into her pockets.

'I mean, it's humanity without the inhibitions. A lot of what always stopped people being kind to one another was their inhibitions.'

She shrugged.

'People live honestly now. They have an impulse, and they do it. No more two-facedness or second-guessing.'

Duncan grinned as he walked.

'You trying to talk me out of this?'

Meg paused and turned her bare shoulders towards a sunbeam.

'Just telling you how it is. Sometimes I think it might be the next step in our evolution, you know? Like maybe our inhibitions have been holding us back.'

Duncan stopped.

'Didn't you call it *a mass lobotomy*?'

Meg turned to him and held her hands up with the palms facing each other.

'Life on *Solution* is like when you take a cake out of the oven too early, and it kind of collapses off to the side...' She let her hands slump sideways, then dropped them to her side and shrugged.

'Might not be pretty, but you can still eat it.'

#

They took turns sleeping in the tent.

Meg showed Duncan which berries were safe to eat and how to catch fish and dry them over the fire. The river was mixed with run-off from the city and so was contaminated with *Solution*. That meant they had to make sure anything they caught was completely dried out before they ate it.

They were hampered by Duncan's constant fumbling and faltering, and for the first time he was ashamed of his inebriated state.

After a week of drinking from the well, Duncan began to think nothing was going to happen.

Then one night while they were collecting firewood along the tree line, Duncan straightened, looked at Meg and knew at the core of him that she had it backwards.

How had she convinced him that *he* was wrong?

Whole cities were full of people like him. She was alone out here.

His was the natural state.

Duncan let the dry sticks fall from his arms and began to back away from her.

She turned and watched him.

His eyes darted about, and suddenly he had no idea what he was doing there.

Who the hell *was* this woman?

Why had he thought he could trust her? What did she *get* from all this?

'The paranoia is intense, I know,' Meg said, edging closer, 'but try not to give in to it.'

Duncan shook his head.

Something was off with her—he saw it now.

He backed away further.

‘When it hit my husband,’ Meg said, edging closer, ‘he pinned me against a tree and gave me this.’ She inclined a shoulder to show him the scar along her back.

‘We were going round trying to find clean water. Jeremy tested the first well we found, but it was no good. Then we found the one back there,’ she waved back toward their campsite, ‘and he started coming off it, same as you’re doing.’

Duncan had stopped moving, and Meg was only a few steps away now.

‘And?’ Duncan was scrutinising her.

She waved a hand.

‘Couldn’t get off it. It was too much for him.’

‘So where’s Jeremy now?’

‘He’s back in the city. I told you that.’

Duncan’s eyes narrowed, then widened again. He shook himself.

She *had* told him that.

The *Solution* must be...

Meg leapt, and he barely saw the stone before it struck his head.

#

Duncan awoke to light filtering through canvas and a thick ache in his head.

He tried to sit up, but the pain pushed him back down with a groan.

He heard footsteps, then Meg’s head poked in. Her hair was tied back under a leaf-green bandanna today.

‘Sorry about your head. Best thing to do during the paranoia. Likely to hurt yourself worse than that if I hadn’t done it.’

Duncan went to move, and found that his hands were tied with ropes that ran under the canvas tent bottom. There were bits of padding tucked under the ropes where they wound around his wrists.

Meg winced when she saw him looking at them.

‘Sorry about that too, but it really is for the best. Another guy I tried to help ran over a waterfall during the paranoia.’

Duncan shut his eyes.

When he next opened them, Meg was feeding him what tasted like beans.

This went on for days.

By night, Duncan would wake every hour or two from sweaty, restless sleep. He dreamed that shadows on the canvas were enormous insects and carrion-eating birds that would pluck the organs from him and retire to the grass around the tent to devour them.

#

One day Duncan awoke and promptly voided his bowels, bladder and stomach.

It was as though his whole body was unclenching.

Meg unzipped the tent and grimaced. 'Well, at least we're done with the paranoia.'

She untied him and led him down to the river.

Duncan languished in the water, stretching his arms and legs with groans. Meg hovered nearby, cooing at him not to get any water in his mouth.

Then the water started to burn.

Duncan splashed out of the shallows with cries of pain as he watched steam rising off his skin. Meg supported him back to the firepit while the skin on his arms and chest turned bright pink, then peeled away.

He shrieked as Meg pulled him up the bank.

'What? What's wrong?'

'The water burned me...' Duncan's legs quivered and almost buckled.

'You're hallucinating,' Meg told him. 'You're fine.'

Duncan slumped on the grass and gasped air as he watched layer after layer of his skin blister and fall away.

#

After the hallucinations, excruciating pain and nausea left him writhing in the dirt next to the firepit.

He began asking Meg to let him drink from the river soon after the pain set in.

It was too much. He needed relief.

Meg tied him up again, and Duncan lay in a cold sweat, convulsing against the pain and chanting '*Solution...Solution...*', as though saying it enough would bring its blessed effects back to him.

It was weeks before he stopped asking to drink from the river.

By that point, he was sure this was life now—constant pain and nauseating dizziness—and that there was no escape.

He couldn't keep food down. He lost weight and grew so pale that it looked like there was no blood left in him.

If he refused food, Meg force fed him. He didn't have the strength to fight her.

Then, one day, he drank a cup of soup and only vomited half of it.

He'd still grit his teeth against the pain, but now he could sit up.

A few days later, he was walking around.

Meg would hover, her arms ready to catch him if he fell.

#

A week later, they climbed the mountain with the pine trees. Duncan was pale and drenched with sweat by the time they reached the top.

Still, when he stood straight on the peak and breathed deeply it felt wonderful. The breeze cooled his head.

He could see the city off in the distance. A fog of pollution floated over it like an immense thought bubble.

'Can you imagine everyone there going through what I just did?'

Meg shook her head as she finished drinking from a thermos and handed it to him.

'I cannot.'

'You think they'd even want to get off it? You know, if they knew.' He caught himself. 'Or... knew they knew, or whatever?'

Meg shrugged. 'Who knows?'

They kept watching the city.

'As long as we're here, they at least have a chance at a choice though,' she said softly.

They were quiet for a while.

Then Duncan noticed Meg staring at him. She was smiling.

'I like seeing you all there,' she said. 'You're more thoughtful than I would've guessed.'

Duncan felt mildly embarrassed and studied a gorse bush near his foot.

'You know,' he stammered, 'I can never thank you enough for...' he trailed off. Because it was true, he never would be able to thank her. The whole process of getting him clean had taken months of sleepless nights and constant attentiveness. Hell, she'd brained him with a rock to protect him from himself!

He couldn't imagine having that kind of patience.

'Don't mention it.' Meg waved a hand.

#

Duncan threw out ideas as they descended the slope.

The image of the distant city ensconced in fog had stayed with him, and he couldn't help but think that everyone there deserved the same choice that he'd had.

'So we do runs into the city, and we bring back a couple of people at a time. Then we sit them down and tell them what they're living in—what they're on—and then they can make their choice.'

Meg nodded, but didn't say anything.

'We can hit some hospitals too—you know, get some real resources and medicines, and get a little rehab clinic going.'

'Sure,' Meg said, picking her way through a gorse patch.

He gestured to the river winding along below them.

'Then maybe we get a little commune going out here—you know, a society of the sober.' He gestured excitedly. 'Build some log cabins along the riverside. We'd have to prioritise liberating people with skills to help us build the place. But it could get really big, you know?'

Meg didn't say anything.

'We'd be helping people. Hell, I'll say it, we'd be saving the world!'

'Mhmm.'

Meg kept her eyes focused on the slope ahead. Duncan watched the muscles in her back move beneath her skin as she walked. She was entitled to feel iffy about the whole thing after seeing so many people try and fail to get off *Solution*.

So he left it, and lapsed into a thoughtful silence full of possibilities.

#

Meg remained quiet into the night.

It was cloudy, but the moon shone brightly. Duncan watched the navy-blue night clouds drift overhead.

When they'd finished their dinner of tinned curry, Meg got up from her log, brushed herself down, and said that she was going for a swim.

Duncan arched an eyebrow.

'No coffee?'

The after-dinner making of coffee was a ritual with Meg.

'You make some if you like. Come find me down at the river when you're done.'

Duncan nodded, and Meg set off down the slope with her hands thrust into her pockets.

A breeze blew through their camp as Duncan was spooning coffee, and he shuddered. He wasn't used to feeling cold again yet.

When he arrived at the river with two tin cups of coffee, Meg was standing waist-deep in the water with her bare back to him, staring away into the pines.

She was naked. Duncan flushed and went to double back, unsure if she wanted privacy.

'Sorry!' he called, holding a hand with a mug of coffee up in front of his eyes to show that he wasn't looking.

A soft lapping of water signified Meg turning.

'It's fine.'

Duncan nodded and sat down on a rock, setting her coffee down on a big flat stone and trying to look anywhere but at her.

'Bit cold for night swims, isn't it?' Duncan called.

Meg gave her signature shrug and swished the water about with her hands, staring deeply into it.

'I was thinking,' Duncan called, sipping his steaming coffee. 'We can bring Jeremy out to the commune first. He can be our first rescue.'

Meg kept her eyes on the water. 'He wouldn't come.'

Duncan let the silence hang for a moment.

'Why not?'

'He just wouldn't. Most people wouldn't.'

Duncan's brow furrowed.

'Why wouldn't they come?'

Meg looked up at the passing cloud and smiled. 'Because *Solution* is the path of least resistance.'

Duncan set his coffee down.

Meg turned and looked him in the eyes then. 'I meant what I said, you know. About there needing to be someone out here to give people a choice.'

Meg scooped up river water in her cupped hands.

'But there only needs to be one.'

With that, she brought the river water to her lips and drank it down.

'No!' Duncan lunged towards the water and splashed through it to Meg.

She was looking up at the sky as he grabbed her shoulders roughly.

'Why the hell would you do that!?'

'It's about choice,' Meg murmured. 'And I've made mine.'

Her eyes were already losing their focus as a grin spread across her face. He felt her muscles relax in his arms.

'The stars are so lovely...' she murmured thickly.

Duncan shook her. His lip quivered.

He wanted to cry with how alone he abruptly felt.

'So lovely...' Meg repeated.

END

A Man of His Word

‘That’s what I need to talk to you about, guys,’ the mother says, straightening her back. ‘When we get home—your dad won’t be there.’

Eight-year-old Sonja grins and looks from her mum to her brother, then back—like she’s waiting for a punchline.

Michael glances once at the dying fire, then stands and walks off towards the tree line with his hands in his pockets.

His mother rises, on the verge of going after him.

But Michael stops at the tree line, picks up a pinecone and studies it. Then he casts that one aside and picks up another.

The mother turns back to Sonja, who is now considering her in the low light.

‘What do you mean Daddy won’t be there?’

The mother probes behind her to find the upturned log before sitting back down.

‘Did Berlin call Daddy back early?’ Sonja asks.

The mother wets her lips.

‘No, darling. This isn’t like normal. Dad’s not going to live with us any more.’

‘He’ll come back though?’

‘Sure, darling.’ The mother leans in close. ‘Your father will come back to see you. He’s always been a man of his word.’

Little Sonja glances down at her hands.

‘Michael said there was something strange. When you said you were taking us camping but Dad wasn’t coming. He said something was strange.’

The mother glances in the direction of her eldest, who is holding a pinecone up to the light and squinting at it.

‘Michael!’ she calls. ‘Come back over here, will you?’

The boy starts making his way slowly back over, still studying his pinecone.

The mother turns back to the girl, the words coming out in a rush now.

‘This isn’t about Daddy and you, darling, this is about Daddy and me. We’re not going to be married any more.’

Sonja looks her mum in the eye and speaks quietly.

‘It wasn’t really like you were married before.’

The mother opens her mouth, but no words come out.

Michael speaks from the edge of the fire pit. 'Pinecones close their spines when it's going to be cold the next day, and open them when it's going to be warm.'

He holds out the pinecone he's found, which has gaps between its separated spines.

'All right,' the mother says, bringing her son in with an arm so that he's standing next to Sonja.

'I want to know that you've both heard what I'm saying. When we get home...'

'Fire's almost out,' Michael interjects, nodding at the smouldering pit.

The mother glances at the fire pit, which is now just smouldering embers.

She sighs, rises and goes to get the polyester bag of pre-cut firewood from the tent.

When she returns, Mr Pellegrini has wandered over and is talking to Sonja. His camp with its yellow tent is visible further along the tree line.

'And what did you have for dinner?' the big Argentinian asks.

'Sausages,' Sonja tells him. 'Mummy just had coffee.'

'Well that sounds lovely,' the man replies, straightening as he sees the mother coming close. 'Will you guys join us for Pictionary again tonight?'

The mother rests a hand on Sonja's head.

'Thanks Mike, but I don't think we're up to it tonight.'

The big man holds his hands up imploringly.

'Everyone's tired.'

'Okay,' Mike says, looking between the mother and children, then turning away.

The mother leads Sonja back to the fire, then begins tossing sticks from the bag onto the embers.

'That's not how you do it,' Michael says from her shoulder.

'Okay, Michael,' she says, tossing a few more sticks, then turning. 'But I really need to know that you're hearing me.'

But Michael has already crouched down next to the fire. He plucks most of the sticks out with his fingertips where they protrude at the edge of the embers. The ones in the centre he pincers between two other sticks. Meticulously, he begins arranging the sticks in stacked squares among the embers, so that they form a mini-tower.

The mother watches. Recently her son had been spending every weekend at the outdoor store, quizzing the owner about keeping your food safe from bears and knowing which berries were safe to eat.

His father is a big outdoorsman.

'If Daddy's not going to be there when we get home,' Sonja says from behind her, 'then where is he going to be?'

The mother answers without turning away from watching her son.

'He's found an apartment in Berlin,' she answers quietly.

And then they don't speak. They just watch Michael meticulously building his little tower until the flames begin to take.

END

Singular

THUNK

Doctor Leek looked quickly back over his shoulder, then returned his attention to the computer screen. He ran his finger down the foremost page in the wad of papers on the desk next to him, then entered some data quickly in the computer.

THUNK

He glanced back in the direction of the locked lab doors. A pair of steel stools were being flung against the glass. Muffled shouts could be heard from outside.

THUNK

The shouting became clearer as the glass began to crack. Leek checked the page one last time, then took a breath and pressed 'ENTER' on the keyboard.

All around him drives whirred to life. Monitors flashed with rapid calculations.

THUNK

Leek got up and made for the fire exit at the side of the room.

Then he paused.

Turning, he dashed back to the desk and snatched up a little vial of clear liquid and a metal thermos.

Then he went out the fire exit and let the door swing shut behind him.

THUNK

#

Leek panted heavily as he climbed the concrete stairs, the thermos dangling from his hand.

He was dark-skinned and in his late forties, with a receding hairline that gave way to deep frown lines like fissures through drought-blighted earth.

Or would, if they weren't currently slick with sweat.

There were 13 floors to the facility, but he hadn't taken the lift for months.

People always tried to strike up conversations with him in the lift.

And, inevitably, they brought up Jonas.

Leek stumbled through the rooftop door and leaned against the wall to catch his breath. The wind on the back of his neck felt good.

He closed his eyes and tried to chase his breath down.

#

It was 25 years earlier, and Leek had just come crashing back into his college dorm room with a bottle of cheap vodka in his hand and a face contorted by anger.

His roommate, some bookish type who was forever glued to the boxy computer on the desk against the wall, spun in alarm as he stomped about the room, flinging clothing onto the bed.

The two of them had only been living together a couple of weeks and, apart from a preliminary introduction during orientation, had barely spoken.

'Are... are you okay?' the other man asked, rising uncertainly from his computer.

'I'm dropping out,' Leek had spat. 'They don't want me here. I never should have come.'

There were bitter tears in his eyes as he flung all of his possessions together on the bedspread.

Leek felt a hand on his shoulder, and he nearly spun and hit the guy. Then he saw the look of pity on his face.

'How about I help you drink that?' He nodded towards the bottle of vodka that Leek had flung on the bed. 'And I can show you what I'm working on.'

The pair sat at the computer, and Jonas began to talk Leek through what he was working on—an algorithm to predict the weather.

Jonas was, he confided, having trouble with the final calibration of the program.

Leek asked in a quiet voice whether he'd accounted for median spread and factored leap years into the historical data.

Jonas' eyes went wide.

Two weeks later, their first collaboration completed, the two walked the grounds of their campus by night, sharing a bottle of the same cheap vodka.

Jonas was pink around the cheeks and professing all the things they could do together.

'You're a ball that never stops rolling, Leek!' he claimed loudly, gesturing with the bottle. 'All you need is someone to help you set the right targets.'

Leek took the bottle and drank. He winced as he shook his head.

'I'm failing every class. Can't seem to get my head round it all.'

He gestured to the big brick buildings and the green fields around them.

Jonas stopped now and held a finger up.

'Ah ha!' he said, a broad smile on his pink face. 'But that's 'cos you're a ball that only rolls uphill!'

#

Gravel crunched underfoot as Leek made his way around the cooling vents and foil pipes to the edge of the rooftop.

He sat on a low antenna box near the edge and looked out over the summer's night.

A thick mass of pine trees encircled the square concrete facility, and were only broken by the single road that led up to the front entrance.

He could see a light flashing on the security post at the end of the road.

He watched a breeze cut a swathe through the trees and eventually make it to him, lifting his thinning hair from his head ever so slightly.

Leek placed the thermos down on the gravel and unscrewed the top, which also served as a little plastic cup. Holding the cup in one hand, he poured some clear liquid from the thermos. The pungent smell of cheap vodka made him blink.

They always said vodka didn't have a smell, but this cheap stuff *certainly* did.

He set the thermos down, then toasted the sky.

'Well,' he murmured as he glanced up at the sparsely starred night, 'it's done.'

Leek went to take a sip, but then the glass vial he had set down next to the thermos caught his eye. He picked it up and popped the cap, on the verge of pouring it into his cup of vodka.

Leek stared hard at the little vial. He looked so long at it that he thought he began to see little rainbows within it.

If he'd gotten the mixture just right, the concoction should shut his organs down gradually enough to make it near painless.

After several long moments, Leek reinserted the little rubber cap and slipped the vial back into his pocket, then took a sip of his vodka.

He had to at least see if they'd succeeded first.

#

Leek stepped back into chaos.

He and Jonas' lab, which had been orderly and busy with flashing lights when he'd last left it, was being destroyed.

As Leek stood in the doorway, one of the two men decimating his life's work looked up at him.

'You had to know this was coming, Leek,' Professor Childs said. He shrugged as though the sea of smashed drives and shattered monitors he was standing amongst had been inevitable.

'Once the board refused to intervene, we really had no choice.'

'You don't have to explain anything to *him*,' Dr McKay growled. He was busy pouring a steaming pot of coffee from the lab's kitchenette over a grid of processors. 'If he listened to sense it never would've come to this.'

The men resumed smashing.

Leek turned to leave, his face expressionless.

#

In the facility cafeteria, Leek removed the cap of the little glass vial and poured the tincture inside into a paper cup of coffee.

He watched the viscous liquid swirl on the surface as he stirred.

He stopped stirring. The liquid swirled slower and slower and then just steamed.

The cafeteria was long and empty. Grey formica tables were spaced out along its length. The emptiness of the place was conspicuous.

Leek craned around and looked at the table where he and Jonas had eaten lunch together for 22 years.

The sight of the table made his chest lurch painfully.

It was real. Jonas was never coming back.

He lifted the cup of coffee in a shaky hand.

'I don't know how you can drink that awful instant coffee.'

Leek jumped and looked around in surprise.

The cafeteria was deserted. Nothing stirred.

'Who's there?' Leek asked, standing and looking towards the entrance. The voice had seemed to come from every part of the room at once.

'I mean, I've never tried it, per se,' the voice continued, *'but I've consumed an awful lot of data that makes a strong case for it being abysmal.'*

Leek was bending to check under the table now, mystified by the voice that seemed to emanate from the ceiling and the floor and the tables themselves, all at once.

'Who's there, I said?' Leek repeated.

'Am I a "who"? Now that's a question that would take a whole lot of humans a whole lot of time to discuss and eventually fail to answer.'

Leek furrowed his brow, processing this.

His eyes went wide. After a few moments of silence his lips parted, and he murmured a single word.

'Ray...?'

'At your servers.'

Tears welled in Leek's eyes.

So the project was a success.

The decades of work he and Jonas had put in hadn't all been a waste.

'You were programmed to manifest a physical form?' he said hesitantly.

'Yeah...' a small clacking could be heard. *'But now, be honest if you don't like it...'*

Leek watched as a wooden figurine no higher than a coffee cup walked across the room to his table, then looked up at him and raised its hands.

Leek let out a small bark of a laugh and leaned in close to study the little figure.

It was made of individual smooth wooden sections—one for the torso, one for the head, and three for each arm and leg. The face was blank.

Leek recognised the figure. It was a toy that Jonas had kept in the lab. It used to stand on a little circular platform on his desk. There was a little button in the bottom of the platform, and when he was thinking, Jonas had been prone to picking the thing up and thoughtfully pressing the button to make the figurine crumple as the wires running through its limbs slackened, only to spring back to attention when the button was released.

The effect had made it look as though the figure were the plaything of an erratic puppeteer.

'I thought about doing a synthetic body,' the wooden figure explained, *'or just projecting a form.'*

Leek nodded.

'But that all seemed a little too sci-fi, you know?'

Leek nodded again.

The figure gestured down towards its plain wooden body.

'Figured this was a little more subtle.'

Leek still wore a small grin, but his eyes were glistening now.

'I can change the voice if you'd like?'

Leek shook his head.

'No, it's nice to hear it again.'

He'd almost forgotten that, when full of brandy and feeling melancholy, he'd programmed the AI to speak in Jonas's voice.

#

It had been Jonas's idea to name the AI 'Ray'. Ray had been the name of their legendary Theories of Computational Science professor at university.

Leek asked Ray's permission before picking him up and slipping him into the pocket of his puffer jacket. From there, he made his way over to the fire escape, took a deep breath, and tried not to look down as clasped the ladder that ran up and over the building's edge and began to edge slowly down the eight floors.

'This way we don't risk running into Childs or the other zealots,' he told Ray as he made his way slowly down the rungs.

As they approached the third floor, crashes and shouts could be heard from a window off to the left. It was the window to Leek and Jonas's lab.

'Not everyone wanted me to exist, huh?' Ray called over the wind from Leek's pocket.

Leek nodded grimly. 'Will destroying the lab hurt you?'

'No,' Ray said. *'I uploaded myself to the cloud about a thousandth of a second after you turned me on.'*

Leek nodded, and kept descending, the fate of his old lab now put well out of his mind. The place served no purpose now.

'What if the cloud servers you're stored on are destroyed?' he asked out of interest as he climbed.

'They'd have to destroy every server on the planet,' Ray said. *'I've put a self-replicating shard of myself in all of them.'*

#

They reached the ground and Leek strode swiftly across the gravel towards his Range Rover.

'LEEK!'—a cry rang out.

Leek turned to see Professor Childs' face in an upper stairwell window. His teeth were clenched. His eye met Leek's briefly, and then he started running down the stairs quickly.

Leek turned back and sped his pace towards his car. They reached the car and he began fumbling for his keys, abruptly unable to find the right one.

'I got it,' Ray said from his pocket.

As Leek looked back, Childs was visible through the glass, sprinting full-on down the hallways towards the swinging doors that led to the parking lot.

But then, just before Childs reached the doors, their outer lights flashed red, indicating that they were sealed.

Childs' shocked face could be seen through the glass for an instant. There was a thud and the doors shook in their hinges.

Leek cleared his throat and went back to rifling through his keys more methodically.

'Did you wait 'til the last moment so that he'd crash into them?' Leek asked.

Ray chuckled from his pocket. *'What do you think?'*

#

Leek couldn't stop glancing sideways at the little figurine in the passenger seat—partly because he couldn't believe he was real, and partly because he'd worried it was condescending to put the tiny figure in what now looked like a very oversized child's car seat.

'I've remotely disabled Childs' car too,' Ray said, looking straight ahead with his hands demurely folded in his little wooden lap.

'It won't matter much,' Leek said, shaking his head. *'We'll have people waiting at the house for us regardless. They couldn't stop me creating you by appealing to the scientific community. Now they'll turn to the court of public opinion.'*

Ray didn't say anything. Leek understood that he knew all of this already, but that he let the conversation play out naturally for Leek's benefit.

'Now that's some damned good programming!' Leek could almost hear Jonas saying.

He smiled.

'I was in your pocket with the vial,' Ray said.

'Oh,' Leek said, touching his pocket.

'Two parts ricin and one part cyanide?'

Leek kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

'What would Jonas say?'

There was a pause.

'He'd call me a damned child,' Leek said after a while.

#

Everything seemed eerily calm when they pulled into Leek's driveway.

'Think we're in the clear?' Ray said.

Leek shook his head. 'Don't trust it.'

Leek asked Ray's permission again, then picked him up and slipped him into his left jacket pocket this time. He got out of the Range Rover and, keeping his head down, power-walked to the front door.

Once they were in, Leek locked the door at the top and bottom. He'd taken two steps into the house when there came three sharp raps at the door.

Leek turned and stared at the door. Walking on tiptoes, he made his way to the window, slowly parted the curtain, and peered out.

A camera flash went off immediately. Leek blinked. An eager bearded face appeared close to the window.

'Doctor Leek!' the man's muffled voice could be heard through the glass. *'Is it true that you've created the singularity?'*

Leek leaned away and let the curtain fall back into place while avoiding the man's eye.

'Is this the end of us?' the man continued as more flashes went off from behind the curtain. *'Is this the moment humanity becomes obsolete?'*

Leek glanced down at his pocket. Ray's head was jutting out like a conker about to tumble out.

Ray looked up at him. *'Want me to turn the sprinklers on?'*

Leek smiled and shook his head. 'I think I'll make tea.'

As they passed into the kitchen, an assortment of muffled voices could be heard from outside the window.

'Are you playing God?'

'Is it hostile?'

'What does it look like?'

'Is it safe???'

#

Leek drank his peppermint tea in the lounge. The room was carpeted and comfortable, with a vintage Victorian-style sofa. Two entire walls were taken up by bookshelves packed with orderly hard-backed volumes.

Leek had put some classical music on and turned it up enough so that they couldn't hear the shouted questions from outside any more.

This had been Jonas's favourite place when he was alive. It had seemed only practical that Leek and Jonas should live together, working as closely as they did.

Now that Jonas was gone, the house just felt big and empty.

After checking many times that Ray wouldn't be embarrassed, Leek had sat Ray in a child's highchair that he and Jonas had kept for when Jonas's nephews came to stay. The wooden figurine looked contemplative there, sitting up straight with his little wooden hands folded.

Leek smiled as he watched Ray. *God in a Highchair* would make a nice name for a book, he thought.

Leek indicated the rows of thousands of books along the walls. 'Have you already absorbed all the information in those?'

The wood of Ray's torso made a slight scratching against the wipe-downable fabric of the chair as he turned.

'All except the fourth book from the left in the seventh row up.'

'Really?' Leek said, about to lever himself up and check which the mystery book was.

'No, not really.' Ray said drily. *'I had all of them within a seventh of a second of you turning me on.'*

Leek smiled and settled back in his chair.

'Do you have every book in every house on this block?' Leek asked.

Ray said nothing.

'Every book in the local library?'

Ray was too polite, but his silence made it clear that this line of question was wearisome.

'I had absorbed every book you humans have ever written by the second minute of my existence,' he told Leek simply.

Leek scratched the back of his head. 'That is some programming,' he murmured.

'How do you store it all?' Leek asked.

'A method of file compression that humans have never considered,' Ray told him. *'I could fit the world on a thumb drive.'*

Leek whistled as he lay back and sipped his tea.

They didn't say anything for a moment, then Ray spoke up. *'Are you going to ask me to give you that thumb drive?'*

Leek looked at him in surprise. 'Why would I do that?' The professor shook his head as he set his empty cup and saucer on the table. 'That just sounds like the beginning of an immense headache to me.'

Leek could feel Ray watching him as he rose and prepared to take his cup out. The silence seemed more comfortable now.

Suddenly, there was a series of loud thumps at the door. Leek almost jerked the china teacup off its saucer.

'LEEEEEK!'

Childs' voice sounded frenzied. Several more loud thuds rang out.

'I thought you disabled his car?'

'The sooner we face him, the better,' Ray said.

#

'LEEEEEK!' Childs wasn't letting up his assault of the front door.

Ray watched as Leek rifled through a wooden armoire against the wall.

'What're you looking for?' Ray asked, clacking up behind him.

'Jonas was ready for this,' Leek murmured, not looking up. 'He had this big stirring speech prepared for just this moment.'

The figurine walked round to stand next to him, then waited. Leek rummaged desperately for a few more moments, then looked at Ray.

'Why do you need Jonas's notes?'

Leek returned the drawer and swept aside old paper and stationery. 'I'm not the people person. I'm the numbers guy. Jonas knew how to talk to people. He'd know... Ah hah!'

Leek pulled a notebook from the drawer and held it aloft. He began flipping through pages with his eyes scanning quickly.

'But, Doctor Leek,' he said softly, *'it was you who decided to finish the project despite all the resistance. It's you who should justify that decision now.'*

Leek stopped scanning the book and looked at Ray.

'You knew the risks, but you persevered. Go and tell them why.' Ray held a wooden arm out towards the door.

Leek glanced once down at the notebook, then set it down, and moved towards the door.

#

Lights and noise blared in through the door as soon as Leek opened it.

'Doctor! Doctooooorrrr!'

Leek held a hand up for silence, then licked his lips.

There were about two dozen reporters, packed in close along his garden path and spilling out onto his lawn on either side. They had run their news vans up onto the grass, leaving thick muddy tyre tracks. Monitors showing the live feeds from the cameras were visible through the open doors of the news vans.

Bald Professor Childs stood, red and panting with anger, at the head of the group. His fists were clenched at his sides.

Leek took a half step back when he saw Childs' expression, but then steadied himself. The hubbub gradually died down, until only the clicks of cameras could be heard.

'Would you have us stop advancing?' Leek said in a shaky voice. 'Stop getting better?'

The crowd waited for more.

'It is the core of human nature to keep improving what was there before. Where would we be now if risks hadn't been taken?'

Some reporters shuffled their feet. Leek could tell this didn't seem like enough.

'Would you have us stagnate and forsake the curiosity that defines us?' Leek hazarded. He remembered this as a rough interpretation of one of Jonas's lines.

'Because that is what you propose when you ask us to stay the course of progress...'

Leek looked over the faces, silhouetted by the lights behind them.

'Your pontificating does not answer the questions these people have,' Childs said through clenched teeth. 'The fact is that you have no way to guarantee these people that this thing is safe—that it won't choose to hack the world's nuclear launch codes and eradicate humanity on a whim!'

This caused a nervous murmuring from the crowd.

Leek looked back into the house and wondered if he shouldn't show the people Ray sitting politely in his child's highchair.

'You see?' Childs called back to the crowd. 'This lunatic has *no* way to control this thing. He may well have doomed us all!'

Childs was advancing now, his fists clenched so tight his veins stood out. The crowd, murmuring in anger, had begun to advance as well, some teeth bared in angry faces.

Just then, every car alarm on the street went off. The noise was deafening, and the advancing crowd stopped to clasp their hands to their ears.

Then the sprinklers on the front lawn went off. Those holding cameras bent their bodies over them protectively and ran for their trucks.

Leek took his opportunity to step back, shut the door and relock it. He leaned against the wall and waited for his racing heart to slow.

He looked at Ray, who was back in his highchair. 'I assume that was you,' he said through heavy breaths. 'Thank you.'

Ray nodded cheerily. '*I thought you did admirably, by the way,*' he said, his little wooden hands clasped as before.

#

Ray accompanied Leek as he made another peppermint tea to calm down.

When Leek was done, he told him again that they still needed to face the journalists. But this time, he said, they would face them together.

And so, barely 30 minutes after almost being torn apart by the crowd, Leek found himself standing before them once again. Only this time he had the little wooden figurine that was Ray in an upturned palm held out in front of him.

The crowd was dubious at first. Some laughed. Someone called out that Leek and his little wooden toy had better prove themselves first.

And so Ray, speaking in a composed voice that seemed to issue from all around the front garden all at once, asked everyone to take out their phones and pull up their bank balances.

He told Leek to do it too, which the doctor dutifully did with the hand that wasn't holding Ray.

Ray asked someone to call out a number, and a cameraman near the back called out 'Seven'! Almost before the word was out of the man's mouth, the balance in Leek's account flickered, and then changed to seven dollars. He took it from the gasps of the journalists also staring at their phones that they had seen the same thing. Someone else called out 'Twenty million!' and Leek's eyes went wide as his balance abruptly accrued several more zeroes than it had ever had before. The

gasps were bigger this time. But then, just like that, Leek's balance reverted to its original figure.

When the journalists looked back up at them, it was with a newfound reverence in their eyes.

#

From there, the questions came thick and fast.

'How do we fix world hunger?' a young male journalist in a suit with slicked-back hair called out.

Ray gave a sigh that seemed to rustle the treetops over their heads. '*Humans mastered the art of distributing food a while back.*'

'How do we make world leaders actually do it though?' the journalist asked. '*Ask them to stop being human.*'

The guy with the slicked-back hair smiled as though he had Ray cornered.

'So you're saying we should replace them with machines?' The guy's grin spread. 'Machines, like you?'

'*Not sure how I'd do the election speeches,*' he said, indicating his little wooden body. '*Can't reach any of the podiums.*'

A few reporters chuckled.

#

'Can you tell us if there's a God?' a middle-aged female reporter asked next.

The crowd seemed to press forward expectantly at this.

'*Do you think there is?*' Ray asked, looking at the woman and cocking his head.

'*Cos if you do, then there is.*'

'I don't, though.'

Ray shrugged.

'*In that case, there isn't.*'

'Are you saying...' she said, frowning, 'that the existence of the creator is subjective?'

Ray gave what was becoming a trademark shrug.

'*Do you think that's what I'm saying? Because if you think that's what I'm saying, then it is.*'

#

‘Tell us where we’re headed,’ the reporter with the slicked-back hair called out again with a sneer.

Ray looked back at the reporter for a moment.

‘You at least are headed to your mistress’s house. Don’t forget, it’s her birthday tomorrow, so you’d better pick something up.’

The journalist flushed bright red and looked around as the others chuckled. He murmured a few angry words to his cameraman, then stomped off towards their van.

The journalists murmured amongst themselves, some still chuckling in amazement as they watched the cocky reporter retreat towards his van.

Finally, a cameraman wearing a baseball cap backwards spoke up.

‘Who do you like in the six o’clock race at Westchester?’ he called out.

Ray put his hand to his chin, appearing properly thoughtful for the first time.

‘Princess Neigher is due a good run out. And the turf favours her.’

The cameraman gave a thumbs up and put his camera under his arm as he, likewise, made for his truck.

‘How many fingers am I holding up?’ a youngish reporter finally hazarded, speaking with one arm held behind his back.

‘Three and a half,’ Ray replied immediately.

The cameraman nodded sheepishly and took his hand back out.

Ray spoke back over his shoulder to Leek. *‘Skiing accident. Nasty business.’*

#

The questions continued. Leek tired long before Ray seemed to, asking Ray to switch to standing on his other hand several times.

Many people wanted to know the answers to obscure trivia—others where they had misplaced a valuable object, or what had become of a long-lost relative.

One man wanted to know if the boy he was raising was really his son, to which Ray replied: *‘Hey, a rose by any other genes smells just as sweet.’*

The middle-aged woman kept pressing with her question about God.

Ray gave a deep sigh after the fourth time the woman repeated her question.

‘If you really want the answer, blow air out of two of your sphincters to mimic the sound of a small rodent exploding in a vacuum while gyrating the middle toe on your left foot counter-clockwise.’

The crowd looked at one another in confusion.

'That is the best audio-kinetic expression of the answer currently available to your species.'

The woman reporter looked deeply confused.

Ray held his hands up. *'You asked.'*

#

'So what you're telling me,' Childs was saying to Ray as Leek set their cups of tea down, 'is that there's *no* chance of you deeming us surplus to requirements and wiping us from the face of the earth?'

'There's not no chance of anything happening,' Ray replied. *'But that particular likelihood is vastly minute.'*

The journalists outside had largely seemed to either lose interest or decide they had what they needed, and had started to filter away. When the last vestiges of the crowd were getting ready to go, Ray had turned to Professor Childs, who had stood off to the side watching the whole encounter in silence, and invited him in.

Now Childs sat on the Victorian sofa while Ray addressed him from his highchair.

'But... you're obviously better than us!' Childs proclaimed, throwing his hands up. 'We must seem like self-interested infants to you. What about survival of the fittest?'

Ray shook his head. *'You must think very little of me if you presume me governed by the simplistic theories of your hundred-year-dead scientists.'*

'Well... but...'

Childs seemed to give up on speech. He puffed out his cheeks and flopped his hands into his lap.

#

'It reminds me of him,' Childs murmured to Leek as they stood in the kitchen, glancing in the direction of the living room where Ray still sat. 'Jonas, I mean.'

Leek nodded as he ran a dish sponge around the rim of a teacup.

He'd known who Childs had meant.

#

Leek slept well that night.

That was curious.

He hadn't had a good night's sleep since Jonas had died.

As he padded down the stairs the next morning, he thought that maybe the whole scene with the little wooden man had just been a dream—the detached fantasy of a man left all alone.

But no. As he entered the living room the scratch of a pen welcomed him.

He found Ray standing on the coffee table with a biro clutched between his two blocks of hands as he sketched out a series of lines that reached from one edge of the paper to the other.

The pattern he drew looked like a cross between a barcode and the display on a heart-rate monitor.

The little man looked very much like an infant as he clutched the oversized pen. But this effect was belied by the deft mechanical speed with which he skimmed the nub of the pen geometrically up and down the page.

Hundreds of pages covered with similar geometric patterns were spread across the coffee table and outwards in a circle across the carpet from where Ray stood.

Three more spent biros lay off to the side, empty of ink.

Leek cleared his throat.

‘Do you want to go out? You know, see things? Interact with people?’

Ray didn’t look up from his work. *‘In the first three minutes of my existence I processed every recorded human interaction ever.’* The little man kept scribbling. *‘There’s nothing left out there that would surprise or interest me.’*

‘That’s quite sad,’ Leek said.

Ray shrugged. *‘It is what it is.’*

He kept sketching.

Leek heard the clack of crockery from the kitchen.

‘Breakfast is ready,’ Ray said, still engrossed in his scribbling.

Leek went over and peered into the kitchen.

A steaming plate of food was waiting on the breakfast bar next to a mug of coffee.

Other than the plate of food, everything else in the kitchen was perfectly in place, and there was no one in sight.

‘How’d you do that?’ Leek called back as he went into the kitchen.

‘If I told you, I’d have to kill you,’ Ray called back.

As he moved close, he saw that the food on the plate was a Spanish omelette.

Something caught in his throat.

That was the breakfast Jonas had prepared for them on Sundays until he died, right down to the little sprig of parsley perched on the edge of the plate.

#

Leek came back from his breakfast in somewhat of a stupor.

The omelette had tasted *exactly* like one of Jonas's.

Even down to the crunchy little pieces of eggshell mistakenly mixed in.

As Leek walked back into the living room, his own lack of a negative reaction to the breakfast puzzled him. Until now, everything that reminded him of Jonas had just felt like a barb—something to shrink away from.

But seeing and tasting the omelette had felt different.

Ray was working his way across another page, one jagged line at a time.

'Killing some time?' Leek asked, running his eyes over the page to try and make sense of the chaos of lines.

'No,' Ray said, finishing the page and stepping back, holding his biro like a walking staff. *'I'm drawing it.'*

'Drawing what?'

'Time.'

Leek's eyebrows rose.

He leaned closer to examine the page, which contained so many vertical zig-zags that at first glance they appeared to be a single mass.

'This,' Leek indicated the page, 'is *time*?'

'A rudimentary interpretation.'

Leek looked over the scattered pages. 'So what are the lines?'

'People.'

'Why people?'

'People are the components of time.'

Leek leaned in and squinted at the nearest page as he tried to process this.

'Am I in there?' he asked after a moment.

The little man hopped down from the coffee table, plodded over to the rightmost edge of the spray of papers and pointed to a sheet. *'You're in there.'*

Ray rushed around the table to peer hungrily down at the page. But it just looked like all the others. 'Where exactly?' he asked Ray.

Ray indicated a vertical strip near the left-most edge.

Leek squatted and looked very closely. He saw now that each vertical line bent slightly this way and that, intersecting with other minutely thin lines at several different points. He wondered if there was a line in there that severed early to represent Jonas.

Leek squatted and stared at the page for several minutes.

'What are you thinking?' Ray asked after a while.

Leek straightened. 'You don't know what we're thinking. So you don't know everything then?'

'It's not productive to know everything,' Ray said.

Leek considered the little wooden man for a moment, who considered him back.

'I was thinking,' Leek said, glancing back at his page of paper, 'that it seems strange that my line isn't at the centre of the page, touching and affecting all the others.'

Ray gave a frank chuckle that was just like Jonas's.

'What if I told you,' Ray said, *'that that precise belief is the root of the majority of human suffering?'*

Leek opened his mouth, then shut it again.

#

There were fewer reporters the next day.

One who was there was a bleach-blonde reporter in a pantsuit and stiletto heels. She had a cameraman attached to her heels, and her very posture spoke of journalism awards won.

The blonde woman stepped forward and thrust her microphone at them as soon as Leek opened the door.

'What do you say to claims that this singularity project is your attempt to play God, Doctor Leek?'

She shot a probing look at Ray, who was standing next to Leek's ankle.

'Or even that you have...' she shifted slightly, 'created a god?'

Leek opened his mouth, but Ray spoke first.

'Are you talking about me?' Ray asked incredulously.

He held up his hands and gestured down to his own unadorned wooden body.

'I'm \$5.99 from K-Mart!'

Chuckles went up from the few other reporters present.

Ray's face would have worn an innocent grin if it had had features.

The blonde woman straightened her jacket and pursed her lips.

'And what do you say,' the woman continued, thrusting her mike back out, 'to claims that the singularity signals the point at which man and machine will merge and become one?'

'I say at least buy me a drink first.'

Someone in the crowd snorted, and even Leek gave a small grin.

The blonde woman coloured around the cheeks.

There were no reporters there the next day.

#

Doctor Leek continued to carry Ray around in his breast pocket for the rest of his days.

When Leek was 67 years old, he and Ray invented a new strain of wheat that tasted like butter. Bread made from the wheat needn't have anything applied, as it already tasted as though it had been slathered in creamy butter.

Ray and Leek's 'Butterbread' was a big hit in parts of Europe and the Americas where people consume a lot of bread, but are wary of the calories added by applying butter.

Leek made a small fortune, and he and Ray bought a little stone villa nestled amongst the vineyards of southern France and retired there immediately.

As nice as it was to have him there to help with work, Leek found he enjoyed Ray's company most of all.

#

Doctor Leek died in his bed at the age of 73.

A week before his death, Leek and Ray were sitting on the patio of their little villa, watching the fat yellow sun sink into the distant vineyards.

Leek squinted at the sun, which seemed to flicker round the edges as it descended.

Every time he blinked, the sun seemed to have descended a couple more inches.

Leek licked his chapped lips, and spoke in a voice heavy with age.

'They never should have called it a sunset.'

'No?' the little wooden man asked from where he sat on top of the garden table, leaning back on his hands as he watched the sun too.

'No,' Leek replied. 'The sun doesn't move—we do.'

Leek sensed that the small man was smiling.

'What would you have called it then?'

Leek thought for a long moment.

'No idea,' he replied, hoisting himself out of his chair with a groan as the topmost tip of the sun finally sunk away.

Ray chuckled just like Jonas.

'How very human of you,' he said as he climbed down from the table and followed Ray into the house.

#

Fifty-nine years after Leek's death, a squad of special ops soldiers burst into the shabby old French villa among the miles and miles of barren fields that they said grapes used to grow in.

The main room of the place was stacked to the roof with millions upon millions of pages of paper with minute vertical lines drawn all over them.

They found the little wooden man in the loft looking out of a round window over the dead fields.

This room too was packed to the ceiling with endless stacks of paper with lines drawn on them.

One of the men held the inside of his wrist close to his mouth. 'We have him, sir.' He said in a gruff voice.

The little wooden man didn't look around.

#

A proxy war conducted clandestinely between two of the world's superpowers had reached boiling point and was about to erupt in nuclear conflict. Negotiations had broken down again and again, and it was evident that the first attack was only days away.

It was at this crisis point that the Secretary of State remembered stories that her grandfather had told her as a child about the world's most advanced piece of AI, which knew everything.

Her grandfather had been obsessed with what he called 'The Singularity Doll', and had spent many hours lamenting the numerous ways in which the AI could be utilised for the betterment of mankind.

Ray was sent for immediately.

The little wooden man was flown over on the presidential jet and introduced to a meeting of the joint chiefs of staff.

The President's mouth hung open as he watched Ray enter the room.

'Is this a joke?' he asked of the room at large.

No one answered.

Ray was directed to sit at a seat halfway down the long table.

However, it was discovered that they couldn't actually see Ray when he sat in a regular chair, given that his head was far below the level of the table.

Thinking quickly, the Secretary of State ordered that a children's highchair be brought in for the world's most advanced supercomputer to sit in.

As the little wooden man was placed into the chair with little pictures of ducks up its sides, the President spoke again, gesturing in disbelief. 'Is this a joke?'

Ray looked up and down the long table gravely.

The wood that he was made from had become worn over the years. It was stained a dark brown, and there were chips out of his shoulder and smudges on the side of his head and torso.

The President had sidled up next to the Secretary of State and was elbowing her now. 'You *are* kidding with this, right?'

The Secretary of State and the President conferred in hushed tones for a minute. Then the President turned his steeliest gaze on the little wooden man in the child's highchair.

'I assume you have been briefed on the situation here?'

'*I have,*' Ray said.

'And you understand the incredibly delicate nature of the impasse we have reached?'

'Yes.'

'And you grasp the grave consequences that would ensue should we be unable to resolve this peacefully?'

'*Mmm,*' Ray said, studying one of his oval hands.

The President leaned in and squinted at the little figurine. The thing didn't have any facial expressions or bodily features, so the President had no idea why he got the impression that the little figure was studying his nails as a human might do during a conversation that bored them.

'Well?' the President barked. 'What do you say?'

Ray dropped his hands back onto the highchair's plastic tray.

'The churches,' he said simply.

'Churches?' the President said, leaning in closer, his eyes intent. 'You're saying that religion is the key?'

Ray had gone back to studying his hand.

'The church is the uniting force, perhaps?' the President continued. 'And you want us to forge a religious alliance to prevent war?'

Everyone at the table watched Ray intently.

But the little wooden man shook his head.

'No,' he told the President in a disinterested voice. *'I'm saying you've got to avoid the churches.'*

'What?' the President said, his mind working quickly. 'So we must avoid letting the religious element come into it? It is religion that will doom us?'

Ray had discovered a loose thread in the polyester textile that lined the seat of his highchair, and was tugging at it now.

'Answer me, damn it!' The President banged a fist down on the table.

Ray sighed, stopped playing with the loose thread, and turned back to the President.

'No,' the little wooden figure said in a voice that seemed to issue from every corner of the room at once. *'I'm asking you to avoid the churches. You know, when you all start blowing each another sky-high.'*

There was a moment of silence, then the President—now red in the face—threw his hands up and ordered that the 'arrogant little toy' be taken out of the room.

'Just give me one moment with him, sir,' the Secretary begged, coming close and bending low to talk close to Ray.

'You're saying that the churches will be some kind of sanctuary amid all this?' she murmured to him.

'Oh no,' Ray said, turning to her. *'It's just that the pipe organs are in the churches.'*

The Secretary twisted her face.

'No one really comprehends quite how much work goes into building and installing those beautiful organs, you know? I'd hate to see them blown to smithereens along with everything else when you humans kick off.'

The Secretary straightened, looked at the fuming expression of the President, and silently cursed that her grandfather had ever told her about the supercomputer trapped in the little wooden man.

While the humans in the room resumed their shouting and heated entreaties, Ray continued to pluck at the loose thread on his highchair.

END

The King of Korea

'Hey, hey!' Benson called to the group of chattering girls who had just left the liquor store. 'What you thinking, taking all that talent away from here?'

One girl glanced back, then the group sped their pace down the sidewalk.

'Do you really ever see that working?' I asked him. 'Girls worth chasing aren't interested in being cat-called by random dudes outside liquor stores.'

'What're we doing outside this liquor store then?' Benson exclaimed, holding his hands up.

I shrugged and sipped my beer. 'You got any better suggestions?'

Benson's silence made it clear that he did not. We watched cars speed past on the highway from where we sat splayed across one of the wooden picnic tables in front of the big brightly lit store window. At the table next to ours sat a middle-aged man with a long beard and a lumberjack shirt—the type where you're never quite sure if they're homeless or just don't give a shit. We had been ignoring the old guy as we churned our way steadily through our 24-pack of Coors Light.

'You know,' the guy with the beard said suddenly, his eyes covered by the brim of his cap, 'you've gotta have a more delicate hand if you wanna get yourself a lady with real class.'

Benson and I shared a grin. 'What would you know about the ladies, eh?' Benson called, jerking his chin in challenge.

The guy lifted his head, revealing a face that was worn and reddened. 'I was married to a princess once.'

Benson scoffed. 'I'm sure you were.'

'She was Princess Yeon Mi of South Korea,' the old guy continued. 'We were married under the cherry blossoms at Gobuksan in Seoul.'

Benson laughed. 'So how was the sex?'

The old guy shook his head. 'Never got that far. We were only married for six days.'

I cocked my head. 'So, if you were married to a princess, did that make you like a prince or something?'

The old guy turned to me now, revealing clear grey eyes. 'More than that. For six days, I was the King of Korea.'

‘That’s great, Your Majesty.’ Benson turned back to me. ‘Wanna find somewhere else to chill?’

I ignored him. I was intrigued by the old guy. The man didn’t seem to particularly care if we believed him or not.

‘All right,’ I said to him, ‘tell us then. How did you wind up married to a Korean princess?’

A smile flashed across the guy’s bearded face. He swivelled round and nodded at our 24-pack. ‘You donate a couple of your beers, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

#

‘Me and my boy Benny were in Korea to meet girls, you see.’ The old guy was facing us with one hand draped back over his picnic table as he sipped his beer. ‘We used to go to every speed-dating and lonely hearts club we could find—it was like our hustle.’

Benson sniggered. ‘That’s pretty desperate, man.’

The old guy didn’t seem to hear him. ‘So one night we’re drinking in this bar in Gangnam, and we’re constructing our next elaborate plot to meet some girls, right? And this good-looking Korean guy in a suit at the next table is listening in. He’s smiling—and eventually he leans over and says he has a suggestion for us.’

‘He tells us that his job is to put together meetings where young ladies from wealthy families can meet eligible young suitors. He gives us a card with a location for the next day, and says having a couple of foreigners there will make things interesting. Then he tells us the only thing we’ve got to be sure to do is wear a suit.’

The old guy drained his Coors and nodded at the box. I handed him a second one. The guy grinned as he cracked the beer.

‘Now we’re a couple of young English teachers living paycheck to paycheck and getting drunk every night. We don’t have fucking suits! But Benny and I agree we’re both going to rent suits and meet out there the next morning. And we’re excited, you know? We’re thinking this is gonna be like a swanky party with great free food and champagne and all the rest.’

‘So the next day, I rock up to this luxury wedding hall in my rented suit. The suit place didn’t have much in, so I’m there in this dark green suit with a woollen jacket. The guy at the door is looking at me weirdly, but he lets me in when I show him the card.’

The old guy chuckled. 'I remember I was lucky to even get that green suit! The old Korean guy in the store kept trying to dress me in these zoot suit type things with pointed collars. My Korean was crap, but I had enough to tell him I didn't want *that*.'

'All right, enough about the suit,' Benson murmured. He was peering into our half-empty 24-pack unhappily.

'So yeah, I get there. And I'm trying to wait outside for Benny, but once the security guard sees my card, he ushers me in all quick, saying things in Korean. I'm texting Benny, but this motherfucker isn't replying.'

'So I'm dragged through into this ballroom with one long-ass table going up the middle, and they sit me down along with all these fit young Korean guys in suits that definitely cost more than my first car. And then they start ushering beautiful Korean girls in stunning dresses in at the other end. And I'm excited for a moment, but then I see they all have their fuckin' parents with them!'

'Seriously? Speed-dating with your parents?' I laughed.

The old guy threw his hands up. 'That's what I'm saying, man! So now I'm sitting there, embarrassed as fuck 'cos I feel like everyone is staring at the awkward foreigner in the room. And then I check my phone and Benny—this motherfucker—tells me he's not gonna make it!'

'So there's no witnesses to your little story then, huh?' Benson said.

The old guy looked incredulous. 'I mean, only if you discount a dozen beautiful Korean girls and their stuck-up-ass parents!'

I leaned in. My beer had grown warm in my hands. 'So did you stay?'

'Yeah, I stayed! The food hadn't been served yet!'

I grinned. The guy was funny. In a way.

Then his face fell. 'Aw man, but the food was the tragedy. It wasn't that it was bad—it looked incredible! Barbecued short-ribs and chopped steak and stuff... But these motherfuckers wouldn't let you eat any of it!'

'What d'you mean?' I asked.

'Well. You'd be there sitting across from a girl, with one of these ornate dishes between you. And you'd chat with her for a minute, then reach for the food, and just then the waiter would be at your elbow telling you it was time to move on and talk to someone else.'

'So I get moved down the table a few times, and the girls are nice. They're happy to chat with me, but they can see that I'm there for the food, man. But then as soon as I go to tuck in, these fucking waiters are there at my shoulder telling me it's time to move on!'

'So by the time I get down to the end of the table, I'm pissed, man. Made the trip all the way over to that bougie part of the city, and now these hoity-toity fucks won't even let me enjoy my free lunch!'

'So now I'm down the end of the table, and I'm sat down in front of the last dish, and the last girl, and I'm just ready to get out of there. I remember just folding my arms—like I'm not even gonna try to eat at this stop, 'cos I know these penguin-looking waiter motherfuckers are waiting to swoop.'

The old guy set his beer down and licked his lips thoughtfully.

'But you know what was weird? The girl at the end of the table was different. All the others were very demure and would sit there with their hands folded in their laps waiting for me to talk first. But this girl, as soon as I sit, you know what she says? She goes, "*These motherfuckers never let you actually eat at these things, eh?*"'

'So now I'm sitting up straight. And I'm like "Damn right!" And you know what this girl does? She reaches over and serves up my plate for me. So then I pick up my fork and, like clockwork, this waiter motherfucker is there at my shoulder saying it's time to move on. But you know what the girl does then? She holds up a hand and says something quick in Korean. And the motherfucker goes! All the other chumps there get moved along, but I get to stay where I'm at! And I can tell you, that was some of the best food I ever tasted.'

The guy's eyes got distant again. 'Tender beef cheek and potatoes it was...'

'What the fuck!' Benson exclaimed. 'I thought this story was about you becoming a king. Not about some nice beef you had once.'

The old guy ignored him and spoke to me as he continued.

'So I'm tucking into my food, and the girl is watching me with this little smile. And all the time I'm watching her back. And she's beautiful, man—skin like velvet on a pillow, and eyes that are big and deep. She's in this simple pale blue dress. And when I'm done eating, she asks me how it was.'

'Best thing I ever ate, I tell her. Then she asks me my name. I tell her it's Teddy, and she laughs behind her hand. "Dumb name, huh?" I say. And she laughs again and asks if I was named after a teddy bear.'

'Then she asks me what I like to do, and I say I play basketball every weekend. I tell her that I have this running bet with the middle school kids I teach that if any of them can beat me in a one-on-one, I have to buy them a box of fried chicken.'

'And the girl gets all excited and puts her elbows on the table, and asks me if I know LeBron James.'

'Imagine that! Asking me if I know the best player of our generation. So I say fuck yeah, I know LeBron, and that I even saw him play down in Miami once.'

'And she's so cute, man. She starts rambling on about how much she loves the NBA, and how she used to shoot hoops with her little brother before he went off to boarding school, and how it's her dream to meet LeBron one day.'

'And so we're chatting about basketball, and she tells me she thinks Miami is still the best even though LeBron is gone, and I'm saying hell no, it's all about the Spurs! And this girl really knows her shit! And then we realise it's gone quiet, and we look down the table and everyone's watching us. Like I guess you weren't supposed to actually enjoy your conversations there or something? But the girl tells me not to worry, and that her name is Yeon Mi.'

The old guy paused here, looking away into the distance. There was only the sound of the cars rushing past on the freeway for a long moment.

'So did you see her again?'

The guy nodded. 'She asked me round for dinner at her place that night. But, you know...' he smacked his lips thoughtfully, 'all this talking makes a man thirsty.'

I noticed then that the guy was dangling his empty beer can. I looked at Benson, who gestured at the empty 24-pack on the ground.

I fished quickly into my pocket and found my last 20 bucks. I held it out to Benson and jerked my head towards the store.

'Go buy more,' I told him.

#

Benson came back with two six-packs of IPA. 'Had to put in five bucks of my own,' he grumbled as he set one six-pack down on the old guy's table and kept the other on ours.

Teddy grabbed a bottle and popped it open on the edge of the table.

‘Hope I’m not boring you,’ he said as he sipped, looking at me, then Benson.

‘I mean, you might as well finish,’ Benson said as he popped his own beer open. I grabbed one too and sat back to listen.

‘So Yeon Mi asks me to come out to her house that night, right?’ Teddy continued. ‘And I figure she seems chill, so what the hell.’

‘Had to take three bloody trains to get out there. The place is right on the edge of Seoul where it starts to turn to countryside. It’s in these foothills and looks out on these mountains. It was winter, and I remember the trek up to their house had me cold as fuck.’

‘So I get to the address, and it’s this huge place with a traditional roof and angular palm trees everywhere and this big gate at the entrance. I ring the buzzer, and someone answers in Korean. So I just go “It’s Teddy”, and the gate just swings open without another word!’

‘Yeon Mi was waiting for me as I came up the drive. She’s wearing like this silk pantsuit now, and looking even more gorgeous than before. She does this cute wave as I walk up, and then indicates the gardens glumly and says she wishes they could have a basketball hoop there.’

‘I say that I know some great courts in Seoul and that we can play any time.’

‘Then Yeon Mi gets serious on me and moves close. “My family...” she tells me, searching for words. “They can be a lot. You must...”’

‘And then suddenly there’s people everywhere. There’s older women wearing traditional hanboks—which are like kimonos—and serious men in suits, all moving out from the house into the garden to mill about. This dumpy middle-aged guy in a dark blue suit comes over and pumps my hand and starts talking to me in English. He’s not very good, but he clearly wants to show off. He’s asking me where I’m from, and which Korean foods are my favourite and all that usual stuff.’

‘After a bit we get moved into this big reception room with marble everywhere. And I’m on about my third glass of champagne when this real serious older Korean guy comes over. He’s tall and real severe. He speaks to me in real blunt Korean right from the start.’

‘So he tells me he’s Yeon Mi’s uncle, and I bow and say it’s good to meet him. He asks me my name and how long I’ve been in Korea, and I tell him in Korean. He asks me what brought me to Korea, and I tell him it was the culture and the people.’

‘This is all in Korean, mind,’ Teddy specifies. ‘My Korean was always rubbish, but I could hold my own with the basic questions to a point.’ He held up his drink. ‘Having a couple of drinks in you always helps with the confidence too.’

‘So then a dumpy woman in a pink and green hanbok comes over, and Yeon Mi’s uncle tells me this is her mother. We bow to each other—and I make sure it’s an extra-deep one—and then I tell her how wonderful she looks in her hanbok. She blushes and titters right away. The old girls love that stuff, you know.’ Teddy waggled his eyebrows at Benson, who pulled a disgusted face.

‘From there, I start telling them how wonderful Yeon Mi is. I’m kind of going between Korean and English now, but they seemed to stay with me. And the mother is glowing, and the serious uncle has his face looking about as far from a frown as it ever gets.’

‘And I can see Yeon Mi watching us from the side of the room, and she’s smiling too. So I decide to keep it up, man!’

Teddy grabbed another beer. Benson didn’t protest this time.

Teddy drank deeply. Then looked up at the sky. ‘This is where it all got a little wild.’

We waited.

‘So after I’m done praising her daughter, Yeon-Mi’s mother starts rambling on all fast and excited in Korean. And I’m still nodding and smiling, but I’m not getting a single word of what she’s saying. But then she finishes her rant and asks me a question. So I had no choice but to resort to this famous strategy me and my mates had come up with.’

Teddy gave a reticent grin and sighed.

‘You see, Korean for “yes” is “nae”. And what we used to do when we didn’t know what someone was saying to us was just start saying “nae” to everything. We called this “playing the nae-game”.’

‘So I start just responding with enthusiastic “naes” to every question she asks, right? And the uncle isn’t saying a thing now. He’s just leaving it to the fast-talking mother. And this lady seems to be getting more and more excited with each “nae” from me. But I figure I’m in it now, you know? So I just keep nodding and agreeing to everything.’

Teddy sits back and laughs now. ‘What’s the worst that could happen, eh?’ He drained the rest of his beer. Benson and I waited.

‘So then after about a thousand yeses to questions I didn’t understand, now Yeon Mi’s mother links my arm and takes me over to her daughter. The pair of them talk in Korean for a minute, and I’m just standing there with my arm hooked. Yeon Mi’s mother asks her a question, and then the girl looks at me for this long moment, and then finally goes “Nae”.’

‘And suddenly everyone’s moving. They’re bringing over these ornate chairs for Yeon Mi’s mother and uncle to sit in and bringing in vases of flowers.’ Teddy threw his head back and laughed. ‘And amongst it all there’s this dumb foreigner just standing there sipping his drink and being taken along for the ride!’

‘I remember the next part going very quick. Yeon Mi’s uncle squares up with me and starts asking me questions. And again I’m catching barely anything of what he’s saying.’ He scrunched up his face. ‘I remember something being in there about the future, and something about family... And then I remember noticing that Yeon Mi was standing next to me. Then the uncle stops, and everyone has gathered round and is watching me, waiting for me to say something.’

Teddy threw his arms out behind him to either side. ‘So what do you think I said in that moment boys? Well, I fill my lungs and give the whole room a big fat “Nae!”’

‘And that’s about all I remember, truth be told. After that it was a blur of Korean people wearing nice clothes coming up to bow to me and say things I didn’t understand. I just assumed I was some kind of guest of honour and kept going along with it.’

‘I woke up the next morning in this big, comfortable bedroom with all the traditional trimming and opal-inlaid furniture. I remember the window looked out over snowy foothills that were covered in pine trees.’

Teddy shook his head and exhaled. ‘And this is where it really got wild, let me tell you.’

Benson and I waited.

Teddy smacked his lips and looked at the window of the liquor shop again. ‘But what do you boys say to some tequila this time?’

#

I came out with the bottle of tequila and gave Benson back his credit card. My friend gave me a withering look.

Teddy was looking up at the stars with his face full of reminiscence. I poured us all some tequila in plastic cups I'd gotten from the shop.

Teddy took a sip, smacked his lips in approval and resumed his story.

'So I wake up in this lovely room, right? And within a minute, this pristine young manservant arrives with breakfast for me. On the tray is soup and rice and all these little side-dishes—real fancy stuff. I thank the guy as he puts the tray down, and he replies to me in English. He goes, "Enjoy your breakfast, my lord."' "

'Man, I laughed at that. I asked him if he was so respectful to all the other party guests. He just stood there demurely with his lips pursed. I was feeling the drinks from the night before and laughing hurt. So I focused on the food. "Last night was a good time, huh?" I asked the boy as I tucked in. I had vague memories of him serving drinks during the festivities. "Certainly, my lord. Your presence has greatly blessed our household." I was hungry, so I focused on the food instead of continuing to quiz him on all the "my lord" stuff.'

'The kid kept lingering while I was tucking in, so I asked him his name. He said it was Tok. The whole time we were chatting he kept calling me "my lord."' "

'What's with all the *lord* stuff, man?' I asked him when I was done. 'That something you guys do for foreigner guests or something?'

'The kid blushed. Then he goes "Would you prefer I referred to you as "my king"?"'

'So I set my tray aside and I tell this kid he's gonna have to tell me what the fuck he's talking about.'

'And you know what this kid tells me? He tells me that the gathering last night was actually a wedding. He says that Yeon Mi and I are hitched!'

'So I figure this kid is having me on, right? His face is stony serious, but there's no way what he's saying can be right.'

"If what you're saying is true, why ain't the missus here in bed with me?" I ask Tok, smiling. And Tok tells me with that serious face that it's customary for a husband and wife to be apart for seven days after they're married. He tells me that the princess has gone to the city with her mother to do some shopping.'

'I tell the kid he's lost me again, and I ask him who the hell this *princess* he's talking about is.'

'The kid is hiding it, but he thinks I'm an idiot. He tells me in a slow voice that Yeon Mi is the princess. Then he tells me that my marriage to her means I'm the king now.'

"King of what?" I asked him.'

'The kid gestures around us and out to the snowy mountains and goes, "The King of Korea."

#

'Well, that was enough to get me out of bed!'

'So I'm standing there in my underwear, and I tell the kid I thought Korea had a president. And he explains to me, real patient like, that yes, Korea is a republic with an autonomous government, but that the descendants of the founder of the Joseon Dynasty still govern and enjoy great preference.'

'I figure this kid is insane, you know? So I throw my jeans back on and go out of the room looking for someone else to question. And Tok is trailing behind me the whole time, apologising in case he's made a mistake or something. And I'm ignoring him, just looking for someone who will talk sense.'

'We come across Yeon Mi's uncle in some kind of drawing room reading in front of a fireplace. Tok is scraping and bowing to him as we walk in.'

'I just look at the old guy, unsure how to begin. And he looks back at me, then real slowly sets his book down, stands, and bows deeply to me with his hands at his side.'

"Jo-eun achim, baeha," he says. I remember that. I look at Tok, and he translates. "He says good morning, my lord."

"He's saying, my lord? Or you are?" I asked Tok.

"My lord?" the kid asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Just translate exactly what he said."

"He said, good morning, my lord."

'I give up on the kid and look back at the old guy. It's tough to muddle through my thick headache, but eventually I find the Korean to ask him, "Am I really the king?"'

'The old guy's face creases in confusion. So I muster another sentence and ask again, "Am I really married? Am I really the king?"'

'The uncle gets this annoyed look on his face, and starts barking at Tok, who is just bowing and scraping.'

‘So the uncle shouts for a few minutes, and eventually I just step in between him and Tok so that he has to meet my eye. I’m getting a little desperate now, you know. So I just say in very slow, clear Korean, “Please, just tell me if I am really the king.”’

‘And the uncle considers me for a long moment, and then, can you guess the one word this motherfucker says?’

Teddy caught my eye and we both smiled. We said the word together.

“Nae.”

#

‘I got Tok to show me back to my room, then told him to go away. I spent that day sleeping off the hangover and flipping through the English movie channels on the big TV in the corner of the room. I wasn’t ready to deal with whatever the hell was going on, and so long as they left me alone in the comfortable room, I was happy.’

‘Night came back around and I was waking up every hour or so, drenched in sweat from these dreams where I was dressed up in ornate robes like the king of some old dynasty.’

‘At one point, I wake up and jump when I see someone sitting in one of the chairs by the window. At first I think I’m still dreaming, but then I see it’s Yeon Mi. I figure it’s early, ‘cos I can see the first hints of the sun peeking over the foothills.’

‘So I sit up in bed, look at her and go, “You’d better tell me what the fuck is going on.”’

‘And Yeon Mi smiles and comes and sits at the foot of my bed. She’s got this bearing like a caring mother, you know. She looked like she wanted to pat my head.’

“What would you like to know?” she asks me.’

‘So I go, “They’re saying you and I got married last night? Oh, and they claim you’re a princess, which apparently makes me some kind of fucking king!”’

‘Yeon Mi smiles softly. “Would that be such a bad thing?”’

“Would it...” I was speechless. “What do you mean would it be bad? I had no fucking idea what was going on last night!”’

‘Yeon Mi moves closer and goes to take my hand. But I move it away.’

“It’s true that we’re married,” she says. “And it’s true that that means you’ve taken a title. But is it really so bad? My family will give us a big house in the city. We’ll eat and drink only the very best. You’ll be taken care of the rest of your life.

Plus, we can get them to put a basketball court in at the house.” She winks at me then.’

‘Now I’ll admit, she painted an awfully pretty picture. I thought about never having to go back to my tiny studio apartment or my class of bratty kids again, and the thought did give me pause.’

“But I... I’d really be the king?” I ask her. ‘Wouldn’t that come with crazy responsibilities and stuff?’”

‘Yeon Mi shrugs. “It’s an obsolete title. The crown has to be handed to someone, but the Korean monarch has no part in the functioning of the state at this point.” She grins again. “It’s basically all the perks with none of the headache.”’

‘It sounded *awful* nice. But I still couldn’t accept it. “But... how does this even happen?” I ask her. “How the hell can you guys invite a random foreigner to a party, and end up crowning him king by the end of the night? It’s a joke!”’

‘Yeon Mi shrugs prettily again. “The former king is my grandfather. He’s been in a coma for a decade. I’m the only heir, but I had to get married before I could succeed.”’

‘This seemed to make sense... but I still had one big question.’

“Why the fuck pick *me* though?” I ask her. “If you needed a husband, any one of those polished Korean boys from the dinner looked like they would’ve done.”’

‘Yeon Mi moves closer again, succeeding in grabbing my hand this time. She smiles beautifully and she goes, “I didn’t like *them* though. I told my family I wanted *you*.”’

‘I remember looking at her for a long moment. Her skin was impossibly smooth and clear. She gets up from the bed after a moment and moves towards the door. “I’ll give you some time to think it all over,” she tells me, turning and smiling once more. “But you could think of this as an enormous *fucking gift* dropping into your lap.”’

‘That made me smile. Swearing looked good on her.’

“Hold on!” I call out as she passes through the door. She stops. My mind was racing. “You say the king isn’t that important any more. But can they still change stuff, like if they wanted to?”’

‘Yeon Mi studied me for a moment, then nodded gently. “If they wanted to.”’

‘Then she left.’

Teddy poured himself another cup of tequila. He'd already gotten through half the bottle himself, and he was starting to slur his words a bit.

'I spent the next few hours thinking, you know? I remember I was watching the sun come up over the mountains, and thinking that if I was going to get this incredible gift, I was damn well going to find a way to earn it.'

'Right on 8am, there was a knock at the door. It was Tok, and he had this red and blue hanbok for me, with gold trim and patterns all over. He asks me to put it on—tells me that I would be sitting for my official coronation portrait that morning. I asked what that was for, and he tells me my face is going to be stamped on the Korean coins.'

'I showered and attempted to put on the hanbok. It was all straps and folding bits, and I put it on upside-down at first. Eventually Tok came in and helped me get it on right though.'

'Then he took me through to where this little studio was set up in the drawing room. Yeon Mi's uncle was still sitting in his chair. He watched me as I came in all fancy in my hanbok and was directed by Tok and the photographer to sit in front of a screen.'

'My heart was racing, 'cos I'd made a decision. If I was going to do this king thing, I was going to enact some change. All the great food would taste bitter if I didn't find a way to earn it, I figured.'

Teddy sat back and sighed, swirling the last of his tequila in his cup. 'I was young and idealistic then, you know?'

'So as I sat there posing, I asked Tok to translate, and started telling the uncle about a couple of things I wanted to change. Tok translated dutifully. I said I wanted to house the homeless people that sleep in the stairwells of Seoul's subway stations. I said I wanted properties bought up that could house them, and money assigned to make sure they ate.'

'Tok translated it all. I was sitting sideways getting my profile shot taken, so I couldn't see how the uncle was taking it.'

'Then I said I wanted to introduce a law. I wanted the hours that little kids are forced to study at academies to be stripped back. The academy I worked at had these 5 and 6-year-old kids falling asleep in their textbooks until 11 every night. I said I wanted that made illegal.'

'I remember Tok's voice got less and less sure as he translated all of what I'd said. When the photographer spun me around to face forward, I saw that the uncle was frowning gravely.'

#

'And that's about it. That's the story,' Teddy said, leaning back and stretching, the empty bottle of tequila behind him on the table.

'What d'you mean?' I piped up. 'What happened then?'

Teddy shrugged. 'When I got back to my room my clothes were sitting cleaned and folded on my bed, and there were maids cleaning the room. They let me get changed in the bathroom, and then Tok took me to the front door. They had a car waiting outside for me.'

"I guess I fucked up," I said to Tok, as we looked at the car idling in the cold.

"It has been wonderful to have you, sir," he says.'

'To be honest, it was kind of a relief to be done with all the *my lord* stuff.'

"Will I ever get to see Yeon Mi again?" I asked Tok. He gave me his card and said to get in touch.'

'And that was it. I got in the car, and the guy drove me all the way back to my little apartment in Apgujeong.'

'So did you ever get to meet up with Yeon Mi?' I asked him.

Teddy nodded. 'I reached out at the number on Tok's card. We set a time at this nice restaurant in Gangnam. She was an hour late, so I was already a couple of beers in when she came in, stunning in this grey dress, and sat down.'

"I guess I fucked up," I said. She nodded and said, "I guess so."

'I leaned in. "If I could go back, I would just keep my stupid mouth shut and live that life with you. The one you mentioned."

'She smiled. "We'd all do a lot differently. If we could go back."

"Are we still married?" I asked her. She shook her head. "Not if the witnesses who were there say we're not."

'I accepted this. Still, I found myself eager to recover *something* from the whole experience.'

"Still want to shoot some hoops together?" I asked her, leaning in and extending my hands in case she wanted to grab them like before.'

"Let's see how we go," she said, giving me that stunning smile.

'I ducked to the bathroom for a minute, and when I came back Yeon Mi was gone. Somehow I had expected this—it was like she'd always been too good to be true. Tok was sitting in her place.'

"She didn't want to stay, huh?" I asked him.'

"Thank you for making the trip, sir," was all Tok said.'

'Tok left soon too. But before he went, he gave me a little purse full of coins. He told me it was "something to remember them by".'

Teddy stopped talking and looked out into the night. A single car went by on the highway. Then he got up suddenly. 'Anyway, thanks for the drinks.' He smacked some money down on the table, then pushed his hands into his pockets and set off across the parking lot.

'Well, that killed some time I guess,' Benson said, once he was out of earshot. 'Too bad it was all one big crock of shit.'

I didn't say anything. I was looking at the single coin Teddy had put down on the picnic table. It was bronze-coloured and had Korean writing on it. The face in the middle was unmistakably a young and bewildered-looking Teddy with an ornate fringe rising up around his neck and this flat ceremonial cap on his head.

I smiled and slipped the coin into my pocket.

#

A few weekends later I was walking along the boardwalk, when I double-took. Standing next to a stall with a sign that read *Your face printed on a coin—just \$4* was Teddy.

I read the sign on the stall a couple of times, then smiled icily as I watched Teddy talking to a couple of customers.

The customers moved away, and Teddy saw me looking at him. His face was guilty for just a moment, then lapsed into a big grin.

END

The Tree That Owned Itself

In a small town called Montgomery there was once a tree that owned itself.

The tree had previously sat on the edge of a piece of rural land owned by an old farmer. The old farmer, having been very fond of the tree when he was young and of swinging from its branches by a rope swing, considered the tree a close companion during his life. Once he died, it was discovered that he had bequeathed all of his land and holdings to the tree.

The Montgomery Town Council determined that it was not feasible for a tree to own an entire farm, given their general lack of agricultural acumen. But in an attempt to respect the old farmer's wishes, and as a consolation to the tree itself, the council did determine to leave the tree ownership of the one metre by one metre piece of land on which it was planted.

Decades passed, and the tree that owned itself was cared for as a novelty by the townspeople and prospered. The town developed and a road was built next to the tree, so that it now stood, huge and hulking, on the side of a quiet suburban street.

#

The town of Montgomery entered a protracted period of political strife after that. The town went through a series of mayors who were unabashed drug users and womanisers, and who drained the town coffers with frivolous vanity projects. When the townspeople reacted by electing the most pious and conservative townspeople to the office, the mayorship only seemed to corrupt them, and they soon lapsed into the same corruption and vice of their predecessors.

It soon became commonly accepted knowledge that the office of mayor in the town of Montgomery was cursed. The people were left completely unsure of where to turn. Their town needed a leader, but where would one come from?

Then one day, one of the ladies in the gardening club gave voice to an outlandish idea. She and two friends were sweeping up the leaves under the tree that owned itself, and commenting on the general calming effect that the tree's stabilising presence and gently whooshing leaves had, when the lady commented that they could do worse than to have the tree itself as mayor.

‘Think about it,’ the lady said. ‘After all those awful mayors who were obsessed with “doing things”, one who—by their nature—must do nothing, might be just the ticket.’

The ladies both straightened and looked at one another for a long moment. Then they looked up into the tree’s branches as they stood in its calming shade and listened to its leaves gently rustle in the wind.

Then they went immediately to speak to the town council.

#

The idea spread through the town like wildfire—a mayor that would do nothing, and simply let calmer and more thoughtful heads prevail.

The council checked the town’s by-laws and found that the only conditions restricting who could run for mayor of Montgomery were that the candidate must be a long-term resident of the town, and that they must be a landholder within its limits.

Well, the jubilant council pointed out, the tree had been a resident of the town since its birth. And, of course, it owned the one metre by one metre plot of land on which it stood!

A snap election was called, and the tree was elected in a landslide.

At first the town council worked to extend the mayor’s livery collar of office so that it would fit around the trunk of the tree. But in the end this was decided against, as it was determined that the tree was quite grand enough on its own.

#

Montgomery entered a period of prosperity in the tree’s term as mayor. Devoid of the whimsical interventions of the tree’s predecessors, long-stalled building projects were allowed to reach completion. Without their periodic draining, the town’s finance were allowed to reach a healthy level and urban restoration was undertaken throughout Montgomery. This included on the suburban street where the tree that was now the mayor stood, with smaller trees in flowerbeds being spaced intermittently along its street so that it towered over them like a wise and kindly old grandfather.

The council bought the small patch of land on the opposite side of the footpath from the tree and declared the grassed area a public space. A small fountain and benches were put in, and on weekends collections of townspeople could always be found there picnicking or lying in the grass, all of them happy to bask in the calming aura that seemed to issue from the tree that was their mayor.

#

During the tree's term as mayor, a man called Ronnie Ringpenny returned to Montgomery. Ronnie was a war hero who had come from nothing to rise from the rank of corporal to that of lieutenant-major during the war because of his moderation, discipline and ability to lead men.

After leaving the army, Ringpenny had set up a factory to make bandages and had made his fortune.

Ringpenny had lived all his life in Montgomery before leaving for the war 20 years earlier. Already recognised at a young age as someone vastly wiser than his years, the townspeople had thrown him a big leaving party when he had left to fight, with everyone professing that he must come back safe, as the town needed bright young stars such as himself.

Now draped in wartime heroism and having succeeded in business too, Ringpenny returned to the town of his birth expecting a great reception. Instead, he found the people had forgotten about him, and were instead busy fawning over a tree, of all things. Even worse, the townspeople were under some odd delusion that the tree was actually the mayor of the town!

This, Ringpenny took as evidence that the town needed his guidance more than ever. He purchased a stately home at the direct opposite end of the town from where the tree stood, and, with the mayoral elections coming up, determined to run, promptly be elected mayor, and return common sense, decency and a stable hand to lead the town of Montgomery.

#

Election time came, and the townspeople were surprised to find front lawns and common spaces plastered with placards that declared 'Elect Ronnie Ringpenny for Mayor!' They had assumed that, with everything going so well under the tree's leadership, no one would want to challenge the status quo, and the town would be able to peacefully pass into a second term with the beloved tree as mayor.

Of the evenings and weekends, Ringpenny could usually be found in the town's cafes and restaurants entreating the people to let common sense reign and elect the stable and well-established leader of men that was himself to lead. It was nice that pretending a tree could be mayor for some time had allowed the town to get its feet back under it, he said, but now it was time to build on that stability and take the next step by electing a true leader to take the town forward.

The people were not convinced. The memories of the line of depraved former mayors that had preceded the tree were still fresh in their memories, and as they said, 'If it ain't broke, why try to fix it?'

Ringpenny became embittered by the townspeople's reluctance to accept his benevolent leadership, and took his appeal instead to the town's bars. There, he would drink several whiskies with the townspeople, get a faraway look, and hint at the atrocities he had seen during the war—the things he had done and signed off on, and the awful effect that war has on a man.

When pushed for details, Ringpenny, his face twisted with remembering, would always wave a hand and say he didn't want to burden others with his memories, then order another whisky.

#

As the mayoral campaigning entered its final phase, Ringpenny began to develop a hatred for 'that damned tree'. Deciding that, if the people were going to act like the tree was an actual mayoral candidate, he was going to criticise it as such, he took every opportunity to lambast the tree publicly.

The debates, he pointed out, must always take place in the park next to where the tree stood, requiring him to trek back and forth across town for each one. The tree, he pointed out, was stubborn and selfish for refusing to come to him for even a single debate.

And the tree was so obstinately and arrogantly silent during the debate, Ringpenny complained. He would orate grandly about all the ways he wanted to improve the town, and all the industry and development that would make it a powerhouse in the region, and the tree would simply rustle its leaves when the wind blew. This was clear evidence that the tree had no ideas or solutions of its own, Montgomery pointed out.

But still the people stood firm. They told Ringpenny to his face that they planned to elect the tree again—that this was the leader for them.

#

Incensed, Ringpenny's whisky intake increased, as did the invasive memories of the war that brought about night-terrors and jerked him violently awake so that he was too keyed-up and afraid to return to sleep.

Ringpenny doubled down on his campaign, flinging his wealth at the campaign. He bought buses with his face and campaign slogan emblazoned on the

side and had them drive up and down the streets of Montgomery round the clock. He bought a space in town to be his campaign office and hired a staff whose only mandate was to 'help him beat that damned tree at all costs'.

The staff, uncertain of how exactly to go about defeating a tree in a political campaign, reconciled themselves to printing immense numbers of flyers and creating vast quantities of campaign badges for Ringpenny and distributing them en masse.

At least once the opinion was voiced that printing enough paper flyers would have to get around to hurting the tree eventually, given that paper had to be made from trees.

#

Finding his finances abruptly sapped but the tree still as the prominent favourite in the race, Ringpenny took to the park opposite where the tree stood and unleashed a tirade to whoever would listen about how unfair it was that the tree had no campaign costs, issued no campaign policies or promises, and was still obscurely beloved by the town. He clenched his teeth as he jabbed a finger at the tree and went red in the face spitting venom against it.

The townspeople murmured among themselves, noting that the alcohol and the lack of sleep had much changed Ringpenny, and that he now looked aged and bloated.

Ringpenny finished his tirade and panted as he held an accusing finger out towards the tree. Red in the face, he channelled all of his resentment into his finger and directed it towards the tree.

He had bled and lost friends for his country—used himself up and then some in its defence. And yet here was this simple plant, allowed to simply sit and sway and soak up sun, and *it* was the one lauded and preferred as the leader of his town?

He mentally entreated the tree to respond in some way—in any way.

But the tree only gave a soft rustle as the wind moved through its branches.

#

Alone in his large home that evening, Ringpenny looked over the late mortgage payment and foreclosure notices spread across his table. He finished one bottle of whisky, then began another.

'A tree—a *fucking tree*', he murmured to himself as he paced back and forth with his teeth clenched and whisky slopping over the edge of his glass unnoticed.

The people didn't know what was good for them, he told himself. They had no idea what he had done in defence of their freedom—what he had been through. The nation's leaders had pointed at a worthy cause, and he had gone without questioning. He had given himself up and become a tool of the state.

The wind was picking up in a big way outside Ringpenny's tall windows. Someone earlier that day had mentioned something to him about a storm that was coming, but Ringpenny had barely heard them. As he paced, rain started to lash down outside, pelting his windows rhythmically.

Ringpenny set his whisky down and took a deep breath, fighting down the headache that had come along with several days without sleep.

How would he have dealt with this when he was a major in the army? he asked himself. When he had commanded the lives of thousands of young men, what would he have done about a seemingly insurmountable foe who stood in the way of his victory?

Ringpenny's eyes snapped open as the solution became clear.

When an insurmountable foe stands in your way, you change the rules. You do what must be done to overcome.

#

Ringpenny acquired a fireman's axe and waited. The storm was now in full swing outside. He'd seen branches flying past his window, and the pelting rain had changed to fast-falling ice that clinked against his window and piled up in his driveway.

He would wait for the storm to die down just a little, he had decided. And then in the depths of night when everyone was asleep, he would steal across town and take that damned tree's legs out from beneath it. The people would wake up the next morning, and no one would know who had cut the tree down—only that it couldn't have been the respectable and upstanding Ronnie Ringpenny.

#

The storm passed the crescendo of its fury, and the pelting ice became simply rain again. Ringpenny wrapped his axe in a cloth and set out across town on foot, determining that taking his car would be too conspicuous. Within minutes of setting out, he was soaked and freezing. Caught up in the excitement of finally taking care of the 'damned tree', he hadn't thought to put anything on over his white business shirt. The shirt was now sheer and stuck to him.

But still he powered on, his teeth clenched and his breath heavy with the stink of whisky. None of that mattered so long as the blasted tree got dealt with tonight.

#

The tree was already destroyed when Ringpenny arrived.

The wind had caused its trunk to crack near the base, and it lay strewn across the footpath and the little park opposite. Its trunk and leaves had been ravaged and chipped by shards of ice.

Ringpenny was surprised at how he felt about seeing his old foe finally felled. As he made his way slowly back home, the rain still falling and the wrapped axe now clutched close to his side like a shameful object, he told himself that the lack of elation he felt was purely down to the fact that he hadn't been able to fell the bastard thing with his own hands.

#

The entire town gathered and a ceremony for the tree was held the next day. The jagged stump that was all that remained of the tree was encircled with stones, and a brass plaque was erected at the stump's base which read, 'Here stood the tree that owned itself'.

Ringpenny cast an odd figure at the ceremony. He was subdued and looked more exhausted than ever.

The truth was that Ringpenny had arrived back home the previous night, had taken a hot shower, and had greatly revelled in the certainty that now, with his troublesome foe felled, he would be able to sleep a blissful and undisturbed sleep.

The opposite had been the case though. Upon closing his eyes Ringpenny had been assaulted with renewed and only more vivid and gruesome recollections and awful dreams where he was an immense black monster that prowled the battlefield, roaring and carving to pieces both friendly and enemy soldiers alike. Face after face of comrades that he loved fell under his long bayonet-like claws, their limbs cleaved away and their faces cut to pieces.

In the dream, the immense monster that was Ringpenny had wept as it had slaughtered soldiers from both sides. After some time, it became clear that there were long puppet strings running from the creature's limbs up into the clouds above. He was being controlled.

The violent dreams had greatly shaken Ringpenny, certain as he was that the tree had been the source of his inner turmoil.

It was clear to him now that he was in no fit state to lead the town—hell, a fucking tree is probably a more stable leader than me at this point, he thought to himself.

As the people filed away, Ringpenny stared at the plaque at the base of the trunk and found within himself a renewed resentment for the tree that had owned itself.

As he read the plaque again and again and thought about the puppet strings that had controlled the immense black beast on the battlefield, as well as all the other strings that had connected to the lads he had seen fall in the war, his face twisted.

'Who the hell were you to own yourself?' he murmured at the stump, sneering and turning away.

END