

That Handsome Devil wakes up first, peels off the swaddled hotel linen, gaudy in thread count, and catches a glimpse in the mirror across the room—damned if he isn't just as beautiful waking up as he is cleaned up for dinner, dressed for one of his kid's recitals. He's been trading off his golden ratio for years, since before puberty really. The kind of kid who showed the early-warning signs, destined to have a charmed life provided he could avoid self-detonation.

He's had more than a few close calls.

He looks over to see his friend sleeping in the adjacent bed, his shaved head and bearded jaw poking out from under the covers—Sergeant Major Cocksure, who is currently dreaming of glorified nonsense, subconscious flotsam. He's always thought dreams were meaningless, and those who assigned value to them were grade-A morons. There was a time back in his military days when some of the army headshrinkers were rather interested in his dreams. This was around the time his confirmed kill count had reached "interesting" and "noteworthy" levels. One of the docs went so far as to suggest he keep a dream journal. But the sergeant major just stood before his inquisitor; unzipped his fatigues; and pulled out a girthy, nine-inch, flaccid penis. He let it dangle for a spell, then politely tucked himself back in and retook his seat. Obviously, he didn't need to say anything. And he wasn't overly worried about repercussions; he was eliminating too many insurgents to be removed from the theater.

So, yeah, he wasn't keeping no dream journal.

Across from the room That Handsome Devil and Sergeant Major Cocksure share is their friend and benefactor, The Almighty Dollar—who is currently super-setting stomach crunchers with push-ups on a laid-out towel before the television, which blares cable finance news he's been privy to for days, despite the program's chyron reading "Breaking Development." *It's only a breaking development if you're an asshole*, thinks The Almighty. His phone chirps on the nightstand with a text from his boyfriend, who seems determined to specter him from afar this weekend. There are some legitimate concerns about overindulgence, drugs from the eighties looking to make a renaissance. The Almighty Dollar finishes his workout and appraises his abs in the bathroom mirror and thinks the real Almighty would be envious. Then he masturbates off the adrenaline rush into the porcelain mouth of the toilet, knowing he's not getting laid this weekend, holding his monogamy sacred, one of his more endearing traits.

He considers wealth as his best trait and doesn't understand a world that would be embarrassed by that.

This is just to give you a sense of the men you'll be dealing with.

These three friends have plans to meet downstairs for breakfast in one hour to kick off their only full day together before they head back to their respective realities on Sunday—there is precious little time to lose; these meetups don't come around often.

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Saturday morning—breakfast in the hotel's relatively empty though well-staffed dining hall.

"Why don't you have anything to say?" asks S. M. Cocksure.

“You mean now or in general?” replies That Handsome Devil, eating chocolate croissants that are powerless against his hummingbird metabolism.

“Either. Both. You’ve changed,” says Cocksure, narrowing his marble eyes.

These friends are always accusing each other of changing, though mostly over text or digital threads—it’s a quasi-threat, an inside joke.

“You need a sleep apnea machine. Your airways have changed.”

Their Bloody Marys arrive, clogged with celery and petrified bacon and other such encumberments—they toast to things you wouldn’t understand; you had to be there.

“If you two are finished,” says The Almighty Dollar, “I figure we got about three hours to walk around the city before we should head to the field.” He’s already finished his plate of scrambled eggs and turkey sausage.

“Are you going to eat something, S. M.?”

“I don’t want to trigger an insulin response,” replies Cocksure, draining his Bloody, working around the mosaic of garnish.

“I spot multiple flaws in your logic. You’re too old to have an empty stomach.”

The Almighty Dollar flags down an attendant, charges the meal to his room, overtips accordingly.

“OK, let’s get the fuck out of this soft target,” he says.

They leave their drinks in varying states of disrepair.

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Once outside the hotel, they are immediately accosted on the street by someone asking if they want to know the *truth* truth about solar energy. S. M. Cocksure tells her he’ll collapse her hyoid bone in three places if she doesn’t fuck off. The same choice he’d pose to a man asking a similar query. His version of modern feminism. She wisely opts to fuck off.

They proceed to walk down the streets of their formative years, their college youth, where they all first met and matriculated in the city’s university. That was twenty years ago. All three acknowledge it’s been the blink of an eye. None of them have been back in over a decade. The university is what keeps the city afloat, always has been—a fragile and often tenuous relationship between the two. The city would collapse if not for the revenues brought in by the university. And the university can’t uproot and move any more than someone wishing for different biological parents. So they are stuck with each other, intertwined—an old married couple, unsure who they want to die first.

But here’s the thing.

They’ve heard rumors. Stories of aberration. Drastic change to the city and university. That town and academia now paint with the Broad Brush. They want to see how true it is, if it is true. Boots on the ground. They want to see these supposed changes. They want to separate fact from fiction. They want to find out for themselves.

They walk.

On the corner of Foxglove Fairway and Tabasco Trail, representatives of Homeless Union 1031 are handing out pamphlets to wayfarers, detailing the perils of a city not greased with the labor of the unhoused. Some are handed out plainly with minimal fuss. Others are crumpled into balls and tossed at those walking by. These slights are ignored. No one wants to pick a fight with a homeless union.

On the corner of Foxglove and Wind Farm Way, That Handsome Devil asks a sapling, poorly dressed for the chilly, early-December weather, eagerly showing off that dewdrop youth, if she'd like to grab a drink with him. She makes mention that it's not even ten a.m., though not without appraising his tall cut of fabric, bundled in a greatcoat. Also the wedding band on his finger. He tells her that time is a child's construct. "Oh God," she says.

"Two for two," he replies.

She splits in a huff.

On the corner of Foxglove and Torpedo Trail, The Almighty Dollar takes a picture of a garbage pail teeming with waste and refuse, some of it vaguely medical, gutter birds picking at the bounty, shedding feathers. He texts his boyfriend the picture, captions it "Thinking of you."

A group of students walk down Foxglove, adorned in university colors, probably heading to the football game later, cheerful on the cold, sunny morning—buoyant with their coded language and hand gestures—their whole lives ahead of them to fuck up as they please.

"Hard to imagine we were ever that young," says The Almighty Dollar.

"Maybe we never were," replies Cocksure.

Overhead, dozens of hot-air balloons take to the sky, lulling their passengers over the city, for travel, leisure, sightseeing. Beautiful really. Imagine all the sharp cheese and white wine and stone fruit and wheat crackers just floating in midair. On the distant horizon, zeppelins travel at slow, bloated speeds—who could have foreseen their resurgence? People love them again, their retro-majesty. The occasional drone flits by. Though most are picked off out of the sky: anti-tech, anti-noise malcontents skilled with a slingshot and other nonlethal projectiles. Faces hidden with balaclavas. Hooded jackets. They'll take back the skies one noisy drone at a time. They'll clean the air lanes up for good. Then they'll flee into the sewers to evade capture. The city's ambassadors aren't committed or paid enough to give chase, to go subterranean.

There is talk of farming that job out to Homeless Union 3482. They know the sewers well.

On the corner of Foxglove and Juniper Junction, a bank is being robbed. Multiple assailants in black and rainbow balaclavas pour out and take to foot. Everyone around sees this and does nothing, the diffusion of responsibility wafting through the air. No city ambassadors to be seen. "Should I go after them?" screams S. M. Cocksure to his friends. "Should I engage?"

"No," they tell him. "The world doesn't want your help," they remind him. "You're just going to get hurt, emotionally," they chastise him.

Cocksure takes off after the bank robbers anyway, leaving his friends behind, yelling in his trailing wake, "Don't . . . worry, I . . . have . . . a . . . huge . . . dick!"

The cause of and solution to all the good and bad things in the sergeant major's life.

The two men carry on in his absence. A drone is shot out of the sky and looted for treasure and parts, as The Almighty and Devil step around the debris, the scavengers.

That Handsome Devil buys some Turkish cigarettes at a nostalgia-infused newsstand that even has an operating pay phone adjoining it. He's told he's the first person to buy a pack of cigs in over a month. Feeling weirdly honored, he lights one up and puffs the heady smoke, his head and heart, already slightly abuzz from the Bloody Mary, catching a charge. He feels loose now. He's had some chocolate. Hit on a girl and been rejected. Always flirting with that self-detonation. He puts his arm around his buddy, The Almighty Dollar, schoolboy gestures meant to transport them in time. They'd fallen out of touch, let some of the more important things slide. It had been too long since they'd seen each other in the flesh, spoken face-to-face.

"So when you going to propose to this fellow of yours?" asks Devil. "When you going to take the big plunge?"

The Almighty waves away some of that thick cigarette smoke from his spinning-scrubbed lungs.

"Are you glad *you* got married? That you built a family?"

"Best decision I ever made."

"But you're not faithful to them."

"I'd lie down in traffic for any one of them, hundred percent," says Devil, his sanguine nature infectious. "I don't know how to be more faithful than that."

The Almighty Dollar isn't going to push his version of moral judgments against the Devil, at least not this early in the day and not before he can secure the moral high ground.

"I think I do want to get married. And I know that he'd say yes," says The Almighty. "I don't know why I haven't asked yet. I don't know why he doesn't just ask me."

"Because he's afraid you'll say no."

The Almighty quietly considers this, says, "There's Cocksure up ahead."

S. M. Cocksure lies prone, back against a mailbox, cushioned in a pile of neon-color garbage bags. Glitter and confetti everywhere. He's doused in it. His hands are scraped to hell and bleeding; he mumbles to himself in an unhealthy way.

"Did they abscond?" asks The Almighty, who plops right down next to him on the littered and glittered sidewalk.

"They shot me with some kind of party-popper gun," says Cocksure, picking flecks of confetti off his tongue, out of his beard. "Then I tripped over a pile of junked drones and wiped out."

"I'm sure the bank is insured."

"Doesn't matter. Turns out it was all fake, wasn't even a robbery; it was performance art," says Cocksure. "Look, you can see them posing and uploading their sacrament to YouTube."

Sure enough, the would-be robbers are clustered together taking reunion-like photos, fake guns dropped, balaclavas removed. Now the city ambassadors show up, just in time to assist them with a group shot.

“Strange times,” says That Handsome Devil, lighting a fresh cigarette and handing it off to Cocksure. “Here, for your airways.”

The two men get to their feet, joining Devil, dusting themselves of grime and party confections, and take stock of their current position.

“Where are we?”

“The corner of Cottoncoil Court and Mettlekettle Manor, a few blocks off Foxglove,” says The Almighty, his phone’s mapping program doing most of the work.

From across the street, anti-noise protesters simply mouth their chants, practicing what they preach, willing to make a scene but not a ruckus.

A man who looks like he should be selling dictionaries door-to-door pre-internet approaches the three and asks if they’d like to know the real score about solar energy. A zeppelin flies over head and blots out the sun. Devil tries to remember if they replaced the hydrogen with helium, or was it the other way around? Students abound, so young they resemble embryos, like they’ve just been time released from hermetically sealed packaging. All in university colors. Armadas of hot-air balloons. The homeless. And cameras—unseen but absolutely everywhere—chronicling the narrative.

The three men look to each other, telepathically reminding themselves why they returned to this city.

“Let’s find this football game before they get word of what CTE is,” says The Almighty Dollar.

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Properly dressed for the wind chill, though overly adorned for a football game, the three men sit on metal-slat bleachers and watch what has been a most entertaining game—far more kinetic than any contest they can remember attending back in their own day. The team was historically kind of a joke and loitered in the cellar of the standings most years. But not today. This game is a real corker. The small stadium is surprisingly well populated, mostly by students slathered in school colors, very much engaged with the proceedings. There are cheerleading squads. Sideline profanity. Trick plays galore. Cold puffs of air streaming out of the crowd, who warm themselves with more flasks than the three men would have suspected for a school-sanctioned event.

The Almighty Dollar worries over his phone; he’s trying to get the game’s line but can’t find it. S. M. Cocksure is redressing his hand bandages with supplies he picked up at an apothecary shop en route. Devil is eye-fucking any co-ed who moves. They all partake in Cocksure’s flask of the good stuff. Then two actual adult women, with fully developed frontal cortexes and some life weariness, slink down from a few rows back and sit directly behind the men, tap them on the shoulders.

“I thought that was you guys. Still inseparable, I see,” says one of the women. “Seems like some things never change, apart from certain hairlines.”

That Handsome Devil recognizes her first, behind layers of warmth and age-appropriate garb.

“Eye on the Prize. Is that you hiding under a balaclava?”

“In the flesh,” says Eye on the Prize, as mutterings and salutations and remembrance take place, peppered with just enough embarrassment at the passage of time, the roots they are still tethered to, their communal ancient history.

“What are you all doing here?” asks Eye on the Prize. “I wouldn’t have thought this was your scene.”

They hardly understand what she means by that—a football game is exactly their scene. They let it pass.

“We actually haven’t seen each other in years,” says The Almighty Dollar. “We came back to appraise the city.”

“That’s huh-larious, best of luck with that. This is my teaching assistant, by the way, Last In, First Out,” says Eye on the Prize. “She’s my right hand at the university. I stayed around after graduation, post-grad, got tenured, now I teach History as Written by the Losers. It fills up every semester.”

A round of introductions are made to Last In, First Out, who just nods vigorously. She wears a full-on black ski mask as if she was going to rob a bank or just pretend to.

A whistle blows, and the opposing team scores a touchdown on what appears to be an honest-to-goodness Statue of Liberty play, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since helmets were made of more leather than the actual ball. The crowd boos in derision, taking the setback way harder than any of the men would have expected. Disproportionately so. Flasks are lifted. A concessions vendor saddles over wearing bundled newspaper duct-taped to his feet as shoes. Homeless Union 1258, selling hot dogs, which The Almighty buys a round of. They turn out to be plant-based facsimiles. The scoreboard flashes LOWER YOUR VOICES, THROW YOUR PHONES AWAY—clearly paid advertisements from the anti-noise, anti-tech lobbies. No one pays any mind to the Cassandra-like messaging. Fake meat is consumed. Last In, First Out has a smudge of wasabi on her ski mask’s chin, so S. M. hands her some napkins, points to his own chin, at which she nods in approval.

“Your friend doesn’t talk so much, does she, Prize?” asks Cocksure, blood already seeping through his fresh bandages, his injuries bordering on stigmata.

“Oh, she took a yearlong vow of silence toward the patriarchy,” says Eye on the Prize. “Nothing personal.”

“Admirable,” the three men say in unison.

“I fully understand not wanting to talk to men, goes without saying,” says The Almighty Dollar. “But can she at least take off that mask?”

“If she takes it off, two of you would fall in love with her instantaneously,” says Prize. “You’re still gay, right, Almighty?”

“The gayest.”

“You’re safe then. But the mask is for these two’s protection,” says Eye on the Prize. “Though not for nothing, Devil, I do hope there’s some portrait of you growing hideous that you keep hidden in an attic.”

“There is, but we display it above the mantle, next to the kid’s lacrosse trophies.”

The three men appraise Last In, First Out’s head, and though it’s covered by the mask, they can ascertain she has a nicely shaped skull, that her eyes are made of rough-cut amethyst.

The final whistle blows, and the game ends and, the home team has lost on a last-second triple flea-flicker, which stuns the crowd into pin-drop silence. Helmets are removed. Pom-poms jettisoned. Then all the competitors congregate in the center of the field, partner up, and slow dance with each other to a saccharine melody blasted through the stadium’s PA, strobe effects hitting the turf like some junior prom.

The scene has taken a turn.

“They used to just shake hands after a game in my day,” says Cocksure.

“You guys didn’t think you were watching a real game, did you?” asks Eye on the Prize. “This is a joint production between the university and local arts council and our sister city in Idaho.”

That Handsome Devil grabs a neighboring student’s flask and takes an uninvited pull.

“It’s nut milk,” he says, disgusted, pushing it back on the kid.

“The real team was dissolved almost five years ago. Too much date rape and CTE,” says Prize. “Again, huh-larious you are.”

The three men accept their naivete with grace, unwilling to challenge high art this early in the day—plus, they’re keen to move on anyway.

“So, Prize, we’re heading to Burger Battle if you and your nuclear option would care to join us,” says That Handsome Devil, very much interested in seeing what’s under that mask, in comparing his Fibonacci sequence to hers.

“Hard pass. But let’s exchange contact info in case we can meet up before the city spits you gentle souls out.” They swap data.

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A couple of miles from the stadium and more than a few blocks off the main artery that Foxglove serves as is a half-mile stretch of commercial road that’s home to three institutions that lay claim to having invented the hamburger. That stretch of road is called Chuck Ground, a haven for greasy hangover cures, study breaks, first dates, late-night dinners, parents’ weekends, alumni weekends, prospective student weekends, *touristas*, and any other damn excuse to enjoy the best burgers on the planet.

Not long after the three men graduated and left the city, a food-centric explosion of reality television took hold. One network swooped in and chronicled the rivalry between the three businesses, dubbing it *Burger Battle*. It aired for five years, then unceremoniously ran its course and was canceled, though it helped pave the way for shows about cupcakes and game meat. But in its prime, it was a nifty scene—a fun show that animated the workers and owners

and regulars along Chuck Ground. Drama that was both real and manufactured. Innate comedy. Legit eats. The TV show was good for business—another feather in the cap of the city and the university. A high tide raising all boats.

Then the cameras you were meant to see disappeared, and years passed, and things changed.

The three men push through a throng of protesters until they finally reach the wooden street barricades, where a national guardsman equipped with a full-on automatic weapon stops them and asks what their intentions are. This is not performance art. That weapon isn't a prop, nor is it fucking around. The Almighty Dollar tells him they're paying customers with a belly full of appetite and money to burn. S. M. Cocksure appraises the guardsman's gun and concludes that he's fired bigger. That Handsome Devil is chatting up some starling wearing a plastic cow hat, waving around a placard that reads MEAT IS RACIST.

The guardsman sizes up the three, then, convinced they aren't infiltrators and their consumerism is aboveboard, waves them past the barricade into a new throng of people, the meat enthusiasts. They walk the half mile to the other end of Chuck Ground to see a similar checkpoint, manned by more guardsmen with military-grade equipment and country-before-self verve.

The whole thing's a shitshow that reeks of rendered fat and grizzle.

"You don't think this has become another installment?" asks That Handsome Devil.

"Nope, I think this is *reality* reality," says Cocksure.

"They're not going to cast a pall over my cheat meal," says The Almighty Dollar. "Let us regress."

In the quasi-demilitarized zone, they eat old-timey hamburgers, marinated and cooked vertically on racks, served on toast with either cheese, tomato, or onion. These places do not serve French fries, forfeiting that unseemly profit margin. If you ask for ketchup, they will literally tell you to go fuck yourself, even if you're a child asking—especially if you're a child asking. Maybe they'll give you some potato chips, a heap of slaw, if the right person is tending the counter. The half mile of Burger Battle is its own nation-state, and they don't give a flying fig about your feelings or repeat business. They don't answer to constitutional law or the customer-is-always-right tenets. They're selling you a unique and brash experience, and that's how they've turned a profit for decades: novelty and seared cow flesh, not marked-up soda and chicken tendon passed off as strips.

Or plants pretending to be meat.

The three men eat and tarry, then get the fuck out of Dodge, through the meat protesters and back toward the heart of the city, back onto familiar old Foxglove, where roaming tattoo artists try to trace and ink Devil's arms, pushing up the sleeves of his greatcoat. He's forced to swat them away, the city lousy with those looking to practice their craft and apply their stamp on others as though it were a birthright. They happen upon an arcade that sells beer and play pinball for an hour, drinking cheap swill that can't even mask the taste of aluminum. The Almighty achieves a high score. They leave and dip into an audio lab with stations that feature fancy

music-listening chairs with built-in ottomans, equipped with record players, dope headphones, and manic-pixie waitresses who will bring you whatever record they have on the menu, paired with the stiff drink of your choice. The three men chill for a bit, imbibe rye and water back. They indulge in records of their youth and agree that music never had more soul than it did back then. Boozy and aged commiseration. They embrace the nostalgia, and That Handsome Devil's skin prickles with goose-bump emotion as he's moved by the following lyric: "He broke the mirrors off his Cadillac, yeah, cause he doesn't like it looking like he looks back."

It takes *him* back—he reflects on his charmed life.

They blow that pop stand and buy tallboys and a frisbee from a liquor store and toss the frisbee around between the three of them in the city's main park. The sun has started to retreat, and the zeppelins and hot-air balloons are ferrying away the last of their cargo, anxious to land before dark. The airspace is not as safe as it used to be after sunset. Even the drones have disappeared. The men are more than a little drunk by now, though their guts full of ground beef have helped offset the hedonism. They nurse their cans of pilsner. They fling the disc as their greatcoats flap under the effort and the ever-present wind. Was it always so windy in this city? No matter, it's peaceful. They're having a ball, laughing, like they've found a way to retard the passing of time. The waning sunlight is cutting through the stark trees devoid of leaves, and it's epic looking, would meet the standards of hermit poets. It would make you spiteful of lumberjacks and their felled wood. Even the street occupants and solar truthers and protesters and tattoo artists leave the three men to their own devices, to their isosceles of sport. They're happy in a way that shouldn't be possible from ten cents worth of plastic and badly fermented corn, but that's how it is—that's how the moment shakes loose.

Then it becomes dark, and they leave the park for their hotel suite, where they will lounge and micro-nap and quickly FaceTime with loved ones and shower and prepare for a night out on the town, beginning with a clandestine dinner The Almighty Dollar has hooked up.

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They dine at an indoor gun range. Or at least that's what it's made to look like at street level, given the subterfuge, given the flashing neon sign that reads GUNS, GUNS, GUNS. The large storefront with its windows all blacked out. The faint repetitive pings of discharge echoing off the concrete, off reductive, noise-cushioning material. An ominous permit laminated into the corner of the front door—a door centered in the squat, single-level structure, nothing particularly uplifting about the place—if anything, it smacks of foreboding. Even for a gun range, it seems uninviting.

But inside, it's anything but. Inside, it's a true restaurant, opulent and surprisingly homey. The three men are escorted to their table and asked to roll up their sleeves by the hostess, who is also a registered nurse, so she can swab the crooks of their elbows with rubbing alcohol, only to insert IVs into the disinfected areas. They are given electronic bracelets to wear, paired with an app they are asked to download onto their phones. S. M. Cocksure and That Handsome Devil lob curious glances at The Almighty Dollar, whose idea this was. The Almighty tells them to have

faith. That it will all make sense in due time or make as much sense as it possibly can. The two men acquiesce to their friend. They try to order a round of drinks but are told it doesn't gel with the process. They are allowed water. The Almighty assures them they'll be OK to drink again after dinner, that in fact, they'll be well positioned to do so. He doesn't elaborate. And the two men further acquiesce.

The Almighty orders for the table as a man with tattered clothes and a lice-ridden beard, a representative of Homeless Union 2098, serves them a carafe of water. No one complains. The three men toast to world harmony, sincerely. The street occupant grumbles and shuffles away. Their IV lines dangle from a gurgling communal bag, propped up on a metal rod with a flat base on small trolley wheels. The kind of rig you'd see in a hospital. On the metal base is a bumper sticker that reads MEAT IS XENOPHOBIC. The three men engage in their version of chitchat.

Two of the friends tell S. M. Cocksure that he needs to get his drinking under control, that he needs to get back to attending meetings, that he was better off earning chips. Plus, that no one in this world particularly cares that he has a big unit.

Two of the friends tell That Handsome Devil that it's truly embarrassing for a man his age, with his gorgeous family and idyllic life, to be running around cheating on his much-better half. That he's courting disaster and needs to quit the shit.

Two of the friends tell The Almighty Dollar that he needs to stop being a pussy and propose to his boyfriend already, who by all accounts sounds patient and amazing and clearly marriage material. They remind The Almighty there are other barometers for happiness and success apart from money.

None of them really argue with the complaints levied against them—their conversation taking place over the restaurant's PA system, which toggles between nineteenth-century Austrian music, the occasional rat-a-tat-tat of AR-15 fire, and the occasional pop-pop-pop of a glock-glock-glock. Sporadic RPG blasts. Passersby at street level scurry when they hear those muffled noises, pull up their coat collars against the bad vibes of such an archaic institution. They can't get away fast enough while the patrons inside are nonplussed by the staccato or, at the very least, quickly grow accustomed to it.

The men say what they wanted to say to one another, respectively, then they are free to discuss sports. To recount the fake football game they watched only a few hours ago. Then dinner arrives. Their entrée is set in the middle of the table, a crystalline structure that looks as though it were made of clouded glass. Thin metal skewers are placed before the men: no plates, no napkins, no other utensils. They are not needed. They are told, "Bon appetit." Their union representative refills water glasses past the rim. The hostess/nurse checks their IV lines, their electronic bracelets. She flicks the gurgling bag with her pointer finger, jostling the fluid. Satisfied, possibly dispelling air bubbles, she leaves the men to their meal. Or whatever it's supposed to be.

The Almighty takes a skewer and firmly plants it into a branching area of the structure, plucks off a section, and places it in his mouth. Despite appearances, it's not crunchy or sharp; it's not rock candy, even if it bears some resemblance. It actually melts rapidly, your tongue

doing most of the work, your teeth mostly moot. He encourages his friends to follow suit. They do. They all experience different tastes, mouth feels. Their minds adjust to the new sensations, the new experience. Their electronic bracelets whirl with life. Their cell phones transmit data. They winnow down the structure, their entrée, with those thin metal rods, until nothing remains but a pristine plate underneath. They are surprisingly full despite the lightness of the crystals, the liquification that took place in their mouths. Their eyes are dilated. Their cognition heightened. It feels like they've been administered a B₁₂ shot. Ingested neotropics. They are very much sated, and their blood now courses with an iron richness that feeds their muscles and connective tissue. Their bones feel calcified. In aggregate, they feel fucking great after the meal, if that's what you want to call it.

The two men look to The Almighty Dollar, who just shrugs his shoulders in mock humility, in humble-brag victory.

"It's how everyone will be eating thirty years from now," says The Almighty. "Maybe fifty."

"How'd you learn about this place?" asks That Handsome Devil.

"The secretary of agriculture."

"The tech made my very last piece taste like carrot cake. I fucking love carrot cake," says Cocksure, spinning the electronic bracelet around his wrist. "Now let's get a real drink somewhere." He removes his own IV.

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They go to a club featuring preposterously loud EDM and feel old and out of place within milliseconds of arriving but would rather not cop to it aloud. Instead they attempt to blend in. That Handsome Devil makes for the bar and purchases three bottles of beer just to give them something to sip on, a prop for their hands. The Almighty Dollar has snuck off to the bathroom, and it's anyone's guess what he's really doing in there. S. M. Cocksure, the least deterred by the generation gap, stands on the fringe of the dance floor, which undulates like a living organism, shedding and assimilating new bodies into its host. There is a certain appeal to it, the absence of questions and judgment, but there are also a lot of MDMA and microdoses pulsing through these fruitlings, elevating them to euphoric states, keeping the scene oh so accepting.

Cocksure's on the precipice, looking like he wants to join in, looking like a jelly doughnut kid on the high-diving board making up his mind to take the plunge. He's not really wearing the shoes for it, but his body is moving a bit, the EDM infecting his inhibitions. He's also drunk and still pulling from his flask, so that helps. That Handsome Devil joins him on the fringe and hands off a beer. They look at the kaleidoscope flashing over the hundreds of bodies scrunched together, the DJ spinning her cacophony atop her altar, casting down upon the masses like a high priestess, her sermon in decibels. These kids and their heart-pump, light-speed devotion. Hard to begrudge them their faith. Devil and Cocksure see the charm in it and pull from their bottles and are loosening up, even if they are overdressed in their greatcoats they refused to check, even if they are oldish and touristy and no longer cut from the same cloth.

“Now this is a true performance,” Cocksure yells, pointing to the DJ. “We’re watching a real artist at work.”

The Almighty Dollar finds the two just as the sergeant major pulls the pin and enters the fray, throwing his arms up to dance with the future, young hands already embracing and stroking his beard, rubbing his shaved head. No climbing down the ladder now. Accompanying The Almighty is a young girl who would appear normal if not for her eyes pinballing around in their sockets. Devil suspects pharmaceuticals are at play. And The Almighty looks a scooch tuned up, so it may very well be his handiwork. Plus, it’s not Dollar’s MO to bring strange women into the fold; that’s more of a Devil thing. He hands The Almighty the beer he bought for him. They clink bottles. To speak with one another, they must scream at the top of their lungs over the digital homilies.

“We need to get the fuck out of this soft target,” yells The Almighty Dollar. “There’s something this girl wants to show us.”

“I’m sure there is. But who is she?”

“Honest Conversation. She had a little run-in with an unruly underboss of Homeless Union 3485 that I helped subsidize,” says The Almighty. “She wants to repay the kindness in full, to show us something at the university.”

On the dance floor, Cocksure’s got his bandaged hands in the air, gyrating his body, giving zero fucks about it.

“I thought we’re supposed to be leery of anything that promises an honest conversation. Or an open dialogue, for that matter,” says That Handsome Devil. “You know this as well as I.”

“This is different,” says The Almighty, pinching and scratching at his nose. “It’s not just something they let anybody watch.”

Honest Conversation nods her head rigorously in affirmation, probably drug addled.

And That Handsome Devil didn’t breeze into town to *not* let strange, attractive women take him to undisclosed locations.

“All right, I’ll grab the sergeant major and meet you two outside.”

They meet outside. The four of them walk towards a cluster of campus buildings pinned along the main quad. After ten minutes, their path grows narrow, labyrinthian, and the three men trail Honest Conversation, utterly dependent on her jittery navigation, her night-vision sonar. None of the friends can remember this many nooks and crannies during their own school days. It’s odd. It feels endless and suspicious and indifferent to physical law, morphing of its own free will—though real all the same; they can feel the tall, Gothic-style buildings at street level with their hands. They can feel the varying tracks of concrete and cobblestone under their thinly padded loafers. They know it’s real. It’s just weird that this path exists out in the open, for any and all to take. If you know how to take it. If you know where it leads. So they resign themselves to the experience and follow behind the sway of Honest Conversation’s gravity-defiant ass that reminds Devil of an unripened cherry.

Eventually, the three men are led into a cramped courtyard—*A perfect kill box to be properly ambushed*, thinks Cocksure—and are instructed to climb a flight of metal hanging

stairs, a makeshift fire escape really, until they are sitting on the first-floor concrete ledge, side by side like gargoyles—which there actually are further down the corners of the building. They're high up enough for their feet to swing freely, their heels clicking against the back wall. Once they're situated, Honest Conversation instructs them to sit and stay. They've lost all their leverage to disobey. She disappears. They wait. Cocksure takes a pull from his flask and passes it to his compadres. They wait. They drink the good stuff. It's dark in the courtyard, and visibility is low, but they can tell there are other observers perched like iron-gird workers throughout the interior buildings. They can see the occasional cell phone flash. Or catch some whisper on the wind, constantly kicking up in full gale. It's not overly comfortable. There are murmurs and rumblings faintly echoing about. Impatience in the air.

Everyone is waiting on this—whatever *this* is.

Until scurrying can be heard on the ground floor of the courtyard and bursts of flames begin to ignite, fires burning out of metal barrels. There are four of them, set into the corners of the courtyard, casting off a glow that helps illuminate what's actually taking place. A group of eight young people, student aged, file into the courtyard and take their places in chalked, numbered squares. Eight squares. Eight bodies. There are five men. Three women. All are in their underwear. It is well past sunset and freezing and windy and raw. The kids are shivering badly; even the heat off the distant drums isn't enough to combat the elements. They look pensive, nervous. They are not excited. The three men look to each, not quite sure they like what they're seeing or will approve of what's to happen next. The vibe is tricky to read. And in their own ways, they calculate in their minds what they'll have to do to get these kids out of whatever situation they've landed in. Then feathers start dropping into the courtyard—a lot of feathers, a full-on weather pattern of them. All the observers dangling on the buildings pull out their cell phones and train their cameras on the kids holding still in their chalk boxes. Pixels of light. Digital filming. The observers brushing off stray feathers, silently bearing witness like some court of owls. The three men still don't know what to make of it. Should the cameras make them more at ease? Then some wind picks up and the intent is revealed: the feathers float through the burning fires, ignite, and continue to drift throughout the courtyard like cinder. Accumulating fireflies. They float wherever they will. Embers. Wherever the wind will take them.

They float into the half-naked kids stationed in their chalk boxes—where they are forced to swat them away, the ones who can be detected—but since the wind swirls the feathers in all directions, there are some that can't be intercepted until they make contact with blindsided bodies.

That's when the screams begin.

That's when some of the kids abandon their boxes.

That's when handlers sprint from the shadows to muffle the exited kids into fire-retardant blankets.

Other kids hang in there. They yelp, their cries sharp. Their vulnerable skin bearing the brunt of it. At times, the feathers lessen, then they are replenished, a fresh rainfall of them. It becomes extremely clear that there are people on top of the buildings tossing down bags of these

feathers, probably collected from gutter birds, city pigeons, more than likely coated with a mild accelerant.

Literally adding fuel to the fire.

There's a woman wearing a utility cord as a belt, and she's going around stoking the four fires with a metal rod. Another union worker stays hidden in the darkness of a Gothic doorway, armed with two fire extinguishers in case something goes wrong. As if something hasn't gone wrong already. As if tackle football had become too tame and this is what the university has replaced it with. Perhaps this involves less CTE.

The observers must be wary of burning feathers approaching them—also ready to swat them away.

There's more than enough infrastructure and preparation to suggest this is far from the first time this event has taken place.

There is no moon out tonight—the moon wants no part in this.

From somewhere, elsewhere, a dog howls.

“Oh, I get what's going on,” says That Handsome Devil.

“Really?” says The Almighty Dollar.

“No, not fucking really,” replies Devil. The two look to the sergeant major as if he may have the answer, like maybe he's seen something like this overseas.

But Cocksure just mutters to himself about having a huge something or other and finishes the last of the flask, dangerously close to red lining, barely paying attention to the kids in the courtyard. As though he's bored by it. If he starts bringing up his confirmed kill count, invokes the actual number, then he'll turn into the city's problem for sure.

The number of participants winnows down over the next ten minutes until eventually, all that remains, the last man standing, is some stout lad in Box #2, covered in welts and first-degree burns. Then it's over. Just like that. The feathers stop falling. The fire cans are doused. The video stops recording as the lights flick out. The owls stir and leave without words or fanfare. All the observers and handlers and participants clear out. Honest Conversation is nowhere to be seen. All that remains are the three men, propped on a century-old ledge, unsure exactly what they just witnessed. Art? Sport? Gambling? Rite of passage? Hazing? They are unsure where on the spectrum from acceptable to unacceptable what they just witnessed would fall. Unsure exactly how they should feel about the whole thing. Unsure if all the participants were willing. Unsure about a lot of things.

But quite sure they're glad they saw it, that they're better off for it.

* * *

They are, in fact, the last to leave the courtyard, and it takes them forever to twist and turn their way back to civilization without Honest Conversation leading the charge. The Almighty refuses to use his phone as a guide as though it might cheapen the experience. They eventually make it onto Foxglove and feel moored back in reality. That Handsome Devil plucks a business card that's stuck to the underside of his loafer; it reads “Sparrows Gate”—nothing else. He feels it's

connected with the business back in the courtyard, a clue. It won't be forgotten anytime soon. It's beyond late, well past closing time and the streets reflect it, hardly a soul around. The buildings are dim. The sky utterly cleared out. A lone dog ambles with an odd gait barely within eyeshot of the three men, who look to each other, still at a loss for words at the weirdness they just saw. That Handsome Devil removes his leather gloves and blows hot breath onto bare skin—goes for a cigarette but has left his pack back in the hotel room. Cocksure is finger-gunning imaginary bullets into street lamps. The Almighty Dollar appraises a storefront with a FOR SALE sign in the window, wonders what the property tax would be on it.

The city is so quiet at this hour, it's as if the anti-noisers have actually prevailed, that they've taken back the night, rewound the decibels. That Handsome Devil clears his throat of residual consternation.

"I miss my wife and kids in the most grievous of ways right now," he says.

"Of course you do," says S. M. Cocksure. "How could you not after seeing *that*?"

"It's funny, 'cause seeing that doesn't make me feel so at odds with this world," says The Almighty Dollar. "I see where things are heading, and if that's it, I want to be there."

"What's your assessment, Sergeant Major?" asks Devil.

Cocksure rubs his hand against the grain of his beard in tight semicircles, asymmetrical patterns that lend to his already hardscrabble appearance. He ponders the legitimate question volleyed his way.

"Fallujah was more normal than this city at times," says Cocksure. "But it also seems kind of OK. Maybe I will dry out on beer for a couple months, see if it takes."

The wind has died down, loosening its hold on the city's bones, offering a modicum of relief to the few gonzo souls still haunting her streets. A peaceful moment occurs.

Short lived.

Because before any of the men can suggest finally calling it a night and heading back to the hotel, a Tesla rips around the corner of Bacon Block onto Foxglove, and clips that lone dog, knocking its body into some hedges, then speeds off as if the whole thing didn't happen. As if a hit-and-run didn't just take place. True to his MO, Cocksure chases after the Tesla on foot—but after a half mile, this yields no fruit. There are no other cars or traffic lights worth obeying that would impede the car's getaway. S. M.'s pursuit is moot. Cameras have surely documented this, but will anyone care to leverage the evidence? Would anyone give a hoot about some stray mutt?

That Handsome Devil and The Almighty Dollar sprint toward the hedges and gingerly pull out the dog, too weak to protest the intrusion of foreign, human hands. There is blood and mangle and shred everywhere. There is the low whimpering of a wounded spirit that has been done wrong, that has done no wrong to deserve this. It doesn't understand. There is fear and confusion in its eyes. It is a very, very bad scene.

Cocksure catches back up with his friends, giving up on the asshole driving the Tesla. There is a new problem to address—this is their new problem, at present, to fix. That Handsome Devil removes his greatcoat and bundles the injured dog in its warmth. They think it's a greyhound or some similar breed. Small yips of pain are released from the dog as it's swaddled

in the coat. Then Cocksure, quickly sobered, picks up the dog from the ground, cradling it in his arms, pressing it to his thumping chest. He's assessing. He feels like he's back on the battlefield, the muscle memory impossible to snip away. The Almighty Dollar is already on his phone, looking up 24-7 veterinary clinics in the city, tapping into satellites and geo-mapping applications until he finds one only five blocks away, another offshoot of Foxglove, back in the direction of the stadium.

They race for the vet, The Almighty's phone leading the way.

Six minutes later, they arrive at the clinic, breathless and banging on the metal-framed door in a way that suggests urgency but hopefully not so panicked it would deter someone from answering. A tricky situation given the circumstances: the lateness of the hour, the adrenaline coursing through them, the dying animal in tow. They can only hope that a place advertised as 24-7 is exactly that. That there is truly some kind of attendant—clinician—waiting inside for just this type of emergency. The men don't know; they've never needed a vet at four a.m. before.

They only have to wait a minute or so before the door is unlocked, clicked open on squeaky hinges, and a woman in the soft autumn of her life, with long, graying brown hair down to the small of her back, appears in the doorway and spirits the three men and the wounded dog inside.

“What's happened?” she asks, guiding the men through the clinic, through what appears to be the pound section of the building where other dogs and animals are housed, many of them now awake and adding to the commotion. They are led further down a hallway into an observation room, where Cocksure is instructed to lay the dog down on the metal table, which he does, gently, keeping Devil's coat under it as a cushion.

“Hit by a car. We saw the whole thing,” says That Handsome Devil.

The doctor takes this in—her eyes are sharp, hardly dulled by the late hour; they could split atoms—and in their sharpness, she reveals little.

The three men hover around her as she examines the dog until she politely asks them if they could move back a few paces, just to give her a little more room. They do so. Under the sterile light of the room, the blaring layers of white paint slapped on the walls, the blood stains coating Cocksure stand out even more. Hard to see outside, they are far more pronounced in this room. There is a lot of blood. Stains that are evidence of something real and terrible that has just occurred. They are the harbinger of what they're afraid to say aloud, of what the outcome may be.

The three men nervously shift from foot to foot, in this room that feels surgically clean. Where surgeries have undoubtedly taken place, emergency surgeries. They are perhaps on the cusp of the room's next emergency surgery. Things that have lived and died. A surgery that will spare the dog's life.

From the metal table, the dog's lean head angles toward the men, a snarled tooth caught and broken over its mouth, yielding a sinister look, offering a false narrative. The truth is in the eyes. In the milky swirl, the wet sheen, the incomprehension of what's transpired, of what these four humans are on about. The masters of the world. Top of the destroyer class. Is there enough

mercy in the world? Does the dog have enough cognition left to know they are trying to help? That they are not a cog in the meat grinder? Its eyes don't betray much lucidity, comfort—its breathing is shallow, and it lets out a baleful gurgle, the heave of its rib cage lessening, ears gone flaccid. A tail that refuses to wag.

“Doc . . .” attempts That Handsome Devil, his voice cracking, losing the will to construct the words.

“Any amount of money it takes, Doctor,” says The Almighty Dollar. “Absolutely any amount to heal it.”

Cocksure doesn't say anything; he's just staring at his blood-soaked clothing, his bandaged hands, muttering the same number over and over again to himself: “Eighty-seven, eighty-seven, eighty-seven.”

The veterinarian concludes her examination, the last aspect of it focused on some bone fragment that has slightly penetrated and jutted through the flesh of the dog's left flank. A massive problem, compounded with all the other injuries she's catalogued during her examination of the poor little mongrel. She lets out a sigh of air that's been accumulating in her lungs, unbeknown. She turns to face the three men. And now it's her eyes that betray the story and confirm what they've feared to be true, what is inevitable.

“I'm afraid there is nothing to be done,” she says, solemnly, professionally.

The Almighty Dollar feebly goes for his wallet, dips into the index of no-limit credit cards named after precious metals and fruits.

The doctor waves him off—money cannot fix this.

“I'll adopt the dog,” says That Handsome Devil, frantically, desperately. “I'll bring it to my home, and it will become a member of our family. That will save it; that will make it whole.”

The doctor kindly shakes her head no. She explains that the dog probably wouldn't survive even being lifted off the metal table. Its respiration continues to weaken, is almost imperceptible. It has relieved its bladder on the table into the coat under its body.

“I'm going to find the owner of that Tesla and make him number eighty-eight,” says Cocksure.

The doctor doesn't say anything to this, doesn't know what it means but can tell Cocksure believes in what he's saying. That she wouldn't want to be the person who drove the Tesla. She lets a few beats pass. The atmosphere in the examination room now bloated with despair, with options that have quickly run out. As if the men never had a real chance to save this poor creature from the start. As though it were hopeless from the jump. The dog chokes slightly on its own dying process. It's hard to watch, to suss out logically.

“There's not much time left,” says the doctor. “Maybe you all want to be around the table as our friend leaves us?”

What does one do? There is no amount of money or family or revenge that can undo the injustice that has taken place. They slowly move around the table, gently laying their hands on the dog, its matted coat, lacerated body. The doctor shows compassion, guidance; she's been here before; she knows the tenor to strike. The men less so. There is a driftlessness. They don't

cry in front of this stranger, this female veterinarian. Or each other. They don't even want to show that kind of vulnerability in front of the car-stricken dog. Maybe they will once alone in the bathroom of the airplane. Or back in their toolshed or private office with frosted black-out windows you can control by remote. Maybe they'll release that emotion over a creature they'd never met before, never had any real connection with—but the question is who's going to give them permission to do so?

Then the dog's respiration stops. With so many benevolent hands resting on its frame, the dog dies as peacefully as possible, given the inglorious mode of its death.

There is nothing to hear but the electric hum of the overhead lights.

"It's over," says the doctor, very gently. "It's all over."

From the pound section of the clinic, the other dogs start up again, barking and wailing as if they know one of their own has just departed.

What does one do?

In his grief, heavy and viper fast, That Handsome Devil slumps into a corner chair and refuses to look at anybody. He covers that beautiful face with his large hands as if he never wants to see or be seen, ever again.

In his impotence, The Almighty Dollar throws his cell phone into a metal basin—a sink—and lets its broken and exposed components rattle around the dry hollow, destroyed. "Big fucking deal," he screams aloud, to all of them, to none of them in particular. "I'll just buy a dozen more."

His outburst goes uncommented on.

In his anger, S. M. Cocksure streaks the dog's blood like war paint over his face, still wet and warm and glistening on his own clothing. He fantasizes about what he'd do to the person responsible. The others wordlessly watch him. He continues to dab at his face, under his eyes, then applies just a bit of the dog's blood to his tongue, a small scrap of the tiny soul now wedded with him. His nose crinkles. A curious look creeps over his face. He dabs again, tastes, and re-tastes. The whites of his eyes expand. He then looks to the doctor, still roiling over with emotion, though a sharp, trajectory shift is clicking into place, a recalibration.

"Why does this blood taste like cotton candy?" asks Cocksure.

To this, the doctor says nothing as Cocksure imbibes more of the dog's blood from his clothes, off the metal table and soaked coat.

"I'll repeat. Why does this dog's blood taste like cotton candy?"

He takes a lone, aggressive step in the doctor's direction.

On cue, from the doorway scoots in a young man, midtwenties, dressed in tweed and wearing horn-rimmed glasses, clapping his hands together in triumph, in a jovial and disarming fashion, repeating aloud the mantra, "OK, yup, yup, OK, yup, yup, OK, yup, yup. Allow me to explain."

The young man in tweed stands in between Cocksure and the doctor, the other two men on the periphery, the dead dog on the table. Everyone is more than ready for an explanation.

“So you see, my postgraduate thesis was centered around animals and their impact on us, as well as morality and the ubiquitous presence of digital media in art,” says the young man, this apparent graduate student. “Though, in fairness, all disciplines seem to address the intersection of something or other and electronics.”

Silence in the room, residual barking from the hallway.

That Handsome Devil gets up from the chair he’d sequestered himself in.

“What the fuck is baby professor talking about?” he asks.

“Ha, too right; my name is actually Trick Mirror and . . .” But That Handsome Devil puts two fingers to his lips, pantomiming silence—he looks to Cocksure to continue his thread.

“This isn’t a real dog,” says Cocksure. “This is an experiment, a project. We’re in his performance art.”

They all look to the dead dog on the table that sure seemed real only moments ago. Still does.

“I just want to say how wonderful you three were,” says the doctor. “That you’ll really show our audience just how much the patriarchy still has to offer. I’m Cries on Command, by the way. A pleasure.”

She bows semi-theatrically.

“You’re an actor,” says The Almighty Dollar. “And by audience, you mean this *thing* is streaming on YouTube right now?”

“YouTube is for kitten and how-to videos,” says Trick Mirror. “No, we’ll be posting this on NoConSent once I can do some sound editing and other boring post-production stuff.”

On the lapel of Trick Mirror’s jacket is a small pin that reads MEAT IS ELITIST.

“This doesn’t make any sense. It’s a dog. We saw it walking around,” says That Handsome Devil. “We saw it get hit by the car. There’s blood; there’s piss.”

“This model is on loan from the university’s robotics department. Pretty amazing what they can do over there,” says Trick Mirror. “And to think this one is already two generations behind. All but obsolete.” He pats the dog’s lifeless belly. But was it ever alive?

“Don’t fucking touch it,” says That Handsome Devil to Trick Mirror.

“Pardon,” says Trick Mirror, a bit confused. “Anyway, you guys weren’t really supposed to know that. The engineers in robotics will be disappointed you figured it out.”

“I’m sure they didn’t account for someone actually tasting the dog’s blood,” says Cries on Command. “It should be an easy fix for them, I’d imagine.”

Trick Mirror nods his head in agreement, mentally cataloguing the note he’ll need to pass along to robotics. S. M. Cocksure inches up on him, sharing in the young man’s inexplicable mirth, putting his hand on a tweedy shoulder and giving it a playful squeeze. Like they’re new best buddies—like they’re on the same wavelength.

“Yeah, I suppose your thesis didn’t account for someone who’s had a lot of experience with real blood,” says Cocksure. “And I mean *a lot* of experience with tasting blood.”

The sergeant major promptly cracks Trick Mirror in the nose: a sharp, clean jab, busting it wide-the-fuck open and spraying blood all over the place, actual human blood, already mixing

with the fake-robot corn-syrup blood soaked into Cocksure's greatcoat. Trick Mirror folds and crumples to the ground in a pool of tweed. Noises from a real wounded animal ensue. Cries on Command lets out a little yelp and brisk-walks toward the doorway, the only exit—but her path is cut off by the other two men, shaking their heads slowly at her. They are far from amused. She looks to them, then to Cocksure, massaging his already bandaged hands—she grows nervous, the gist sinking in.

“We're still recording,” ekes out Cries on Command, waving her hands all over the room, the clinic, the city, the world—as if it wasn't the most obvious notion spoken, as if the surveillance wasn't just a given, a fact of life in this millennium.

Something dark has taken over the room, and all the cameras in the world aren't going to lessen it, and this realization isn't lost on any of the parties involved. Particularly the actor.

So what does one do?

“I guess the thesis proposed it would be huh-larious to make us feel something,” says That Handsome Devil, his words squarely directed at Cries on Command, who is trembling a bit, not unlike the way the robotic dog was programmed to.

“I'm just a bit player, the straight man,” says Cries on Command. “I teach at the community theater over on Juniper and Whetstone Way. It wasn't my intention to make you feel anything. That was the dog's job.”

“Oh, but you did mean to,” says The Almighty Dollar. “You're a part of the installment. You're culpable.”

The fake doctor's throat contracts.

“Why us?” asks That Handsome Devil.

Her throat releases.

“I don't know the full details; it was always going to happen on short notice,” says Cries on Command. “This was Trick Mirror's project. But he said it all depended on an Honest Conversation, that nothing gets accomplished without one.”

The men look to each other; they'd let their guards down, were taken in by the splendor of that odd game in the courtyard and were sucked into a sparse open dialogue—targeted since the nightclub. They'd failed to heed their own advice. Time-tested maxims. Never trust an Honest Conversation. Or someone who says one is needed. Or offers to initiate one. She'd recruited them and set Trick Mirror's thesis into motion. Her agenda. Her livelihood.

She was exquisite in its execution.

The three men return their attention to the false veterinarian, the true actor.

“There's a question I need you to ask yourself, Cries on Command,” says S. M. Cocksure, so close in her face now that he can smell the moisturizer clogging her pores, sees the flecks of gold in her hazel eyes. “Do you want equality in this moment? And what I mean by that is, do you want to be treated the same way I would treat a man if he were standing in your shoes? Sort of the way that water balloon down there was once standing in his shoes not so long ago.”

They all instinctively look to Trick Mirror stirring uneasily on the floor, real blood trickling from his really broken nose.

“Ooooooor,” says Cocksure, holding the moment. “Is a modicum of good ole’-fashioned misogyny in order?”

It’s a for-real question. S. M. is being more than serious, and Cries on Command knows it and takes a few moments of stunned silence to understand that this man coated in real and fake blood is pressing his modern feminism on her belief system—that he fully intends to slug her in the face, to drop her unconscious, if that’s the equality she seeks, the progress that gets preached to. If that’s what she really wants. It’s her decision to make. It’s entirely up to her.

“I think the second option would work best,” says Cries on Command contritely.

And to everyone’s relief, including Cocksure’s, the tension deescalates. The atmosphere softens.

“Why don’t you attend to Trick Mirror for a little bit, keep pretending you’re a doctor of animals,” says Cocksure. “Maybe don’t come out of this room for more than a few minutes.”

She nods. The sergeant major motions with his head, and the three men leave the room, closing the door behind them, that Handsome Devil leaving behind his coat under the fake dog. They slowly move through the clinic and its hallways and are almost to the front door when Devil tells them to hold up, to prop the front door open and wait for him there. They do so. And Devil proceeds to the pound section and opens every cage to the condemned animals and ushers them out of their imprisonment, shooing them through the open front door into their new freedom, even if it may be short lived. But freedom all the same. Fifty-plus dogs and cats, set loose onto the city streets as the sun starts to climb over the horizon, peeking around the buildings once again.

S. M. and The Almighty nod their heads in approval—the emancipation of these animals is just.

None of them are quite sure where all the cameras are, but they know they’re there. They know the content is getting vacuumed up, stored, chronicled. Maybe it will make it into Trick Mirror’s narrative; maybe the whole thing will be uploaded to NoConSent in a matter of hours, after he deals with post-production and gets his nose reset. Maybe his thesis will be a big hit. Maybe the city ambassadors will come for Cocksure on assault and possible kidnapping charges. Maybe Cries on Command will let the latter charge slide. Maybe they’ll return to the hotel and catch a few hours of sleep. Maybe they’ll stick to their original plan and spend much of Sunday exploring the university. Maybe Devil will find a shop to purchase a new coat. The Almighty a new phone. Cocksure a CPAP machine. Maybe they’ll meet up with Eye on the Prize for brunch. Maybe they’ll just get the fuck out of Dodge. Maybe they’ll finally learn the truth about solar energy. Maybe they’ll escape the Broad Brush. Maybe they deserve it. Maybe they don’t. Maybe it’s the men who have changed. Maybe it’s the city. Maybe both. Maybe. Probably. But still, maybe.

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