

SUMMER CULLING

VOLUME TWO

A COLLECTION OF SHORT HORRORS BY

JON

SMITH

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Congratulations, this first edition of *Summer Culling* is self-edited! If you cannot abide the occasional typo, turn back! A professionally edited edition will be released in Summer of 2027, alongside the physical pressing.

S U M M E R
C U L L I N G

V O L U M E T W O

B Y

J O N S M I T H

*This collection is dedicated to my mother and
father, without whom I would never have had
the opportunity to rediscover that I enjoy living.*

P A S S A G E S

FLESH CANNON	6
CASCADE	16
GENIUS	27
CAT'S EYE	49
CRANE GAME	63
W.O.O.F.	87
CLEAN SLATE	110
THANK YOU	125

F L E S H C A N N O N

The first time Stig Wilder was human sacrificed, it was, admittedly, terrifying. All he felt now was annoyance at both himself and his captors. That, and the searing pain of being nailed to a cross.

“Guys,” Stig croaked, then cleared his throat. “You’re gonna be, like, my baker’s dozen for dipshits who’ve tried ta use me this way. Once again, whatever you’re hoping to achieve: Not Gonna Happen. Ya hear me?”

The figures, robed and hooded in blue and yellow silks, continued marching in their strange conga line around him while muttering a rhythmic chant. They ignored Stig as much as they did the wind whipping up over the edge of the cliff-side, flecking their cloaks with ice. Stig shouted, “Ya hear me, ya mad fucks??”

The weathered immortal sighed, decided arguing wasn't worth the effort. He leaned back into the crisscross they'd constructed, tried to get comfortable.

A crisscross was what Stig called the sacrificial apparatus he was currently nailed to through the wrist, heels, shoulder, and hip. Instead of having both his arms spread out like the traditional Judeo-Christian method of putting someone to death, his left arm was across his chest and stomach, a thick iron nail connecting the wrist to his right hip. His left leg was kicked out at a ninety degree angle. A fifth larger spike had been put through his left thigh. Crisscross was but one of the many deviations from a basic, *boring* cross, but the end result was mostly the same. *They're all the same*, Stig muttered in his mind.

The truth was Stig had experienced his own murder far more times than he could recall. He'd been ten when the world went weird, could not remember what occurred during that time, nor the following two decades. All the knowledge he had of that time was secondhand, told mostly through scripture.

What Stig *did* know was that his ability to die was, at some point, taken from him. The how and the why still eluded him.

On a related note, anyone who:

- 1. wasn't a dumbass kid when Carrington hit and*
- 2. is still breathing*

Well... Stig believes they're all batshit insane. Whatever they glimpsed during that mad week has given them a cosmic case of Green Grass Syndrome. This is what Stig calls the human habit of perpetual dissatisfaction, the insatiable desire for pastures greener than thine own (his words). He plans to write a book. Maybe in a century or two, he often muses.

Perhaps it was destiny, or a cruel joke from the cosmos, but these psychos always seemed to find Stig. Or maybe Stig found them. Either way, they believed he was their way off this rock. All they had to do was dress up his murder, position themselves in a geometric pattern around his vessel, and voila, the interdimensional journey would begin.

It was also possible Stig's inability to die was a cosmic cancer, his mere existence poisoning the minds of those around him like he was leaking carbon monoxide. Perhaps before he arrived in the sleepy mountain town of Kingwood, his captors had been normal, every day people. Perhaps his arrival a few months back had created these psychos.

All of these theories—and more!—Stig anguished over in his mind to no end. He very much wished he knew any of the

rules surrounding this Undying curse of his. He'd love to stop having to watch people's brains melt out of their faces when they tried to kill him.

His current captors had ambushed him in town, but hauled him out to a beautiful overlook, which Stig regarded as a silver lining. *No one else has to die.* The line of hooded cultists stood atop an oval platform built along the crest of a ridge. The stone archways ringing the brick floor were rather ornate, Stig saw. Huge white stone, every centimeter busy with starscape etchings. The night sky was hidden behind dark clouds. The coverage was so dense, even the ever present auroras added little color. A light snow began to fall. *Fuckin heck, I'm freezin,* Stig thought. He was naked, after all.

They were in the mountains of Appalachia, *not Apalacha,* Stig thought pointedly, recalling the many signs in town. Most locals Stig met in his travels had never learned to read or write. In the handful of decades since the storm, public education had yet to make a resurgence. Most settlements named after old world places were founded with a misspelling. Few were ever fixed.

It was this irksome detail that had led to his attending local council meetings, which then led to his rubbing elbows with the neighborhood's powers-that-be. *How many of them are here now, their familiar faces hidden behind robes?* Stig realized his mind was wandering, decided he should remain

present—at least until he was alone again. *Respect the soon-to-be dead*, he prayed.

Almost in response to his internal shift back to reality, the oblong circle of hooded figures ceased marching. They collectively turned to center. Stig felt a wave of light-headedness, remembered he'd been leaking blood for close to half an hour now.

"May the alignment commence," A shrill voice called from behind the cross, and a cacophony of wooden chairs scooting across stone filled the air. A moment later, the friction of wood on wood and a metal click sounded, and suddenly Stig was flipping backward.

"Christ on a crack-UH," Stig shouted until the wind was knocked out of him when he slammed into the new inverted position.

The wooden cross he was bolted to was, apparently, on some sort of hinge. The pain of being nailed to a sacrificial cross flared, the inertia of his relocated vessel being dispensed across half a dozen iron spikes. Bleary eyed, Stig tilted his eyes down, saw his foot was pointed up at the moon. Though not intending to speak, he groaned, "you're all the goddamn same..." His head spun, and in falsetto, he sang, "hooo..."

A large drum began a steady rhythm. *Thump-thump-thump*. The chanting returned, more charged now. Their

consonants began to crack like whips. Stig could not understand them, but recognized the tongue. *These dumb fuckers're love their Latin.*

His mind was beyond fuzzy. Trying to think felt like dragging a body through the mud. With his brain devoid of oxygen, and his flesh on the brink of collapse, Stig finally began to relax.

"Yall better get to it soon," a small part of his mind tried to say, believed it had. In reality, the warning had come out as a wheeze, a few syllables moaned softly.

"Fletch the cosmic arrow! Let us harvest the ripe fruit of the Longing! May it feed our journey to the Other Worlds!" *Bullshit, more bullshit.*

"To the other worlds," a chorus repeated from all around. *Sounds like they're in position. Only thing left now is...*

A dark shape filled Stig's dim, vignetted view of the world. *Finally*, he thought with a mental sigh, ready to get it over with.

"Steady, steady," a voice called, waiting on some signal from the great beyond, or possibly a stopwatch. "Now!"

Stig feels something both cold and hot enter his belly just at the waist. His nerves overload as the long blade presses down through his organs, then slides its way up his torso to jam into his sternum, the tip carving a jagged path along the

interior spine. He might be wailing, can't be sure. The pain is bright and whole.

Another shape—equally sharp but flatter, longer—buries itself in the center of his chest where his ribs meet. This occurs just as the first blade presses perpendicularly into his sternum. The two points of contact work together and suddenly Stig feels his rib cage snap open like a clam, can feel his insides blossoming out like a piñata from hell.

Stig feels his perception of reality expand out. He awes at the Appalachian Mountains in their entirety just before his mind bloops into two distinct realities. In this second place, his crisscross has been swapped for a simple pole atop a flaming pyre. *OUCH.*

Two become four, then eight, and so on. It is only during this small window of time, as the vessel expires, that he can consciously observe what happens to him whenever his body expires. A thousand lives, a million more, all bubble out of him like foam from the mouth of a crab. *Eugh*, Dream Stig thinks, and then he is everything.

Whenever Stig's vessel dies, it miraculously repairs itself. He has no say in the matter. If the body is well enough intact when this occurs, then it simply reverts after a delay, abused organs becoming new. Oftentimes, he's already been buried, has to punch his way to freedom.

If the Vessel of the Immortal Stig is *not* intact when the body expires... that's when things get messy. The pale man with the too long limbs can't be sure exactly what happens—as he is, y'know, dead and all—but repeatedly waking in the wet, stinky afterbirth of such an event has given him a pretty good idea of what went down.

Stig awoke from one of the best naps he had ever had. He'd dreamed himself a grizzled fishmonger stuck in a storm. "Embrace me," he'd cried to the great foamy wave as it engulfed his small fishing vessel, happy to finally return to the deep black. *I need to stop reading in bed. That's what the nook is for!*

It was only when he tried to roll onto his side did he become aware of how hard and slick his bed was. Cold wetness yinked off the veil of sleep, and suddenly he was smelling many smells.

Stig made the mistake of bringing his hand to his face to pinch his nose. In doing so, he smeared black ooze into his moustache. The naked man at the center of two dozen corpses rolled onto his stomach and began to dry heave. With each retch, faint glimpses of his cosmic vacation peeked through. A plumber. A wolf. A slug.

He was lying at the base of the cross he'd previously been nailed to. His skin was whole. Beside him, the corpses of two

brutes, ceremonial weapons still gripped in thick fists. Tongues lolled from slack jaws, their eye sockets nothing more than pits of black.

Stig brought his head up, surveilled the large platform in the middle of the woods. It had snowed while he was gone. The Sun wasn't up. He felt it was safe to assume it had been hours, not days. The other cultists were seated in a wide oval around the cross in high-backed chairs, all facing center. Their brains had also leaked out of their faces. Some had fallen to the cold stone, while other slouched as though they were merely napping. The white snow mingled with the black ichor. *Don't eat the grey snow*, Stig mused.

Shivering, the unkillable man hopped down the hill, back toward the expansive cabin he'd been lured to a few days prior. He would gather his things and try again. Had to.

After a childhood spent serving as the cosmic crook that his piece-of-shit father used to shepherd his murderous flock, all the young(ish) man wanted now was a quiet, peaceful existence. This was proving difficult, perhaps impossible.

Each time he'd found a place he liked, tried to settle, his attempt at self-domestication ended in violence and mortal consequence. *At least these fuckers took me out into the boonies before opening me up*. More than once, Stig had returned from death to find the whole village—many of them friends—wiped from the board.

He would not return to the small mountain town he'd settled into four months back, would never sleep in that glorious goose feather bed ever again. All the books he'd accrued, the relationships with locals, his favorite mug, the taste of Beverly upon his tongue... Stig stripped them from his mind, burned the memories to nothing just like the brains of the cultists. He did not rid his mind of the tales he'd read from the comfort of his nook, no! That would be foolish.

After gathering his things from the expansive lodge and pilfering their opulent pantry, Stig returned to the dais on the ridge. He pulled the ornamental hammeraxe and dagger from the hands of the widest men, the ones who'd sent him sailing. He packed the latter, used the former to smash the thick, iron nails from the heavy wood, bundled them together in a cloth and stuffed them in his pack.

He doused cooking oil on as much of the sacrificial planks as he could, ignited it with a match. The screams that came were likely just moisture escaping through the pores of the wood, but he couldn't be sure.

"This rollin' stone will break yer bones, when I come a tumblin' though," he sang, cursing himself for existing as he marched in the opposite direction of his cozy little cottage in Kingwood, Apalacha.

CASCADE

In September 1770, a nine-day solar storm blanketed the Earth. Low-latitude auroras were documented across both hemispheres by multiple parties, scribes and scholars of various nations around the globe. This marks perhaps the earliest known conjugate sightings of a worldwide cosmic event. Not only did the storm last four times longer than the Carrington event of 1859, astronomers believe it to have been a much stronger geomagnetic storm as well.

Two years prior, in August of 1768, the HMS Endeavour set sail from England on a Voyage of Discovery around the world, spearheaded by the now famous Captain James Cook. The ship was moored off Timor Island (part of modern day Indonesia) when the auroras began in 1770.

One of the accounts used to confirm the solar storm of 1770 as historical fact was that of Joseph Banks, the botanist aboard the HMS Endeavour at the time. He wrote of blood red skies during the day, a sea of green and gold at night. While riveting at the time, the event was mostly overlooked upon their return to England the following year, an astronomical anecdote forgotten amongst a trove of scientific research.

This would be Joseph Banks' sole trip around the globe, and his last time serving on an expedition. For the next forty years, he acted as President of the Royal Society, the same organization that petitioned King George III to fund the Endeavour's Journey of Discovery.

In the summer of 1820, the famed patron of the natural sciences Joseph Banks passed peacefully in his bed in Isleworth, London.

On his final evening, Banks was tended to by a young steward by the name of Frederick Bloc. His father had gotten him the post, said it would earn him entry into the Royal Society. The budding man had squeezed cool water into Banks' mouth with a cloth, made sure he was comfortable in his final moments.

Two days later, the boy was found dead inside his home from a self-inflicted wound. The state of the room (and the

state of the boy's body) were kept from official record out of respect for the family.

On the anniversary of his death, not a soul was left to mourn Frederick Bloc, for every person whose eyes had lain upon his corpse was themselves deceased.

No one would ever know why the boy went mad, never connected his death to the cascade of tragedies that followed. Nor would they believe that the whispered mumblings of a dying man could cause such chaos.

* * * * *

On the morning of September 23rd, 1770, just after breakfast, Joseph Banks scaled the central mast of the HMS Endeavour. He was in search of dugong, though he was ignorant of the creature's name at the time. He knew they were like dolphins, but slow and fat with big, floppy lips.

They were so slow, in fact, Joseph had spotted algae growths upon one of their backs when he first spotted them the day before. He planned to spend the day following a pod around, presumed them to be herbivores who could give Joseph a tour of the local aquatic flora as they grazed.

The sky was still striped in miraculous ribbons of red from east to west, but that had been the case for nearly a week. Joseph had returned his curious gaze to the land and

sea. Then the sky went pitch black, and he couldn't help but look.

The red auroras were no longer transparent ribbons of light, but solid, glassy structures that seemed to grow and fold out from their centers like glowing leeks that were perpetually being peeled. These zigzagging spires of reflection and color spanned from every edge of the horizon to the center of the sky.

There, where the living lines converged, an entirely incompatible horror awaited Joseph's mortal eyes. A wreath of swirling flesh, layered in pus-swollen sores, writhed around a massive, wet black sphere that seemed to be actively pulling streams of light from the auroral streams, snuffing them out of existence. Then the black hole split at its center, and a X-shaped slit shone with a multitude of colors Joseph could not comprehend, their depth and dimension somehow conveying more than basic tone and hue.

Joseph, unable to comprehend what he was looking at, screamed within his mind, *An Eye! A Great Eye!*

He felt the impossible light and color wash over him, and his entire vessel began to vibrate. Painfully so. Joseph's eyebrows furrowed over widened lids, his lips curled, his mouth open in a scream while his throat fought to stay closed. The resulting sound was a shrill, grating, unending squeak, like throwing wet wood on a fire.

The experience lasted all of eleven seconds, though it felt much, *much* longer to the young naturalist. The instant it ceased, he thought maybe the event had occurred outside of time itself. Unable to comprehend what had just occurred, Joseph immediately fell into a fit of panting as he experienced the first panic attack of his life.

He clutched the netting and pressed his forehead to the mast as his mind descended into chaos. A while later, once the tornado of thoughts had ceased and his breathing had steadied, the memory of what exactly had *caused* the attack was entirely obscured within his mind.

In the evening, when it came time to document the day's activities within his personal journal, Joseph had entirely forgotten about the supernatural aspect to his panic attack atop the mast. Therefore, he was utterly confounded upon discovering that he physically could not move his hand to write the words. The quill stopped midsentence, every muscle in his hand locking up at once.

The sky remains a blend of gold and green and vibrant red. Though most of us have become accustomed to the auroras, the familiar sight has had dire effects on the morale of our Swedish companion.

Breakfast was local greens, two boiled eggs, and sauerkraut. Solander went on and on about a tobacco product he called snoose. Then he cried openly for all to see.

His complaining had more effect on my mood than I want to admit, as I too miss home. I decided to deviate from the day's plans and instead spend my morning watching the peculiar seacows I wrote of just yesterday.

With a full belly, I climbed the m—

Joseph gasped at the cramping of his hand, dropped the pen. He tried to start where he left off, found his hand stuck once again. When he tried to sound the word out as he wrote, his lips puckered and he began a low, wavering scratching sound, his voice never getting past the first consonant. "Mmmmm, muh-muh-MUUUH!"

Then Joseph Banks watched a drop of blood exit his nose and splatter onto the parchment. He instinctively skipped past the climbing of the mast, went ahead to the boarding of the row boat, and the overwhelming tension immediately unknotted.

Terrified by what had occurred, Joseph Banks proceeded with documenting the day's events, wrote around the circle of blood as it was slowly absorbed into the parchment. This same dread prevented him from thinking further on what had occurred, and after a restless night of tossing and turning

in his hammock, Joseph had mostly suppressed the previous day's lapses in sanity. *Of course I can write about what happened yesterday morning! How silly to think it was anything other than embarrassment at having lost myself up there on the mast. I guess I'm more afraid of heights than I thought! I don't need to prove I can write it by trying again. Indulging such nonsense would be a foolish endeavour. Hah—like this ship!*

For the rest of Joseph Baker's life, his memory of that morning on the mast would be a smoldering ember in his mind. To look at it required squinting. Trying to access that small sliver of time brought searing pain.

Even at the end, when he began to pass, Joseph Banks *still* had no intention of sharing the supernatural experience, didn't think he could if he wanted to.

Perhaps it was not Joseph's mind, but his dying vessel that spoke the forbidden words to the young Frederic Bloc on that warm night in 1820. Through half-lilted eyes, his mind balanced on the edge of sleep, his lips spoke of impossible things with each exhale.

Beside him, Frederic leaned in to listen to the words. His eyes widened as the recounting concluded, and Baker's words became babble. The young man felt nothing but intrigue at the time, was unaware of the psychic trauma simply hearing such a story would have on his mind.

The following day, Frederick chose his favorite pen and most expensive ink to document the tall tale he'd heard the night before. *In honor of the late Joseph Banks*, he wrote at the top of the page.

On only the third sentence, as he began to transcribe the description of the beast in the sky, Frederic squeezed his pen so hard it snapped in half. The steel nib buried itself in the young scholar's hand just below the thumb.

By this point, his mind was mostly gone. The sight and smell of blood did not elicit alarm, but instead enthrallment. The half-vacant vessel leapt to its feet. Frederick chose to skip the story and instead illustrate the immaculate image that had been shown to him when he stared into Joseph Banks' cloudy pupils. He had to pause as a wave of gratitude took him, and he hugged himself, smeared blood across his shoulder, stained his shirt. *I have so much work to do, and only so much blood!*

Margaret, the head maid of Bloc manor, was well aware of Frederic's ongoing reclusion. She'd given the boy his privacy for a whole day and a half, but he needed to eat! She'd knocked and knocked and knocked and finally opened the door to have a peek. The smell of shit, piss, and blood sent her running for the garden before she'd gotten a full view of

the horror. She deposited her breakfast into a patch of perennials that had just begun to blossom.

Behind the large oak door, every piece of furniture had been dragged to the middle of Frederic's room, the boy on his back atop the pile. All four walls were covered in painted networks of dark crimson lines that continued up onto the ceiling, converged at the center. Margaret overheard the constables discussing the impracticality of it all.

"You see how pale he is? That boy should've died long before finishing this cursed painting. Looks like every drop of blood in his body made it onto those walls."

"I'm more concerned with how his arms are still up like that. Does it look like he's reaching out?"

Both Mister and Missus Bloc had been attending a garden party when Frederic's body was discovered. Upon their return, they demanded to see their son. Margaret, ever the dutiful servant, was certain that should not happen. She tried to explain this to them, even stepped in front of the door when Mister Bloc tried to move past her. When he reached for the knob, she found herself shrieking, "do NOT open this door!"

"Remember your place," Mister Bloc replied coldly, his face too close. His breath smelled of gherkins and cheese. He bodied her out of the way and entered his late son's room. Her insubordination was forgotten, as soon Frederic's parents were wailing.

Frederic Bloc was buried the following week. The remediation of his room was completed shortly after. Two male servants and four hired hands gutted the walls, floor, and ceiling, replaced it all with new materials. The expensive furniture was to be burned with these removed materials, but the ornate standing mirror went missing before this would occur.

Margaret spent the following year watching everyone around her either die in some inexplicably horrific accident or kill themselves in theatrical fashion as she succumbed to her own mental terrors. Charles had dropped a cup of tea, slipped on the spill, and slammed the back of his skull into the corner of the mantle of the fireplace, his limp body held aloft. *Improbable*. Mister Bloc was impaled through the thigh by an adult boar that had somehow wandered it into the city and into their back garden. *Impossible*.

The final straw had been when Margaret found missus Bloc's body cold to the touch in her bed, two empty flasks of laudanum on the bedside table. The weight of the year's sorrows broke the missus. In the end, Margaret decided to join her, burned down the estate with herself still inside.

The resulting inferno roared across the town of Isleworth for six hours. Fire brigades across all of London were called in to help control the unnaturally resilient blaze. Many of those brave men were lost, lured into the flames by the

screams of children who were not there. By morning, forty-seven homes had burned to the ground, ninety-three people were confirmed dead, and over four-hundred were recovering from related injuries, primarily smoke inhalation.

Thankfully, not a single witness to Frederic's designs had ever tried to draw the strange swirling of spirals they'd seen covering the walls, never spoke of the massive eye that seemed to turn to watch them from the ceiling whenever they looked away.

Had they, this story would not have ended here.

GENIUS

For six long months, Marla Moon had believed herself to be insane. In the summer of 2011, she witnessed something impossible happen right before her eyes, then watched in horror as reality rewrote itself, corrected the cosmic error after it had already occurred.

Being a logical, grounded individual, Marla determined she had hallucinated the initial experience, believed she could never trust her own eyes and ears ever again. Then, around Christmas, an event transpired online that flipped her self-diagnosis on its head. *I'm not crazy, the world is*, she told herself. And then she got to work.

Since the initial incident, Marla had not left her room. Not once in almost nine months. Well, she had a shared bathroom, and she'd used that. She showered weekly. Marla

knew she wasn't crazy, though she didn't fault her father or brother for thinking she was.

What they didn't know was that Marla Moon was working with a finite amount of time. The pattern she'd discovered seemed to be coming to a head. A cosmic crescendo. If she didn't do something, a lot of people were going to die.

Marla had spent every waking minute of the past three months hunched over her computer, racing to complete her plan before it was too late. On the evening of March 19th, 2012, Marla Moon planned to get physical proof of her impossible theory. She had an inkling that it just might save the world.

* * * * *

As a child, Marla reached national fame under the guise of a boy genius named Richie Moon. Her brother, Richard, was meant to do it, but melted down in the green room of the public access studio minutes before he was meant to go on. On a whim, she'd volunteered to take his place. Afterward, Richard told their father he did not want to be on television, ever.

Father told her that because he'd already purchased a thousand buttons with *Richie Moon, Boy Genius* printed on them, that she would continue to perform as her brother. It

was all a con, really, as both Marla and Richard were of average intelligence. It was their father (and his countless hours of repetitive quizzing) who had branded Richie a genius, hoped to handcraft a kid celebrity. He succeeded in this.

After appearing on Letterman, and then Sanders, Marla's father was approached by an agency. In just over a year, the character of Richie Moon had grown into one of the leading commercial spokespersons for family friendly products of the mid-to-late nineties. From purple ketchups to long furbies, Marla's promoting meant she was also the first to receive all of the coolest toys of her generation. It was every kid's dream come true.

In the year 2000, Richie Moon got his own educational video game. This came with the gift of a Personal Computer and a free year of AOL. Her father set it up in the living room. While her brother Richard was out playing with his friends, Marla was sitting at the computer, discovering just how big the world really was.

Then, in 2003, Marla Moon hit puberty. This was right before she was scheduled to tour the new Richie Moon Lunchables collaboration. Against all instruction, she pulled the wig off while she was live on-air in New York on The Today Show, revealed her true self to the world. Al Roker had a conniption.

The company controlling Richie Moon did a fairly good job of spinning the unexpected revelation, even got a *Girl Genius* pilot greenlit. Marla spent a week in Hollywood on set with Janeane Garofalo, who played her mother. The show did not get picked up. Shortly after, the company bought the rights to Richie Moon from her father, reintroduced the boy genius with a new child actor. The new one was fat and had a British accent. Marla was not a fan.

The most alarming aspect of her gender reveal was the hard turn the online discourse took. When Richie was a little boy, they only had nice things to say, mere passing thoughts. When it turned out that Richie was a girl, and would soon become a woman... Well, Marla quickly discovered just how depraved people could be, and in more ways than one.

She'd frequented a number of online communities for years at that point. Across them all, she found assumably grown men calling her a lying cunt, among other things. Others were sexualizing her. Many seemed to be doing both. Some even vowed to enact punishment, sent her emails wherein they threatened to both rape and kill her. This, of course, fucked with her head.

Off-camera, Marla had always been fairly introverted, but the cataclysmic response to her simply telling the world she existed eventually led her to become a shut-in. A perpetual homebody. A near recluse. Personally, she would come to

identify as a NEET, which was an internet term meaning Not in Education, Employment, or Training. Her brother called her a waste of space. She was still her father's little girl.

By the summer of 2011, Marla had been out of the lime-light for eight years. Sadly, her mental health was at an all-time low. In a rare act of self-care, Marla had showered, tamed her hair, applied make-up, chosen a nice flowery dress she'd bought but never worn, and took her copy of *The Dispossessed* to the park. It was here where she decided never to go outside, never ever ever again.

* * * * *

Marla copied one of the IP addresses from the .txt her script had generated, pasted it into the media player she'd written specifically for this purpose.

The monochrome image of a front porch appeared, the camera mounted up and to the right of the entryway. Aimed so you could see the face of whoever was knocking, as well as the path leading up to the front door.

Nothing in the image changed, apart from the digital artifacts that were a byproduct of compression. Marla copied over another IP at random, pasted it into the player.

This time, the images that updated every other second were in color, though much of the scene was dark, broken

only by thin cracks of light. Marla surmised she was looking at the interior of a man made bird's nest. The camera was mounted within what looked like a wooden crate littered with hay, down feathers, and white shit spotted black. The mother and her babies had come and gone, but the camera was still rolling, ready for the next birdmom.

The feed from the third IP she entered into her application made her lean in. Marla could see a couple on a couch, illuminated by a television, in the living room of their home. The camera was mounted in the corner of the room, the large sectional taking up the right side of the feed. The people on screen were sharing a private moment, Marla realized.

The man had his arm around the woman, was fondling her breast from above. Marla grinned as the woman's fingers snaked beneath the waistband of the man's bulging basketball shorts. She felt her own desires begin to stir, closed the feed before she succumbed to the perversity of voyeurism. Marla logged the IP address in her ever-expanding library of online webcams and alt-tabbed out of the application, awash with shame.

The lack of security on the internet astounded her. She'd learned from a forum post on SomethingAwful that there were literally thousands *upon thousands* of personal security cameras publicly broadcasting their feed to the world. Most of the people who bought these cameras were not technically

proficient, had not taken the proper steps to password-protect their feeds.

Access to these cameras had been the final piece she needed for her plan to work. It was a moonshot, of course, but Marla had faith in her role in all of this. *This has to work.* She'd witnessed the world go weird for a reason. It was her responsibility to gather proof and share what she knew. Whatever entity or force or cosmic sickness was at play, it clearly didn't want to be made public, took great strides to prevent the dissemination of knowledge regarding its existence. Marla was confident that if she found a way to tell the world that this was all really happening, the force would be rendered powerless.

With access to over ten thousand live feeds from around the world, Marla believed she had a good chance of capturing one of these cosmic anomalies *before* the correction. A smaller part of her believed she was merely insane.

* * * * *

Upon a park bench along a cement path, Marla had been staring (eyes unfocused, mind elsewhere) at her book for who knew how long when she heard the familiar idling of a multigear bicycle fade in from the left. She glanced in its direction without thought, saw a lean, older Asian man sport-

ing bright spandex and a shiny helmet, his eyes obscured by holographic wrap-around shades. He flashed a smile and nodded, to which Marla returned the favor.

She then looked back down at her book, intent on *not* zoning out this time. She was discouraged to find herself a mere four pages into the first chapter. The kind man on the bike zipped up and past her. Except... he didn't pass her. He started to, never finished.

Marla gasped when the sound of the gears blinked out like the flipping of a switch, the sudden absence of the neon blur that was the passing cyclist, just beyond her view of the book. She dropped the paperback, pressed her hands to the bench as she whipped her head about. *Where did he just go?*

There was no one else in the park that she could see. Marla stood, sure that she would catch the cyclist further up the path, that she had merely zoned out again. The path was empty.

"What in the actual fuck," Marla muttered as she turned back to the bench. That was when she heard the scuff of a shoe behind her, turned around to find the cyclist in neon blue spandex and a yellow bike helmet standing mere feet from her. His eyes were saucers, and before she could say anything, his mouth opened and he began to wail in falsetto.

Marla jumped back when he screamed, half fell back onto the bench behind her. She caught herself, stared helplessly as the man began to claw at his face. “Woah, stop! Stop!”

His fingernails took skin with them, and blood trickled off his chin. Before Marla could shake out of her shocked paralysis and help the man, he turned and fled. Marla took a few steps after him, then froze when she heard another crash from behind.

She recognized the sound, knew what had just fallen to the pavement. Marla didn’t want to turn around, but willed herself to do so. There, maybe fifteen feet up the path, in the middle of the sidewalk, was a sports bike on its side. The front wheel spun lazily as Marla tried to swallow down the lump of existential dread welling within her soul. There was no one else around, no one to ask. *I’d like to go home now*, Marla thought, grabbing her purse and speedwalking toward her house.

The unexplainable experience had troubled her the rest of the day. When the six ‘o’ clock news opened with the report of a man killing himself at a gas station, Marla had showered and changed back into her giant tee shirt, looked like her scrubby old self.

The story began with a blurred shot of the gas station. A security camera captured the inferno, which licked out from

behind the censored rectangle of the burning man. Then it switched to different footage, captured in a familiar place.

The shaky footage had been sent in from a bystander who'd been shooting a student movie in the park "when this dude just zoomed by, screamin' at the top of his lungs," he said into a microphone on the screen, then the image cross-faded back to the handheld footage. A girl in a pink wig was fumbling over her lines when the biker appeared behind her and began to shriek. She looked back in alarm. The camera lifted off the tripod, wobbled as it spun around, then honed in on the mobile screamer.

Marla could not believe what she was seeing. *It didn't happen like that*, she told herself. Her mouth dropped open as she watched the man skid to a stop right in front of *Marla* on the bench, step off the bike, pick it up, and throw it back the way he'd come. It landed right where she'd seen it reappear that morning. She then watched herself stand, say something to the man, then fall backward into the bench when he turned and shouted directly in her face.

In her living room, Marla's head was hurting. She strained to maintain focus on the screen as the man ran off, nearly fainted when she watched herself turn to the camera and shout to the kids, "Did that really just happen?" The Marla on the television was smirking with amused incredulity, like what they'd just witnessed wasn't horrifying, but instead silly.

Her father shook his head, unaware his daughter was on television.

But that's not what happened, she told herself again. She tried to recall her own account of the events. *I was alone. He didn't... Did he stop?* As she pressed her own mind, tried to push past this false new memories flooding in, a phantom pain began to thump and pulse and throb throughout her entire vessel. She pushed through the pain, pressed harder, intent on remembering what exactly had happened that morning. The pressure grew stronger, then burst.

Marla was reminded of a video wherein a man's shirt and pants were ripped off his body when an overinflated tire tore open a few feet from where he was standing. Marla had reached out for the memories of earlier that day, and one good poke had caused a violent explosion of psychic pressure. There was too much there, two accounts of the same stretch of time.

Simply put, her mind go boom. Marla ran screaming from the couch, to the stairs, all the way up to her room.

She never came out again.

* * * * *

On the morning of December 22nd, 2011, the online forum 4chan was flooded with users claiming witness to a

litany of unexplainable, seemingly supernatural events the evening prior. Individual accounts varied wildly, from objects moving on their own, to spontaneous changes in weather, to abnormally strong static shocks, and even one account claiming to have been briefly teleported to another plane of existence. The latter had begun coherent, ended in an all caps declaration that the world would pay for its crimes.

The discourse around these reports quickly turned conspiratorial, as it seemed the moderators were actively deleting the threads, trying to suppress the story.

Marla herself had shared her account from six months prior in a thread where nine other people had claimed to have seen people appear or disappear. She was the only one who had seen both occur back to back, apart from the mad man, of course. He hadn't been active outside his post.

She was refreshing that thread, hoping for replies, when an emboldened message in red text appeared at the top of the page, above the header.

hey everyone.

the first thing you should know is that we are not deleting any threads involving the weird shit that happened around the world yesterday. after many calls and emails with our hosting provider, we've determined that these threads are, somehow, causing the

PHYSICAL DRIVES to fail. yes, this makes no fucking sense, but we're pretty sure that's what is happening.

we're looking into ways we could possibly mitigate this, as we think it's important for the world to know whats going on. it's possible there is a logical explanation to all of this, but I felt it was important to update you guys, as the conversation was diverting from what is important, which is that shit is getting really weird.

that's it for now.

- moot

Despite all of the evidence shown to her that morning, Marla could not believe that what she'd experienced was real. She had spent the last six months telling herself she'd hallucinated an entire morning, and that reality remained. Then she refreshed the page once more, and her computer crashed. *It didn't even blue screen, just turned off. The hell?*

Marla reached down, pressed the power button, and her machine booted up like normal. She frowned, hesitantly reopened Firefox, and typed 4chan.org into the navbar. Her computer continued to hum, but Firefox froze and crashed after a moment of loading. She tried again, got the same result. *Okay, well, 4chan is down. Maybe they're talking about it on*

Reddit. Marla typed reddit.com/r/4chan, found the following message:

**This subreddit has been banned by the
administrators of Reddit.**

That evening, there was another report of someone killing themselves through self-immolation. This time, the blame was placed on 4chan, which his family had found open on his computer after his death. *Online forum convinces 22-year-old boy to kill himself!* Marla didn't have to see the man's computer screen to know it was the one who'd written of traveling to another place. *Just like the biker.*

Holy shit, this is really happening, Marla thought. *And not just to me—to the world.* All of the turmoil of the last six months melted away, and her heart was lofted into the air by a feeling of solidarity with her fellow humans. *Something strange really IS happening. And it's trying to keep us from talking about it. Fuck this thing, whatever it is!!*

With a newfound determination, Marla knew what she had to do. She needed to get proof of this cosmic fuckery and share it with the world. *But... how?* Clearly, whatever was happening, it came in waves.

Marla Moon decided the first step was to find a pattern so she could determine when the next spike would be. *Again, how?*

She hadn't the slightest clue.

* * * * *

It hadn't taken Marla long to discover that the strange events of December 21st (22nd to those east of the Atlantic) had occurred within minutes of the winter solstice. Though colloquially known as 'the shortest day of the year', it was also a unique point in our planet's orbit around The Sun. The solstices marked two points in a solar cycle when the Earth was furthest from our home star.

A quick google revealed to Marla that her own experience aligned with the summer solstice six months prior. From there, she began to dig into the past. In lieu of leaving her room—which was far too dangerous, given what she knew—Marla hired a man off Craigslist to go down to the public library and scan all of the newspapers in the days following each solstice over the past thirty years.

She then realized she could hire people across the country to do the same. Marla pointedly kept her plans secret, didn't tell anyone she hired what she needed the old articles for.

After a month of cataloguing the days following the past sixty solstices, Marla had a shocking realization: *oh shit, maybe I really AM crazy, and I'm seeing patterns where there are none.* This was her initial response to actually *finding* a pattern of

unexplainable events that spanned multiple decades. She remained doubtful because there were no strange winters, which made the most recent event an outlier. Still, she found six separate summers where the frequency of reported fires spiked on the solstice by a large margin.

1980. 1996. 2004. 2008. 2010. 2011. A sixteen year gap, followed by an eight year gap, then four, then two, then one. Marla's throat went dry when she realized what the anomalous winter event really meant. Half of one year was six months. If the pattern held, that meant that another spike would occur in three months. *Would it align with the vernal equinox? When the Earth is nearest The Sun? Perhaps.. And what happens after THAT??*

A small part of her mind seemed to understand she was *more than likely* mentally ill, her 'divine understanding' a product of ongoing psychosis. The thing was, if her delusions were in fact true, denying it could potentially bring about the end of the world. She couldn't chance being numbed and dumbled by antipsychotics even if she *was* insane.

Despite her reservations, Marla knew in her heart she was right. She wasn't crazy—the world itself had gone mad. Her skepticism remained because she was a woman of science, and it was impossible to prove things that shouldn't even exist. *Be Dana, not Fox. Fox is a fool.* The Dana in her was telling her to seek professional help.

She compromised, reminded herself that the impending vernal equinox would determine whether or not Marla Moon had lost her marbles. Until then, she should shelf her doubts and dedicate herself fully to her cause.

Her faith was fueled when she discovered the forum post regarding unsecured security cameras only hours after cracking the pattern. *What do I do next*, she'd asked the universe, and it had answered.

Over the following two months, she'd used a combination of YouTube tutorials and forums to teach herself enough C++ and Python to write a number of scripts that would allow her to maximize the chances of her catching a cosmic anomaly on-camera. *And it's all come down to this. Just a handful of hours until—*

Three solid knocks pulled Marla from her contemplation. How long had she been staring blankly at her screen?

"Lunch," her father stated plainly through the door. *A while then*, she replied to her internal question.

Marla heard her dutiful father close the adjoining door that connected the bathroom to the next bedroom over. She used to share the lavatory with her twin brother as a kid, but he'd left for college many years ago, had barely communicated with her or her dad since. The bathroom now functioned as a sort of airlock between her and the outside world. It's where

her father brought her anything she needed, and where she left her bags of trash when she worked up the nerve to clean.

Marla found a ham & cheese on potato bread, a whole carrot, and a hefty pile of *Lay's Originals* on a red ceramic plate, nested between the twin sinks on the bathroom counter. Beside it, a tall glass filled with ice and an unopened can of Mountain Dew LiveWire beaded in cool sweat. She saw the spots where her father's fingertips had cleared the dew.

"Love you, hun," her father said through the door. Marla recoiled, quietly collected the offering, and returned to her room. She ignored the smell of cleaner, the tiles of her bathroom floor that shone in comparison to her filthy room.

Marla spent the afternoon refining and testing the script that would run during the vernal equinox, which was scheduled to occur at 11:15 CST that night. She'd rented bays of servers in a dozen different countries across the globe.

The grand plan was to employ a massive hive of systems to capture live images from every single source imaginable over an eight minute period, then send them all back to the home server humming within her closet. Four minutes leading up to the equinox, and the four following. It was ludicrous to believe the act would accomplish anything, but she had to do what she could. *No, this will work*, she told herself. *Or you're a lunatic. Either or.*

In all likelihood, even if she was right and a wave of inexplicable events were going to occur at the peak of the vernal equinox, they would *not* occur on any of the cameras she was sourcing. At most, a repeat of what transpired on 4chan would happen to another website, which would disappear once too many people saw. She ignored the irony that such things could occur when she tried to share her own discoveries.

Not for the first time, Marla considered if there was a sentience to whatever was happening, or some shadow organization that would come after her once she went public with the truth. Though this frightened her, she found it also fueled her. She'd love to put a face to what was happening, primarily so she could punch it.

Marla ran out of tasks to repeat roughly an hour before her plan was set to execute. She pasted in the IP of the horny couple from earlier that day, found the man sobbing upon the couch, the woman gone.

As the equinox neared, Marla began to worry that if her plan actually worked, it would simply result in the corruption of her home server. *So the whole plan is useless*, she realized. Her anxiety inflated her fear, and soon it shifted away from 'what if I'm right?' back to the far more likely 'what if I'm wrong?'.

When 11:11 struck, Marla watched as hundreds of pings started coming in. The program was running just as intended, on servers all across the globe. At 11:19, the scripts finished without a hitch, began their data transfers. A little over an hour later, Marla Moon's drives held over eighty gigabytes of 320x240, low resolution stills pulled from publicly accessible security cameras from all around the world.

Over that last hour, she could've begun opening the files as they came in, began sifting through the images for evidence of cosmic fuckery. Instead, she wallowed in self-loathing, watched the monitoring system slowly run out of data transfers to track.

Marla felt like she had just awoken from a terrible dream. *Of course none of this is real*, she knew. The reason she'd been doubting herself this entire time was because, in the back of her mind, she knew this to be nothing more than an extended manic episode, or budding psychosis. There was no other explanation. *What have I done?*

Marla realized how lonely and worried her father must have been all these months. *I haven't left my room in almost A YEAR!* The clarity in which she saw the past nine months was painful, and she felt her heart break twice over. She wanted so badly to run out the door, to hug her father, but she currently stunk to high heaven, and he was asleep.

Marla decided that first thing tomorrow morning she would leave her room, make her father breakfast, and give him a great big hug when he came stumbling into the kitchen with his eyes all squinty like he always did. Marla nearly stood from her computer, left the folders full of images unopened.

What's the harm in clicking through a few? Just for kicks. The voice that spoke inside her head was not her own, but Marla did not know this, and she did as it suggested.

* * * * *

We interrupt this broadcast to alert you to an ongoing emergency in downtown Kansas City. The police headquarters and the surrounding area have been quarantined. All roads in a three block radius around Twelfth and Locust are to be avoided at all costs.

Press has not been told specifics as to the source of the emergency, but it is serious enough that the mayor has issued a citywide lockdown, effective immediately. I repeat, the city is now in lockdown. Everyone is being asked to stay inside for their own safety. The next bit of information I will read verbatim, as, well, I'm not entirely sure what it means.

Ehem, quote. "Specifically to family, friends, and neighbors of police officers: all active personnel is being asked to report to Woodland Station. If any individual of local law enforcement is reaching

out to you, or trying to make direct contact, you must turn them away. They are not where they should be. Do not let them into your homes.” Uh, end quote.

The police department has also requested that anyone with knowledge of—or connections to—Arlin Moon, or his daughter, Marla Moon, the former child actor who first portrayed national icon Richie Moon, to call the number being displayed on screen now. I repeat, anyone who had any interaction—no matter how brief—with Arlin James Moon or Marla Veronica Moon prior to their deaths last night, please call the number on the screen.

We will be back with the news at the end of the hour and hope to provide a clearer picture of the still developing situation. Until then, we return to your regularly scheduled programming. This is Chuck Feller, signing off.

CAT'S EYE

Huey Mendes has his knees slightly bent, his service weapon trained on the shaggy haired specter standing before him. His fellow servicemen fill in behind him. The small room reeks of burnt rot.

The man in Mendes' sights is taller than anyone he's ever seen. His grotesque thinness is emphasized by the tight-fitting pale grey suit. His big square head does not fit his body. The stark white mop of curls obscures his face. When they brought him in, his hair had been slicked back, his whole person pristine. Now, he looks like a beast in a suit covered in black gore.

The trained officer wants nothing more than to pull the trigger, unload the entire clip into the fucker before him. "What did you do??" Huey can't bring himself to look down

to the interview table, where Daniela's corpse is seated, face down, arms at its side. "WHAT DID YOU DO?!?"

* * * * *

Sergeant Hugo Mendes enters the small cafe just off the riverfront when he sees the man who single-handedly ruined six months of work by simply existing. *Tall fucker*, Mendes mutters in his mind as he smiles, approaches the pale figure seated on the short stool, his long, thin hand precariously tilting an espresso cup to his lips.

When Mendes casually slaps the cuff around his other wrist, the one upon the table, the pale giant doesn't flinch. Instead, he pauses his sip, sighs, then opens his large mouth and throws the espresso back like a shot of liquor. "Ow," he says quietly to himself after swallowing. Finally, he turns his large head to look at Mendes. His expression is almost polite.

The man's suit is made of quality materials, and his white hair is combed back, held in place with some nice-smelling goop. His eyes are pale blue, his nose fat and crooked, but his complexion is surprisingly smooth. From a distance, Mendes assumed this man to be his senior, given the white-as-snow hair. Now, he is not so sure.

"Hello again," Mendes says. "I'd love to ask you some questions down at the station." To this, the odd looking gentle-

man purses his lips like Mendes had instead asked him how he'd like his eggs. For effect, the officer shifts his weight to the right hip, rests his free hand on his holstered service weapon.

The thin man's eyes narrow on the pistol, then he sighs with his whole body. "Lead the way," he mutters.

"Nah," Mendes replies, then forcefully yanks the cuff and grabs his elbow, brings the man to his feet. Mendes hooks the other arm, brings it to the man's back, locks the wrist into the free cuff. "How bout *you* lead the way?"

Mendes, with a hamfisted grip upon the chain between the two cuffs, leads his person of interest out the door and up the street. *It's a long way to the station*, he thinks, his face beaming.

* * * * *

Three nights prior, Mendes steps out onto an unlit dock at the ass end of the Port of Phillydelphia. He is acting as the buyer in a sting. They've been investigating the Kentucky Boyz' smuggling operations for close to nine months, have made little headway. Every lead seems to go cold the moment they find it. Finally, Mendes decided to go off-book, convinced one of his informants to 'vouch' for a prospective

client and arrange an initial offering. This will put the informant in danger, and his captain would not have approved.

And it worked. The meet was set, and now three teams of agents are covering every possible escape route off the docks, with four snipers ready to watch the deal go down from two vantage points. Stricklin, the senior most officer after Mendes, is running Ops.

Mendes walks beside Allen Deere, nickname Buck, a younger officer with undercover experience. Buck carries a crate of goods, purchased from a legitimate British Imports shop earlier in the week. The junior agent had spent the afternoon meticulously peeling off the Customs stickers from the lids, then scrubbing away the residual glue. They follow Big Gus to a modest sailboat midway down a line of empty vessels.

Five dark figures rise from the boat, hop over to the dock. *These men came rather armed for a friendly meet and greet*, he grumbles in his head, face neutral. Gus does the introductions, breaks the ice with a wild story from his life as a pimp. Mendes is giving the gang an ocular patdown, doesn't catch most of the tall tale. Something about one of his male escorts and a rich heiress, ended with both of them in the hospital.

"Pickled eel from across the pond," Mendes says after Buck cracks open the wooden box. He pulls a tin out, lofts it over to the leader of the small gang, ironically the shortest of

them. "I have nine more crates just like it." That was a lie. "Consider this a get-ta-know-ya gift."

"Pickled... Eels?" The stout smuggler turns the metal puck over, squints at the paper label. "I don't even wanna open these. Who eats this shiet?" The man's voice has a southern twang to it. *From Kentucky, perhaps?* Mendes isn't sure.

"Rich fuckers love this stuff. Best part is, the more you charge, the more they want it." Mendes is talking out of his ass, has always been able to do so quite with confidence.

"Heh." The hick gives the tin another turn, consideration on his face. Mendes doesn't actually need these men to incriminate themselves further. This meeting is enough to bring them in, squeeze 'em.

Once the men aboard the ship had been processed into holding, interviews would commence. Members of the Kentucky Boyz never talked, but that was fine. Once they refused to cooperate, an official request for a Reader would be filed and approved.

Readers astonished Mendes. He'd doubted their credibility, hadn't believed they were real until he met Daniela. All she had to do was make physical contact, and your knowledge became her knowledge. She was also a skilled artist, and her renderings had led to many arrests in past cases. Nobody could see into someone's mind like she could.

When the reader arrived, they would go person to person, touching each suspect's skin, glimpsing their thoughts. And then the Kentucky Boyz case would be split wide open.

All of this would have—should have—transpired, but it does not. Instead, a bright spot of motion flashes in Mendes' peripheral vision, and he involuntarily whips his head to the side. The gang leader across from him does the same, their motions synchronized.

There, in the shadows, at the end of the dock, a large square head with a mop of white hair peeks out from behind a crate. Immediately, weapons are drawn, guns are cocked, and accusations are flying.

Before Mendes can deescalate the situation, one of the snipers fires, and the rest follow suite. The line of gang members have no time to react, all five of them suddenly flailing and falling as misty red flowers blossom from their persons.

"Cease fire! Cease fire," Mendes shouts ineffectually as he grabs Big Gus and dives away from the boat. As he falls, Mendes catches a glimpse of the white haired stranger diving off the dock, is alarmed by the extreme proportions he glimpses. The brevity of the sight, combined with the low light, causes Mendes to ask himself something incredibly odd: *Was that a fucking skeleton??*

* * * * *

Mendes enters the precinct, his too tall captive in tow, and the whole station responds with jeers of revelry. “So you weren’t lying,” one man shouts. “Damn, you caught yourself a yeti,” a woman calls.

Dean Stricklin, a racist, misogynistic asshole who Mendes has been forced to work beside for two decades, approaches. His fat, bald head is red and shiny, his face puffy, eyes nearly slits. *He should go up a neck size, or four*, Mendes thinks, the man’s many chins stretching out from a disproportionately narrow buttoned collar. *His dumb, round head looks like a fucking grapefruit.*

“Hey there, big fella,” Stricklin says with sly, slimy smile. “Know what the capital of Thailand is?”

“Please don’t,” the tall, pale stranger replies.

“Sack tap!” Stricklin backhands the man in the crotch, then turns to the room to see if anyone is laughing. Mendes shoves the cuffed man forward, takes him to Interview Room #1.

* * * * *

“What took you so long?” Daniela’s voice is like a warm bath. “I’ll be there in twenty, handsome. I’ll make it quick and you can take me to that steak place you love.”

Mendes was almost giddy when the white-haired stranger declined to respond to his questions. He wouldn’t even tell Mendes his name—*Perfect!*

It was on the walk from the cafe to the station that Huey Mendes decided that he was finally going to ask out the woman of his dreams, Daniela Mendoza. So when the stranger zipped his lips, Mendes took it as a sign from the universe.

He scribbled through the Outside Consultant Request form as quickly as he could while maintaining legibility, slapped the document down on his Captain’s desk like he was in an old world cop drama.

“There’s something different about you,” she’d said. “You’re gonna tell her, aren’t you?”

Huey’s crush on Daniela spanned years, and was an open secret among colleagues. Well, they made fun of him for it constantly, but always refrained when she was around.

“I’m gonna ask her to dinner,” Mendes replied through a smile, “so sign the request, Cap!”

After calling, all that was left was the waiting. *She didn’t just say yes, she’d been waiting for me to ask. She truly is a magical woman. I’m going to show her the world.*

“What the fuck did you do to her?!?”

The pale man—covered in the black blood of Mendes’ freshly deceased date—has his enormous hands up, wide mouth stretched into a deep frown. “Well that’s new,” he mutters to himself. He doesn’t seemed phased by the dozen plus police officers pointing their service weapons at his person.

She’d only just gone into the room. From the small window on the door, Mendes had watched her sit down across from the stranger, greet him. He’d gotten lost in the back of her head, her long beautiful mane, loose curls twinkling under the skylight.

Then she reached across the table, put her hand on the pale man’s. She was a Reader, and that required a physical connection. The moment their skin touched, Daniela’s face was spraying black blood. Mendes swore he’d seen her eyeballs shoot out across the table and fall out of view. The tall man’s reaction to being covered in bodily fluids was alarmingly flippant. He’d simply stood, his wrists no longer cuffed to the table, and shaken his head like a wet dog after a swim.

The tense silence is broken by Stricklin, who positions himself on the other side of Daniela. “Speak! Now! What did you do, fucker??”

The tall specter sighs, slowly reaches for his jacket pocket. The roomful of agents lurch as one, but nobody fires. Mendes pulls himself back from the edge just before squeezing the trigger.

The silent stranger pats the air with one hand, opens his palm to reveal a glass marble in the other. The tall man points back and forth between the marble and Stricklin, who is entirely bald. Stricklin growls in understanding.

“If you don’t start cooperating,” Mendes starts, but his words peter out as the tall man makes finger guns, presses the marble between his two index fingers. He rocks his hands back and forth, which causes the clear marble to spin in place. This is made evident by the yellow and black cat’s eye at its center.

With his eyes on the marble, the stranger speaks. His voice is thin and reedier than before, like a sad clarinet. “I just wanted some caviar.”

The pale stranger jams his finger guns at agent Stricklin. Every officer in the room watches as the bald brute is lifted back off his feet, his wide frame suddenly crashing into the back top corner of the room. A squelching *SNAP!* smacks Mendes’ ears, followed by a string of wet pops as Dean

Stricklin's head spins in place, making three, four rotations in less than half a second. As it happens, Mendes is struck by the strange sight of Dean Stricklin's head being replaced by a giant marble, the yellow and black swirl at its center spinning about on a single axis. The sudden torsion causes his neck to snap and the skin and muscles to twist and tear before any force is transferred to the body.

Stricklin's fat corpse separates from the head, drops from the wall and slaps the concrete. Every agent chooses to dive away rather than catch their fallen comrade's body. The severed head remains pressed into the corner of the ceiling. Shaking off the shock of such an impossible sight, the agents all turn in unison and unload their weapons.

A cacophony of cracks fill the room, and the sharp stench of spent gunpowder mingles its way into the foulness filling the air. Only after letting off a few rounds does anyone realize the tall, pale man is no longer in the room with them.

The mass discharging into an empty space slows and stops over a few seconds. A handful of the agents who had instinctively roared as they fired their weapons feel their battlecries drop to awkward hums and haws.

Mendes is the first to notice the clear marble is still floating near the end of the room, just where the stranger left it. He looks up at Stricklin's head, jammed up in the corner.

“No, no, no,” Mendes shouts as he watches a frustrated agent walk up to the floating marble and discharge her weapon point blank. The marble shatters into a million little pieces, as does Stricklin’s skull.

The precinct collectively freaks the fuck out. Every room of the precinct is searched repeatedly, while others go out to canvas the surround streets, ask locals if they’ve seen a pale giant.

Mendes remains where he is. He stares down at the back of Daniela Mendoza’s head. Her long, curly hair shines in the skylight.

* * * * *

Stricklin’s bottom desk drawer is found to have a false bottom. Within, his colleagues discover a variety of narcotics and a little black book with detailed information on the Kentucky Boyz’s entire operation. Names, routes, schedules, the locations of two dozen dead drops, the whole shebang.

It is assumed he was on their pay roll, fed them information, quietly documented everything in the event they tried to fuck him over. Dean Stricklin is posthumously fired from the department and does not receive an officer’s funeral.

For months, the main subject around the department is the the visit from the pale stranger. Eventually, disagree-

ments ensue, each person's memory of the event shifting with time. Random details change, then become exaggerated. First it was over the color of the marble. Then it was whether or not the object was, in fact, a marble to begin with. "It was a tangerine—I handed it to him myself!"

Buck, the young agent from the botched sting, had not made it into the room and therefore did not witness the impossible murder of Stricklin. From where he stood, he only saw the tall man doing something odd with his hands. Buck is adamant that the stranger turned into a paper football. Says that the tall man ducked out of view, and a second later Buck was stabbed in the eye by a white triangle made of folded paper. Everyone makes fun of his eyepatch, all but Mendes.

The senior agent is at the local library. He's pulled one of the local field guides from old world Philadelphia. It takes him half an hour of flipping pages to find it. *Platycotis Vittata*. *Oak Treehopper*.

When Mendes had turned from the floating head of Dean Stricklin to begin firing at the wall where the man had just been, agents were already shooting. Therefore, when his eyes caught a smear of something white, his mind did not register its distinction from the muzzle flashes. He remembers now.

Mendes stares down at the white, triangular bug on the page. "It can't be," he whispers to the empty room.

For the rest of his life, Mendes will look back on that horrific day, and he will see only Daniela. The pain of the loss of what could have been will burn just as brightly as it did when he watched her die. Only at the end, when he is old and bedridden and on the brink of death, can he recall exactly *how* she had died.

As his waking mind weakens, the soft cushioning of logic and reason that kept him sane all those years will deflate, revealing white spires of calcified terror. Memories that should never have existed, buried in his mind and left to fester. Only there, on the brink of passing, does Huey Mendes realize the pale man's psychic slaughter of his love was a familiar sight.

More than one wellness check throughout his time as a beat cop had resulted in the discovery of corpses just like Daniela's: the brain turning into a white hot coal within the skull, burning the sockets black as charred brain matter spewed from the holes. Only now, as he lay dying, can he recall these events, and a chorus of hollow eyed revenants surround his bed. At their center, his love. Her scream is the loudest.

His wrinkled face stretches into one of overwhelming terror, like a man on fire. Mendes' limbs contort, joints dislocating from overextension. The nurse that eventually finds him can't help but scream.

CRANE GAME

The cute cashier, with his thick arms, tan skin, and wavy, sun-bleached middle-part, was Janeane's last hurdle home. She'd mistimed how long it would take for her homemade edibles to kick in, and now she was high off her ass in the grocery store on the ground floor of her new apartment complex. This wouldn't have been an issue, except she'd also miscalculated a single brownie's strength. Her anxiety began to spike in the frozen foods aisle, and it wasn't long before she realized she was too high to function.

Janeane decided she had what she needed for dinner and abandoned her list, made for the register. Upon seeing Tanner at the till, she considered placing the loaded basket on the ground, just ordering delivery. Finally, she willed herself into

line, tried to remember that no one cared that she was high. It did not help.

And then those piercing green eyes were trained on her, and the whole world melted away. It was just the two of them, his bright eyes shining. *Oh, those eyes. I want to wake up to them beside me...*

“Neeeeext,” Tanner droned, and his uncloaked exasperation pulled Janeane from her daydream, dropped her back into social paranoia. *He doesn’t care about me. Can barely see me.* She trotted forward, dropped the basket onto the belt.

“So,” Janeane began. She was trying to remember how people started conversations. “Tanner,” she added to buy herself time.

Tanner did not reply verbally, his only acknowledgement a flick of his eyes and a rise of the eyebrows as he scanned her items and placed them into paper bags.

After roughly two and a half minutes of awkward silence, then paying with her debit card and collecting her purchase, Janeane jokingly said, “nice chat,” then turned to go.

The image of Tanner’s reaction to her parting jibe, him glancing back over his shoulder in disgust, like she’d just audibly shit her pants... that one would stick.

As Janeane rode the elevator up to her apartment, hot shame was replaced by the surreality of her newfound circumstances. A week ago, Janeane Messina was a scooper at

Tubb's Chili, shared a trailer with her mom. Now she had a remote corporate job that came with its own place.

This was her first time living alone, and she still couldn't believe it had actually happened. She'd sent out so many applications over the past few months, she didn't even remember applying to her new employer when the acceptance email arrived.

Within her semi-furnished-but-mostly-empty apartment, High-Ass Janeane successfully transferred her groceries from their bags to their respective places throughout the kitchen without *once* getting distracted. She felt a great sense of accomplishment until she remembered most of what she'd just put away was to be used for dinner. Immediately.

Having four burners, a doublewide sink, and ample countertops made Janeane feel like she was on the set of a reality cooking show, not in her very own swanky ass apartment. She sautéed some chicken thighs in white sauce and boiled a box of linguini while roasting a bag of baby carrots in the oven. She'd rarely used the toaster oven in the trailer as there was a good chance of tripping the breaker.

Janeane sat on the couch and ate over the coffee table. While the apartment had come with a nice dining table, there were no chairs. She'd yet to make a trip to IKEA. *Heck*, Janeane thought, *I haven't even left the building since I moved in*

on Sunday. It was now Saturday night, and she was celebrating having completed her first week of work.

From Monday to Friday, Janeane had woken up, showered, used the gym on the second floor of the building, then opened her laptop and gotten to work. By the end of the week, it had taken her only a handful of hours to reach the daily quota. Transcribing low-res scanned documents had initially been slow work, but Janeane found her ability to simultaneously read and type improving rapidly.

The group chat could not comprehend how her job was entirely online, believed she was being scammed. They also questioned why a company would provide employees with ‘a whole ass apartment’ when the job was to be done on a laptop.

Kuma Inc. owned the whole skyscraper, which Janeane told them. *Is it a skyscraper if it's only thirty-three floors?* She wasn't sure. All the businesses on the ground floor—Daimyo Market, Rosso's BBQ, Supplements 'N' More—were subsidiaries of Kuma, which was headquartered in Japan. There was a gym complete with both a pool and a basketball court taking up the second floor. The other thirty-one floors were split between apartments and offices.

I should invite the gang over, Janeane thought, show them this is all legit. The bud of this idea was immediately nipped, and her active thoughts were wiped clean like an etch-a-sketch.

Janeane found herself on the couch, staring at her toes upon the coffee table. *What was I doing?* The internal question was followed by a soft chortle. *These brownies are strong as hell.*

The young, independent woman took her plate across the open living space, washed it with the cooking pans, then set them all to dry. In her first week of living alone, she had maintained the healthy habit of keeping her sink empty. Dishes were washed immediately after use, and it would stay that way.

All responsibilities for the evening complete, Janeane celebrated her adulthood by eating a second pot brownie.

* * * * *

Janeane slowly acknowledged she'd been staring at her laptop for an indeterminable amount of time. *Why is my email open? What was I doing?*

She looked around through bleary slits. Having just moved in six days prior, there wasn't much to look at. Before her, Firefox was open to her Gmail, the spam folder highlighted, a list of ridiculous emails from endless strangers.

GET THICK QUICK!!! PILLZ PILLZ PILLZ!!!

DO YOU WANT TO RUB ME? IM LUBED AND LOCAL

VIRUS DETECTED—YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR CRIMES

What was I doing? Janeane gasped when she looked to the top of the screen and spied the title of the previous tab.

Anime Figures | Japanese Im...

“Oh yeah!” The proud young woman hooted with glee. She’d been looking for things to decorate her new place! She’d just created an account for a Japanese import store! She was currently searching for the activation email! *Yippee!*

Janeane clicked over to her Inbox, refreshed the window. *Nada.* She clicked back to Spam, hit F5 for what might’ve been the umpteenth time. *Still nada.*

“Hmmm,” she hummed in deep contemplation, her hands tented before her, forefingers tapping at her chin. *Perhaps I misspelled my email address when I made the account.*

Janeane then recalled that, while the figurine was moderately priced, the shipping cost listed in the cart was quite prohibitive. *Maybe I should be... more responsible. I don’t have chairs. I should buy chairs before anime figurines.*

Across a single instant, Janeane watched as the page-long list of unread spam emails split down the middle and jagged red lines scaled up from nothing to fill the empty space. The

slits throbbed as they grew, connected to form demonic glyphs that somehow dripped and burned simultaneously.

By the time she began reading the title of the email, the alien script had turned to basic English and was no longer spewing wet flames fire. Likewise, Janeane had forgotten all about its strange manifestation.

**Webcam Crane Game From Japan! (^o^) Real
Prizes Shipped To Your Door!**

When Janeane clicked into the email, the last thing she expected to see was the very anime figure she'd been eyeing not five minutes before on the imports site. *Vash the Stampede. My king. But this email is halfway down the page, and the timestamp confirms it's a week old. What are the chances?* Janeane spared a glance to the heavens, gave an appreciative nod.

KUREIN MEGA | 悪霊門

A grid of thumbnails loaded onto the simple page. Though web design had come a long way over the past decade, this site appeared to have been built with little more than basic HTML. One of the thumbnails had a red border, the words *IN USE* overlayed across the image at half-opacity like a watermark. Janeane clicked on the active game, was equal parts confused and astonished by what she saw.

Western crane games had a three-armed claw, and the goal was to pick up an item from a pile of prizes, deliver it to the drop zone. What Janeane saw now was... not that.

The page loaded to display the webcam feed, beside it a zeroed out timer, a product photo of an anime figure (Janeane did not recognize the girl) and a big yellow button. The choppy video was streaming from a budget webcam mounted before a makeshift play area. Digital artifacts shifted about a mostly static image.

The main chassis of the crane contraption was a simple box made of welded metal, spanning two meters in each direction. About a halfway up, three white PVC pipes spanned the width of the frame. Below them, a chute of sorts covered in dark fabric with little spots of light, a cheap approximation of deep space. Atop these three pipes sat a bright red box shaped like it might hold a wine bottle. On it, the same scantily-clad anime girl from the product photo, as well as Japanese script. *It's the figure in its packaging, of course*, Janeane realized.

In the top left corner of the screen was the claw. It was made mostly out of translucent plastic. Unlike the western equivalent, which grabbed across three dimensions, this one was flat and symmetrical. Two twin arms went straight out, then made a ninety-degree angle halfway down. In its idle

position, the arms were extended open, but Janeane figured that, when closed, the arms would make a squared diamond.

After a moment of inactivity, the timer on-screen blinked and began counting down from thirty. An 8-bit jingle began to chime. The simple graphic of the yellow button switched to a depressed version, and the plastic claw on-screen began moving right. It went too far, overshot the box. *Aww man*, Janeane thought, immediately invested.

She found herself wowed once again by the interconnectivity the internet had brought the world, hoped she would never get *too* accustomed to it. She was actively watching someone operate a game that was physically on the other side of the planet. For all she knew, the person playing could themselves be in Turkey, or France. *Amazing*.

The yellow button reset then depressed again, and this time the crane moved back, away from the camera. She inherently understood how the game was played. Instead of freely operating the crane with a joystick, like here in the States, the player was restricted to two button holds. Holding the button first moved the crane right, the second moved it back. Sure enough, a moment after the button was let go for the second time and the crane stopped, it began descending.

“You missed, you dingus,” Janeane said out loud. “All you’re gonna do now is poke it.” She watched as the left arm of the claw met the far corner of the red box and stopped,

slightly deforming the cardboard. She recognized another difference from western crane games: instead of a wire that dangled the claw, this one was connected to the main chassis of the game by solid vertical pipe. The jammed claw continued through its automated script, the right arm folding in to center while its partner was stuck on the box.

Her jaw dropped as she watched the pressure of the poke—combined with the force of the clamp—cause the other end of the box to lift off the pipes, twist, and then the whole thing was tumbling into the hole below. The background music was replaced by a simple jingle as a gif of a dancing alien ghost robot thing appeared over the webcam.

“Ooooooh, myyyyyy, gaaaahd!” Janeane could hardly contain her excitement. *This. Is. AWESOME!*

After signing up for an account and blowing roughly thirty dollars on tokens (refilling twice), she succeeded in poking and prodding her own box off of its tubular ledge. She’d guessed correctly in that trying to actually grab the box with the claw was useless, the grip too weak. The poking method proved rather difficult, as the PVC pipes would bend, and they were also wrapped in some sort of adhesive that kept boxes from sliding around too much.

Janeane felt a nearly orgasmic reaction to watching the package (*that’s all the way over in Japan, holy heck!*) tumble into the prize hole. Just as when she’d been a spectator, a jingle

played, and what she now recognized as the mascot of the site—a ghostly black blob with a gold cross for a face—did a little wiggle dance on screen.

A yellow dot appeared over her user icon, and she found that she could place a delivery order to receive her prize, a Hello Kitty foot stool. Her eyes landed on a button that read ‘ship all’. Janeane smiled, clicked back to the grid of webcams. *I should win a few more things first. Make the delivery worth it. It’s traveling half way across the globe, after all.*

Fourteen hours later, Janeane awoke to an aggressive *THUMP THUMP THUMP* upon her door. She was on the couch, had nearly pissed herself with fright. *Some ham-fisted motherfucker just pulled me from some much needed rest,* she fumed.

Janeane threw the front door open, intent on cursing out whoever the hell had the audacity to knock like that. There wasn’t some giant biker dude standing there, so that was good. There wasn’t anyone. *Huh*, she thought, then looked down to find a package on her doormat. She recognized the black inked cartoon mascot patterned across the yellow tape that held the pink cardboard flaps closed. *A little ghost with a cross for a face.*

“That was fast,” Janeane said aloud, still foggy from the brownies. She retrieved the package and brought it to the kitchen table, then went looking for her crafting box.

Unbeknownst to Janeane Messina, new Digital Archivist for Kuma Inc, a psychic barrier would have prevented her from thinking further on the overnight delivery of a supposedly international package, had she tried. In her still slightly stoned and deeply tired state, Janeane lacked any and all curiosity, asked no questions.

* * * * *

The wheel on the small yellow cart that carried Janeane's groceries would NOT stop squeaking. *Not a squeak, a shriek!* The shrill rubbing of metal on metal penetrated the base of her skull like a psychic stake being wiggled within the wound.

After cooking herself breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the first two weeks of her time at Kuma Grand Apartments, working out every day, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance, Janeane had faltered, hard.

The truth was that her day job had taken a weird turn, and it was affecting her sleep. For the first week, all the documents she'd been tasked with transcribing were boring business mumbo jumbo. Invoices, meeting notes, the like.

Over time, she began to notice oddities, like how a page from an inventory audit included one item as 'Tank, Blood, 1000L'.

More recently, she'd spent four straight work days transcribing pages from—what she assumed to be—the same hand-written journal. It was all mad ramblings, many sections illegible, which she marked as [#].

The first night, she awoke more than once to dreams of those same nonsensical phrases being chanted by a choir of hollow eyed faces. Though she'd moved on from the creepy journal, her dreams were still plagued with the faces of the dead, their rhythmic mutterings preventing her from getting more than a few winks of sleep per night.

And now Janeane was about to faint in the middle of Daimyo Market. Her restless nights had led to shortcuts. In lieu of cooking, she ordered delivery from Rosso's at least once a day, survived off of the Daimyo brand Ready-To-Heat meals in the frozen section.

This is where she was now, but Janeane had waited too long. The effort of pulling open the pressure-sealed freezer door had taken her last ounce of strength, and she was actively wobbling. Without checking to see if she was alone in the aisle, Janeane surprised herself when she tore open the box of frozen lasagna, pulled the icy pan-sized puck of pasta from its metal tray, and began shearing husks off with her teeth.

Over the span of a few minutes, Janeane ate an entire family-of-four's worth of pasta. At least, that was the recom-

mended serving size on the box. She licked at her red, oily hands, feeling much, MUCH better. *Ugh, I was really spiraling there for a second. What was I even spiraling about?* She could not recall.

Janeane hid the box amongst the other items in her cart. As she was rawdogging an entire sheet of lasanga, she had come to a decision. She would not return to cooking for herself. Too cumbersome. Instead, she'd buy an entire month's worth of frozen dinners. This way, she could focus on what really mattered: getting back to furnishing her new apartment with all the prizes she could win from Kurein Mega Online Webcam Crane Game!

At checkout, she kept her eyes down, watched the strap-ping Tanner's biceps shift about as he loaded her bags. Imagined his strong hands holding her wrists above her head, those heart-shaped lips pressed against her own. *I wish you could see me...*

* * * * *

It had been six weeks since Janeane had fallen into what she now recognized as a hyperfixated obsession. The surfaces of her apartment were absolutely riddled with statuettes, plushies, posters, and models (which she'd constructed herself!) from various anime and manga. Janeane had even or-

dered one of those vertical glass displays with the built-in LED strips, and *that* was nearly full.

She was running out of room, and good thing, because her enthusiasm seemed to be waning as well. She did this a lot: get entirely consumed by something, think about nothing else for a month or two. Only now did she realize that she had never done this with anything that cost so much money.

Janeane had blown through pretty much all the earnings she'd collected in her first month and a half employed at Kuma Inc. She wasn't sure why it had taken her so long to see that *maybe* she had a *slight* problem. There was nothing wrong with playing a video game for eight hours straight, not when the game was free. This was not that.

Every dip of the claw cost the young archivist eleven cents. She'd poured nearly two-thousand dollars into the site, most of the rest into take-out, had only \$320 left in her bank account. That was less than a tenth of what she had earned. Good thing she didn't have to pay rent, otherwise she'd've been borked. *Phew*, Janeane thought with a mental sigh. *Not borked.*

"Okay, you've had your fun, girlie." She'd been staring silently at the her bank account's current balance for about a minute. Janeane found talking to herself helped force responsibility. "And you've furnished the hell outta your new

apartment. Time to retire the plastic claw, start saving for the future.”

Janeane noticed the tab for Kurein Mega was flashing, something she had never seen Firefox do. She clicked away from her bank account back to the crane website. Her confusion deepened when she saw a small animated graphic in the bottom right corner of the browser. What it *looked* like was the edge of the site was bending up like the corner of a piece of paper. A white triangle flapped in simulated wind, behind it, a black void spotted with stars.

Janeane moused over the new anomaly. She’d been on the site for hundreds of hours at this point, hadn’t seen this before. She clicked the black space. *Nada*. She clicked the wobbling triangle that was the folded up corner. *Nada*. After another moment, she tried something that shouldn’t have been possible on a site that looked like it was designed in 1997.

The curious young woman clicked and dragged the corner up and to the left across the page. *This shouldn’t be possible*, she thought as the white and pink and yellow of Kurein Mega peeled away, revealing an inverted color scheme.

“Cool,” Janeane said aloud. *Must be an easter egg or something, a secret night mode*, she surmised, still unsure how they accomplished the trick on a technical level. Then she saw the thumbnails for the games. Instead of a small cube of space for

a play area, the camera appeared to be mounted in the corner of a harshly lit room.

Even in the small thumbnail, she saw the crane was much larger. It was ribbed with thick pneumatic pumps, and the arms were made of glossy metal instead of flimsy plastic. The mirrored arms were pointed at the end, looked like massive fish hooks. Below the metal monstrosity, upon the concrete floor, ready and waiting to be skewered...

Janeane's hand rose to her mouth as her throat went tight. The images were small—she couldn't be sure. *No. I'm mistaken. Those can't be bodies. They just can't.* Bodies, bound in leather.

The thumbnails for the individual rooms were mostly the same, the only variation being the placement of whatever the hell was shuffling about on the stained floors. Each one featured the same giant metal pincer in the same place, the top-left corner. The rooms were laid out in a three-column-wide grid, just like the the original Kurein Mega. Six rows of rooms were currently visible on screen, and the scroll bar marked the page as being rather long. *How many different rooms are there??*

Janeane couldn't bring herself to click into any of the games to find out if what she *thought* she saw was *really* what she saw. Instead, she pressed CTRL+W and went to bed. She put on *The Office* and ignited the half-smoked blunt that she'd

left upon the *One Piece* themed side table she'd won from the site just last week. She tried to listen to Kevin describe the perfect chili as her mind fled from what she'd just witnessed. *It wasn't real, it wasn't real, it wasn't real. IT WASN'T REAL!*

That night, Janeane dreamed of being stripped and bound and forced to wiggle around on the floor as an enormous metal claw tried to skewer her through the spine from above. All the while, Janeane and her fellow prizes chanted in unison.

* * * * *

Janeane did not open her laptop until late in the afternoon the following day. Friday was still a workday. She powered through her daily quota of transcribing low resolution images of documents—today was mostly schematics for what Janeane surmised to be planetary orbits—submitted the last file only two minutes before six. Despite her lapses in self care, she'd never missed the daily quota, hadn't a clue what the penalty was. *Maybe they'll tie me up, turn me into a prize.*

She looked down to find blood pooling in the recesses of the laptop's low-profile keyboard. It seeped up through the gaps of the keys, created a grid of glossy crimson fluid around the entire board. Janeane blinked and it was gone.

Instead of acknowledging the hallucination, she sprinted across the room and ate one of the half dozen Triple Smashed Cheeseporkers she had stocked in her fridge. Janeane had gotten tired of frozen lasagna, had instead started ordering in bulk from Rosso's BBQ Barn. The cold meat was difficult to chew, the shredded lettuce soggy like a flat slug that wrapped around her lower lip. The unpleasant nature of the meal helped distract her from the horror she'd seen the night before, the terrible dreams that followed.

By the time she finished washing her hands, Janeane had once again convinced herself that she somehow fabricated last night's events. After all, she'd been high as a kite, hadn't she? The rational woman marched over to the laptop, found it free of bodily fluids. She took it from the kitchen table to the couch.

Despite her online gaming addiction decimating her self care routine, Janeane had maintained a professional barrier regarding the employer-provided laptop. She'd never once gone to Kurein Mega at the kitchen table. She always moved herself to the couch first. Sure, she'd spent most of every work day gambling her money away, but she had never played the crane game from her workspace. This distinction was of the utmost importance. She was a professional, after all.

Kurein Mega was just as it had always been. Bright and fun and entirely non-sadistic. Clicking and dragging at the corners had simply highlighted the content of the page, revealed no horrors. She sighed, closed out of the browser.

The desktop background of Vash the Stampede shirtless and supine filled the screen. A new shortcut had appeared overnight, the small icon positioned atop the anime hunk's hand as though he was presenting it for her to find.

KUREIN_ULTRA.exe

Blocks of logic and reason tumbled into place inside her mind, and Janeane laughed as the knot of terror unbound itself within her chest. Her laughter grew, and her stomach began to hurt at the effort.

She was laughing at her own naivety. *This dumb bitch really thought something sinister was going on. You dip!*

It was a video game. She'd downloaded a video game, gotten high, and then thought it was real life. Janeane had never had issues deciphering reality while high before, but she was looking at proof of just that. It made sense that a Japanese gaming company would make a video game version of their website. Felt like a no brainer.

Janeane giggled again at how stupid she'd been as she double-clicked upon the icon, a little metal claw stained with blood.

The application was just as clunky as the website, took more than a minute to launch. When it did, the game indeed appeared as a faux browser game, staying windowed instead of going full screen like most games did. The last block slid into place, came to a stop inside her mind.

High Ass Janeane had launched the game, then gone back to Firefox and forgotten all about it. When the fictional, hyper-violent parody of Kurein Mega finally launched, it did so *directly over* the real browser. *Duh*, she ribbed.

Looking at it now, with fresh and sober eyes, Janeane could see they wouldn't be winning any awards. Even in thumbnail form, the rooms were clearly 3D renders. She clicked on one at random.

The page 'loaded in' like it was running in a real browser. Janeane saw now the faux browser was lazily named Direfox. *That's odd*, she thought, curious whether or not Firefox was popular in Japan. The question flickered out.

Enlarged, the simulated room reminded Janeane of early PS2 games. A low poly count masked by detailed texturing. The things on the ground were indeed naked bodies bound with black straps at the ankles, knees, the arms locked to their sides at the wrists and elbows. They were all male, all built like Ken dolls. Janeane saw it was the same basic model, the scale of the limbs and torsos randomized to simulate variety.

In the space beside the camera that normally previewed the prize, there was nothing more than a small string of letters that read **+10 CHARISMA**.

“Huh,” Janeane thought. *How does charisma help you win a crane game? Is there a leveling system or something?* She was intrigued.

FREE PLAY FREE PLAY FREE PLAY scrolled across the bottom of the simulated webcam. Janeane clicked **START**.

It only took her three attempts to skewer one of the wriggling bodies, but another six to keep one on the hook long enough to carry it over to the giant meat grinder.

Janeane’s lips curled into a sadistic snarl as the bound body dropped into the low poly industrial machine, and gifts of blood splatter spewed from the other end.

She paid no mind to the screaming—the grinding—that echoed into her apartment from the hall.

* * * * *

Everything was coming up Marcus. He’d just landed a chill remote job that came with a swanky ass apartment. The best part was the Rosso’s on the ground floor. He was just stepping up to order when a man and woman pushed their way past him.

“Woah,” he said, surprised and offended. They paid him no mind. The woman was short, disheveled, eyes too wide. The man beside her was tall and handsome and wearing a supermarket uniform. Marcus recognized him as the cashier. His eyes were glazed over, his lips stretched into a dopey grin.

“The fuck,” Marcus muttered under his breath, swallowing his words at the unsettling oddness of the couple.

“Hey big boy,” the small woman said to the Rosso’s employee, the vowels stretched uncomfortably long. She leaned in. “Steve, is it? You wanna come upstairs with me and Tanner here? I live in the building. We can have some... fun.” As the woman spoke, a large glob of saliva stretched out the side of glassy eyed Tanner’s lips, splatted to the floor unnoticed by anyone other than Marcus, who decided to another take a step back.

When he looked back at Steve, the Rosso’s employee, the young man was sporting the same dumbass grin as the supermarket hunk. “Sure, cutie pie. Anything for you.” *What in the fanfic fuck is going on here?*

Marcus found himself literally sputtering in disbelief. Only after the trio of soon-to-be lovers had exited stage right did his huffing and puffing evolve into actual words. “What just happened? What the hell just happened?”

A second later, another employee appeared from the kitchen, took position at the cash register. “Hi, welcome to Rosso’s, what can I getcha?”

Marcus realized he was starving. He pushed the odd encounter from his mind and got to ordering. To go, of course. He didn’t have time for all this foolishness—he had to get back upstairs. That Faye Valentine body pillow wasn’t going to win itself.

W . O . O . F .

Eddie Bowers tightened the straps of his fingerless gloves, took a fat rip off his kiwi melon vape, and tweaked the pink, puffy nipple of the rubber breast that served as the shift knob in his 1984 Cherry Red Pontiac Fiero. He ran a jade comb through his bleached mullet and winked at himself in the rear view mirror, slitted eyes peeking out over iridescent sport-style sunglasses. The bad ass bounty hunter revved the idling engine of his ferocious beast of a vehicle before throwing it into first gear and blasting off down the coastal highway towards his mark.

A new lead for the agents of W.O.O.F. (We Observe and Obtain Fugitives) had just come in from a scorned lover. The fugitive, or perp, or sneaky fucker, was named Babo Mon-

togo. He'd borrowed nine-hundred-and-forty-three dollars from W.O.O.F. in order to make bail and not lose his janitorial job. Now he didn't want to pay it back. This was what Eddie lived for.

The perp's cousin lived on the south side of the island, likely knew where the bastard was hiding. If they didn't want to talk, Bowers had semi-legal ways of making them. The W.O.O.F. agents would conduct their pre-mission briefing at the Beef-N-Bun in the mall. Billy and Darlene were en route from the ex-lover's beach house where they'd gotten the intel.

The ripped hunter exhaled a sick cloud up through the gap in the sunroof, imagined the vapors twisting in the draft to become the ethereal wings of his steel steed. In his excitement, Agent Bowers failed to push the clutch in far enough as he shifted from first to second, and the engine died with a shriek, the car lurching forward with a punch of deceleration.

"Gatdamn motherfuggin shitass fucker," Bowers muttered under his breath as he tried to restart the engine without rolling to a complete stop. A spike of indigestion pierced his gut and he felt beads of sweat well suddenly on his forehead. *Maybe I shouldn'ta had that second chili dog for breakfast...*

His thick, tatted biceps—never hidden beneath sleeves—stretched and glistened in The Sun as the former professional

bodybuilder bent forward in his seat. He gripped his stomach with one hand, steered with the other, and tried to look cool, suddenly hyperaware of all the cameras pointed directly at him.

* * * * *

“What’s the hold up?” The voice in Brandon’s ear asked, audibly annoyed. The young camera operator sitting in the passenger seat of Eddie Bower’s car turned away from the reality television star, pinched the small mic clipped to his lapel, and replied, “tee tee.”

T.T. was code for Tummy Trouble. His fellow documentarians were in a van just behind the Fiero. A collective groan came in reply through Brandon’s earpiece.

On season one of *Power of Bowers*, the middle-aged bounty hunter’s perpetual digestive issues had been a recurring bit that spawned a *shitload* of memes. The show itself was a huge success across the midwest, and the entire Bowers clan exploded in national popularity. Some saw Eddie was a larger-than-life hero, others, a testament to the decay on society that was reality television.

Eddie had used the show’s success to leverage an Executive Producer position on the second season, which they were filming now. His first demand had been to get Guy Fieri

to appear as a guest. “Fieri in my Fiero,” he’d said to a room full of career television executives. “That’s it. That’s the idea.” Though his involvement in preproduction was a perpetual nuisance, his new authority on set turned out to be a waking nightmare for the team.

Not only did ‘Agent Bowers’ insist on giving live notes to his fellow bounty hunters mid-scene (which had led to multiple physical altercations), all mention of his poor gut health was to be edited out in post.

This was providing to be quite the obstacle, narratively speaking, as many of the scenes would end with Bowers calling cut and running for the toilet. In season one, he’d have been forced to finish out the conversation, complete the scene. The word from post was that the entire first episode would have to be stitched together with voice-over.

Brandon Hughes, the cameraman with the shortest résumé, had been tasked with filming ‘Agent Bowers’ during transit in order to capture all of his idiotic monologuing. This also meant enduring the cacophony of smells he produced, from the excessive cologne, to the vaping, to the constant burping and the occasional shart.

The TV star was strapped with a wireless lavalier, meaning the sound guy could ride in the crew van and watch the levels on the board without having to listen to the megalomaniac.

maniacal rambling. It was the last thing anyone wanted to be involved in.

“You just say tiddy?” The voice was gruff, accusatory. Brandon whipped his head over to Bowers, eyes wide like he’d been caught sucking his thumb. The leather-faced hunter eyed the young man suspiciously. *He knows*, Brandon was sure. Still, he had to try. Eddie had a short fuse, and Brandon could see himself getting chopped in the throat if he said the wrong thing.

“Yeah, I said tiddy,” the young camera-op replied, voice wobbling. The camera still trained on Eddie, Brandon adjusted the viewfinder so as not to make direct eye contact with the professional vigilante. He motioned toward the gear shifter. “I just, I love your shifter topper. It’s a boob. So cool.”

For a moment, the huge hulk of a man didn’t move, just stared, eyes hidden behind rainbow sunglasses. Brandon figured he’d failed to sound convincing. The man was a professional lie detector, wasn’t he? That was, like, his job?

“Ba-HA!” The sudden outburst made Brandon recoil and reach for the door. Before he could escape, a giant hamfist was squeezing his shoulder, rubbing the muscle as it did. “Brother, I got your tiddies right here,” Eddie whispered.

“What?” Brandon hadn’t the slightest clue what that could mean. *His hands are so strong..*

“After questioning the cousin,” Bowers said with a sly side grin, “we’re going to the tiddy bar.” His strong fingers pressed further into Brandon’s left shoulder and the tension unfurled, twisted away into a blissful looseness. *Ooooh*, he thought, confused by the blend of different feelings all stirring at once.

“Okay,” Brandon replied through a sigh, mind struggling to stay grounded with the glory of the impromptu massage. “Sounds good.” *Magic fingers...*

* * * * *

The hard heel of a combat boot snapped the weak wooden door frame with one solid kick. Eddie, Darlene, and Billy—all sporting bulletproof vests—stormed through the open entryway, non-lethal deterrents brandished and ready to fire.

Brandon held the camcorder by the top handle, kept his knees bent and the lens wide as he followed close behind. He spun the metal ring that activated the servo, zoomed in to a medium shot of the morbidly obese woman in the huge pink t-shirt screaming and flailing on the stained couch.

When he pulled wide, all three agents were standing over her, tasers painting nine red dots upon her enormous chest. The woman’s shock had turned to ire, and she was spewing profanities at the armed intruders. The hunters were all yelling back.

“WHERE’S BABO??”

“THE FUCK ARE YOU FUCKERS??”

“ON THE FLOOR!”

“DON’T MOVE!”

“HANDS UP!”

“I SAID DON’T MOVE!!”

After close to a minute of incoherent shouting between both parties, the tasers were holstered, and Eddie was on one knee speaking sweetly to the woman in low, gargled tones.

“Sorry darling, we swear we saw Babo’s cousin peeking out through the blind. We had probable cause to enter your apartment.” Eddie’s eyes subconsciously flicked toward the cameras.

“Bullshit,” she replied.

“Just tell us where Babo is and we’ll be out of your hair.”

“I haven’t seen Babo since my wedding.”

“You’re married? Lucky man,” Bowers replied. The woman scoffed.

“He up and left. Fuckem.”

“Look, we know you know where Babo is.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, Nana told us everything.”

“Nana, the one who’s fucking Babo?”

“Yeah, the—eh?” Eddie turned to look at Billy with the high fade, then Darlene with the tight pony. They wore the

matching black uniforms of unlicensed law enforcement. The two junior agents looked at each other, back to Eddie, and shrugged.

* * * * *

The hunters and film crew returned to Nana's bungalow, where Darlene and Billy had gotten the fake tip just a few hours before. Despite being previously furnished, everything was gone. The greasy silhouettes of a refrigerator and stove along the kitchen wall were the only signs that anyone had ever lived in the house. Brandon could see Kyle, the camera op who'd filmed the previous visit, hiding his smile as he filmed Billy and Darlene's tantrums at being duped. Eventually, they ceased their stomping around the property and re-joined the group.

"How the hell they load everything up so fast, that's what I wanna know." Billy buttoned his remark by spitting a glob of brown saliva into the patch of flowers beside the front porch. The tobacco-laced spittle ensnared a small yellow flower, pulled it to the ground.

Darlene decided to begin punching a tree. The film crew stood around, filming each member's individual reactions.

Being bamboozled by a fugitive had done a real number of Eddie's mood. The giant man was hunched over on the steps

of the front porch, stewing in silence. Brandon, despite thinking the man was a complete idiot, kind of felt bad for the guy.

* * * * *

“He fucked *what now?*” Producer Jerry had a huge grin as he slammed the door to the van. They’d retreated within so as not to be overheard by the W.O.O.F. staff. The sound guy, Drew, smiled back, held up a corrective finger.

“Ah, ah, ah,” the man tutted. “He didn’t *fuck* anything. He *got* ass fucked with that giant baby bottle.”

Nina, Assistant Director, moaned, “no, no, no,” as she rubbed at her temples. “That’s fucking sick.”

The crew of *Power of Bowers: Season Two* were discussing the new exposé that had just dropped on TMZ regarding their show’s star, Eddie Bowers. Everyone had been on break at W.O.O.F. H.Q., when eight phones collectively exploded with notifications. A moment later, seven heads followed Eddie as he sprinted from his office door to the exit. His Fiero then disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Brandon had remained silent up to this point, but felt the need to speak. “That’s just a meme from Twitter. Eddie didn’t get you-knowed with a bottle, that’s disgusting. The article itself is just a bunch speculation in the form of terrible puns.

The only *real* thing is the photo. A single photo. Anything beyond that is purely speculative and, dare I say, destructive.”

His co-workers shared quick funny glances with each other before exploding into maniacal fits of laughter. Brandon didn’t understand what was happening. Nina had drunkenly ranted about the toxicity of kink shaming just a few nights ago. How was this any different?

Brandon decided to ask, “Nina, isn’t this just another form of kink shaming?”

The woman’s eyes bulged as her laugh shifted up another gear. When she finally stopped to catch her breath, she replied, “he’s wearing a fucking diaper. He’s probably a fucking pedophile. Fuck him.” The laughs petered out as everyone connected the dot Nina presented. The huddle went quiet, somber. There was nothing funny about pedos.

Brandon wanted to explain that it was likely the opposite. Men who dressed up like babies were usually attracted to older women, mothers. They wanted a strong matriarch who could care for them. It was emotional regression, or something. *Or something*, Brandon repeated in his mind. *Why do I care?*

What was he going to do, go research the fetish of men who liked to roleplay as babies, make a powerpoint or something? Why? Was he going to help Eddie navigate this PR

nightmare? Why did he care so much? Brandon didn't have any answers.

At the moment, he didn't want to be perceived as making light of potential pedophilia, so Brandon swallowed his thoughts and replied, "You're right. Fuck him."

* * * * *

Brandon had yet to admit to himself that'd gone out looking for Eddie, but that's exactly what he'd done. Was doing. He was driving the production van all around town, eyes peeled for a bright red sports car. Were his mother to hear of his current crusade, she would not have been surprised. "Why do latch onto people who will only hurt you?"

She'd bent his ear about it in middle school, when that Ryan kid got them thrown in juvie. Again in high school, when he TA'd for the weird math teacher, Gilly. The woman threw parties for the cool kids, rented them hotel rooms on the weekends. Brandon had, on many occasions, brought them takeout. He'd been a lead witness at the subsequent trial.

Even Brandon's current profession, a camera operator for a reality tv studio, had been the indirect result of him trusting the wrong uncle. Uncle Allen had moved to Los Angeles

to start a Professional Animal Actors enterprise, asked Brandon to come be his ‘number two’.

“He’s stolen my identity half a dozen times,” his mother had warned. Brandon wanted to believe that people could change, grow. He *had* to believe that. The animal actor business worked, for a while. Brandon was responsible for taking care of all the dogs, cats, and the chimp named Gary. Uncle Allen spent most nights networking, which meant drinking at clubs until two am.

Then Uncle Allen got his pets booked on the morning news. A minute into the live segment, Gary the chimp grabbed Coco the backflipping Shi Tzu by the tail, swung her into the floor with all his apey might. The broadcast had been on the wide shot when this happened, and thousands of families across the city had watched live as the poor little dog splattered across the concrete floor like a balloon full of ketchup.

Uncle Allen was last seen driving his Miata into Mexico. Not wanting to return home to his mother, Brandon pivoted to camera operator. This was only his second gig, and he was glad to be away from LA. What Brandon didn’t know was that he’d been named in a class action lawsuit regarding the morning show fiasco, would be served papers upon his return to the city of angels. According to all legal documenta-

tion, Brandon Hughes was the sole owner of Pet Actors Worldwide. Uncle Allen's name was nowhere to be found.

But now, in the present, Brandon was pulling up to Libations, the last of three strip clubs on the relatively small island of Kokomo.

He'd checked out Perky Pete's, even though he didn't see the Fiero in the parking lot. Eddie wasn't there, but Brandon did learn the locals had seen the TMZ report. The private photo was on all the TVs, and everyone was saying the same thing: "Eddie Bowers, Giant Baby!"

The image of a bodybuilder (and national celebrity) wearing a diaper while posing seductively inside a giant crib was just too good. Despite the turmoil such a revealing secret was sure to bring Eddie, the news seemed to have everyone else in high spirits. Wherever Brandon went, he found people smiling, laughing. Some painfully so, their unending cackles interrupted only by wheezy inhales. He didn't see a single frown as he drove up Main Street, head on a swivel.

Jiggle Time was boarded up, the sign on the door mentioning fire damage. Brandon saw now the black licks along the top of each window.

Walking back to the production van, Brandon heard a giggle bubble up from the alley between buildings. He looked over, saw an older black man on all fours beside a dumpster.

His clothes were deeply soiled, his hair unkempt and partially dreaded.

Brandon oddly found himself pondered if the homeless man had seen the TMZ article, if he knew who Eddie Bowers was, or if his laughter was unrelated. Then the man's neck snapped back violently, his head popping up, bright white eyes falling on Brandon. His laughter rose to a keening wail, and the dark figure was suddenly skittering up the alley, approaching fast.

Brandon sprinted to his car, slammed the door just as the as the feral human burst onto the street. He nearly ran him over in his escape, then high-tailed it to Libations. He was embarrassed by the number of times he'd checked the rear view mirror on the way.

Pulling into the lot, Brandon spotted the red Fiero. The nervous young man stepped through the thick, suede curtains into an open room. In the neon glow of the black lights, the back of Eddie's bleached mullet shown across the room like a beacon of hope for Brandon.

The life-size action figure was tucked into the last stool at the end of the curving bar, away from both stages. *Crime Mob's Stiletto*s blasted from the speakers mounted on the walls, the bass thumping through Brandon's chest, rumbling through his entire vessel. From his vantage point, he realized the space was designed to look like a pair of sagging tits. The bar

curved around the two stages, the poles mounted at the nipples.

Only one stage was illuminated. A thick, scantily-clad goddess gyrated her hips upon the dais, wore lime green panties and a matching boa. A discarded top laid at her feet. The lights made her glow like an angel. She was, in fact, wearing stilettos. Shadowed figures bowed at her feet, just outside the light. Bills spun in from all sides, forming small clusters of fortune around the woman who was now off the ground, upside down, spinning spread eagle around the chrome spire.

Brandon didn't care for such overt displays of sexuality, skirted the swaying crowd of men who, in the strange absence of light, appeared only half formed, semi-corporeal.

He took the stool two seats down from Eddie, waved the bartender over. Brandon ordered a Manhattan, pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, and shouted, "one more for him, whatever he got before." The bartender had to lean in to hear the words over the music, but he nodded, left.

When Brandon looked back toward Eddie, the giant's tiny eyes were trained on him. He likened it to a rabbit spying a bear. The young man, regretfully, jumped in his stool before composing himself and throwing Eddie a sad, empathetic nod. The enormous brute's only reaction was to turn away, return to staring into his glass.

In the hours since Brandon had seen Agent Bowers, a dark stubble had formed over the man's face. Paired with the black light, it made his perfect jaw look impossibly sharp, like it could slice a tomato.

When Brandon looked at Eddie, he did not see a creep who was wallowing in self-pity. He saw a good man who had been done bad. Brandon decided he wasn't going anywhere.

* * * * *

Eddie and Brandon were sprinting naked down the beach, giggling like school boys, when the sky opened and heavenly strips of gold and red and green danced across the sky, settled into complex geometric patterns. The incredible sight reminded Brandon of the single time he'd done mushrooms, specifically the kaleidoscopic effect he'd experience whenever he closed his eyes.

The nude duo stopped to crane their necks upward, ooo-ing and ahing drunkenly as they swayed on their feet. Brandon was the first to lose his balance and plop down onto his ass. Eddie's cheeks thumped into the sand a second later.

Eddie sighed, then whispered, "Thanks, bro. I was really in my head back at the bar, felt like I was inching toward some terrible ledge. You pulled me back."

After a couple drinks, Eddie started talking. They'd eventually left the tiddy bar and returned to the motel, where Brandon procured a camera. Eddie's claims of being a really good drunk driver turned out to be true. The pair had decided to shoot an action film.

Without a script, they ended up filming Eddie perform a number of physical feats along the boardwalk. Neither noticed how devoid of activity it had become, despite being the height of tourist season. First he tore a public bench from its bolts, hoisted it over his head, and threw it down onto the beach. When a pair of drunk young women stumbled up to them, Eddie lifted both of them up onto his shoulders and began kicking his feet about like he was a member of Riverdance.

The fun ended when one of them gleefully asked, "are you the giant baby everyone's talking about?" Both girls yelped as they were flung off their perches. The giant fled to the beach, audibly sobbing, and his young steward followed.

Brandon found Eddie recovered from the misstep, cheerfully stamping his feet in the sand as he peeled off his fishnet tank top. "A midnight streak is what we need," he'd proclaimed. Brandon found himself ecstatic at the suggestion, brought the camera along to hide his budding erection.

So when a cosmic miracle appeared above them, Brandon instinctively hit record, turned the lens toward the sky.

When he heard a gurgling come from his left, Brandon assumed Eddie was vomiting from too much alcohol. He turned to pat his big friend on the back, instead let out a shriek.

The large bodybuilder's back was bent forward, like his spine was a tautly drawn bow. Eddie's face was dark, buried in his huge hands. Brandon realized he wasn't gargling, but muttering in gruff tones. "They think I'm a monster. A monster!" The cracking of bone beneath flesh made Brandon's skin crawl, and he instinctively skittered back a few feet. He spun the camcorder, watched the horror play out through the LCD viewfinder.

Brandon's eyes bulged and his hands quivered as Eddie's muscles began to inflate like balloons. When the large man flung his head back, looked to the sky and cried out, his face was swollen like he'd been stung by a thousand bees. "RAAAH!"

The roar was deep and multi-toned, like Eddie had grown another throat. The dull *SUCK* of a joint being pulled from its socket sounded just as the celebrity's right shoulder jerked, and his too-large arm flopped to the sand, stretched longer and longer, muscles squirming beneath the skin like snakes in a sack.

Eddie hobbled to his feet on wobbly legs. He was nearly nine feet tall. Brandon had to zoom out to fit his whole body

in frame. His head was a third of that height, and his once sculpted chest was now an engorged lumpy barrel. While his right arm had outgrown the shoulder and was now had what looked like three separate elbows, the other arm had shriveled and curled into his chest like a vestigial limb.

His legs had not grown but the bones had bowed. They were too short for the oversized torso and head. His feet were pointed inward, making Eddie look less like a man and more look like a monstrously large toddler.

Brandon kept his eyes down on the small screen, was too terrified to flee. Then the giant monstrosity that was previously Eddie Bowers eked out a short, deep whimper, and plopped its ass back into the sand. Its massive head dropped as the creature moaned sorrowfully. Brandon's heart shattered.

He's not a monster, he's my friend. He is NOT a monster. Brandon looked up from his camcorder, resisted the urge to turn away in revulsion at what he saw. He looked a lot... *wetter* off-camera. "Eddie, are you okay?"

Mutant Eddie turned his enormous skull to look over at his friend, naked upon the sand. Brandon forced a smile, but all the creature seemed to notice was the camcorder, its black eye trained on his deformities. His face contorted into something akin to a snarling baboon, and Brandon realized he maybe shouldn't be filming any of this.

Brandon survived the encounter with Big Baby Eddie. Though his newly metamorphosed friend had clearly been mad about the camera, he didn't take it out on the camera *man*. Brandon had taken this to mean that Eddie still had a heart.

The disfigured mutant first tried to reach out with his giant hand, but whined at the dislocated shoulder. Then the baby kaiju reached with the left, looked down to find it also useless.

In the end, Eddie leaned in and bit the camcorder in half like it was made of jelly. The thing had shattered and sparked as Brandon yipped, rolled backwards, and broke into a sprint up the white sand beach. When he finally stopped to pant and rub at the hitch in his side, he'd made it halfway down the boardwalk. Looking back, Big Eddie was gone.

Brandon retrieved both his clothes and Eddie's, found the keys to the Fiero, and began searching for his friend who was definitely *NOT* a monster. He followed a trail of property damage. Flipped car here, toppled street light there. *He's guiding me, maybe*, Brandon hoped against reason.

The path of broken things ended at the local hospital, where Brandon found a circus of activity. It looked as though

nearly every squad car on the island was parked haphazardly in the lot, doors ajar, lights spinning. Brandon felt his heart sink.

He tried in vain to get answers from the officer guarding the perimeter. The hard-faced woman's clammy skin and inability to speak without stuttering led Brandon to believe she *too* had witnessed something that should never have existed.

Eventually, Brandon walked over and listened to a pretty newscaster holding a microphone as she spoke into a tripod-mounted camera. It was much larger than Brandon's hand-held rig, looked straight out of the nineties.

"Tonight, a tragedy has been avoided thanks to the daring work of the Kokomo Police Department. At approximately 7:23PM on the night of June 20th, a disfigured individual showing signs of active psychosis entered the hospital lobby. By happenstance, a few local officers were on the scene visiting Sergeant Bixby, who was shot in the line of duty just yesterday. Many more were already in route to the hospital when the crisis began."

"The assailant was believed to have been under the influence of extreme substances, as he displayed an impractical resistance to gunfire. Officers state the man would not hear reason and lethal force was deemed necessary. He was finally subdued just outside the new born viewing room.

“More than three hundred rounds were fired over the course of four minutes. Thankfully, no babies were harmed, but one bystander and two nurses are being treated for catching strays.”

Brandon watched from a distance as the woman stopped, shook her head. “I can’t say catching strays. That’s ghetto as hell. Do we even know if this is gonna air?”

The mustachioed man behind the camera replied, “Sure it is. This is has babies in danger. Everyone cares about babies.”

“I’m not questioning its juiciness, dipshit. Isn’t the black-out, like, nationwide or something? Are we even gonna be able to broadcast tomorrow?”

“Let’s just get it on tape.”

“To your other point,” the reporter continued, “with all the cult shit that’s been happening, *will* people care about this story? Some mutant freak *failing* to eat some babies doesn’t even rank in top ten craziest things to happen this week. I mean—just look up!”

Brandon turns and walks back to the red Fiero. He unclips the wraparound sunglasses from the blinder, slides the legs over his ears. He takes the fingerless gloves from the center console and dawns them, despite being made for much larger hands. The young man tilts the glasses down, looks at himself in the rear view mirror, gives himself a sad wink.

Brandon Hughes frowns as he fondles the rubber nipple atop the shifter, cries for the misunderstood man who was Eddie Bowers.

CLEAN SLATE

The whiteboard had just finished receiving one of Cheryl Doone's signature spray-and-wipes. The boards in the hall had been replaced thrice over the years, but this one was still the original. She could still remember watching her father mount it to the wall with an the electric screwdriver. *Back when we still had those*, she mused.

Cheryl closed her eyes, felt a calm satisfaction wash over her person. She had endured many hardships, felt things had finally settled for good. She could just... relax. On a related but more immediate note, all she had left to do was Final Tidy, and she'd be free for three whole days. Cheryl had intentionally foregone homework assignments earlier in the week, was looking forward to curling up beneath a blanket

and not moving for a long, long time. *Maybe I'll finally give that Wild Child series a crack. New fiction is hard to come by.*

Cheryl opened her eyes to find a monster standing in the doorway. A tall, pale beast with huge eyes and a face of white fur: the abominable snowman.

“Hoo!” In fright, Cheryl flailed her arms, kicked her feet out. She hollered as her tailbone met the hard floor, and then she was rolling, rubbing the top of her ass. Without intention, she began chanting through tightened vocal chords, “eoo, eoo, eoo!”

Donnie, Cheryl's late kid brother, was dedicated to torturing his sister with jump scares around every corner. The memory of his little life remained present and detailed in her mind, even after all these years. Back before the world went weird, he'd dubbed her a 'scaredy goat'.

There was a breed of goat whose instinctual reaction to predators was to lock their limbs and rigidly tumble onto their backs, legs to the sky, bodies and souls ready to be consumed. Donnie had shown her a YouTube video and they'd both laughed their butts off. *That's you*, he'd squeaked. Cheryl still dreamed of Donnie's death near every night.

Thankfully, here in the present, the thing in the doorway was *not* an active predator. From the floor, Cheryl could see now he was but a man. A tall man with an oddly thin frame, but a man all the same. He wore a suit and his hair was

combed. *Monsters don't wear suits*, she told herself. *Or comb their hair*. His reaction to her shriek and tumble was to bend his knees and extend his hands flat before his person. In a cartoony cadence the man yelled, “aww shoot, di’n’t meanta spookya!”

With a sore ass, Cheryl scrambled back to her feet, tried her best to brush past the embarrassing first encounter with the kind man before her, his cheeks reddening as he scratched his head. Then his color darkened further to an adorably beet red, and Cheryl had to smile.

The stark white side-part, the thick white eyebrows, the bushy moustache, they all made him look old. But behind the hair, she saw his face was soft. His skin was smooth, his large eyes devoid wrinkles, even as he gave her a sheepish smile. The silence stretched.

He wore a light gray suit jacket, matching pants, a white button-up, and a yellow tie. His sneakers were the only scrappy thing about him. *He's younger than me*, Cheryl realized. *By at least a decade, I surmise. Was he born with white hair?* After a brief internal calculation, she determined this man—though grown—had not lived through The Reckoning. They continued to smile and stare at each other. Neither felt the least bit uncomfortable in the silence, at least not at first.

He's got to be the tallest person on the planet, the older woman remarked, unable to pull her eyes away from him. Suddenly,

she remembered that time existed and quite a lot of it had passed since either had spoken. She cleared her throat as she smoothed her skirts, felt her neck burn. *What was the last thing he said? Sorry to scare you?*

“No, my mistake,” She blurted, pretending there hadn’t been a solid minute between call and response. “I’ve caused an entire classroom full of tots to breakdown crying with my false starts.” She threaded her fingers over her stomach and straightened her back, gave the man a flat smile. *What is happening to me?* Cheryl hadn’t gotten flustered over a boy since long before her marriage.

“Well, perhaps you can help me.” The man made of twigs stepped through the threshold between the classroom and the hall, put his hand out. “Nice to meet you, I’m Slick.”

Though Cheryl acknowledged the strange shift she felt vibrate through her neck and ears when she took his hand—the brief tingle in her fingers and toes—she did not understand it and her mind failed to record the unnerving sensation to memory.

Instead, she smiled with one side of her mouth, said, “that better be a nickname.”

* * * * *

Cheryl was the sole teacher in the small settlement of Gloverville, Carolina. They were the first town east of Augusta, just across old state lines. Travelers might stop for a meal, but no one ever stayed. They had a much livelier community during the first few years after The Reckoning, when gas was still being rationed out to the public and people still drove cars and pretended the technological recession would soon be over.

She was only nine when the world went weird, didn't really understand how cataclysmic the Carrington Event had been for the rest of the world outside her little bubble. Like most people who were still kids at the time, her memories of that time were vague, returned only in dreams. Nightmares. Little Donnie's eyes sagging out of their sockets.

Cheryl Doone had turned forty-three this past May. Her parents had passed two decades prior, her husband one. So had all but one of her children, Waylin Doone, who was grown and working in Atlanta for the Pan-American Republic. *The government has a new name every few years, but it's all the same idiots*, her father was like to say. Cheryl herself had nearly been taken by polio in her twenties, had used a cane until she'd stumbled across an old world book on physical therapy, retrained her muscles through months of persistence and pain.

And now I'm helping a crazy person plot their own unintentional suicide, Cheryl mused as she penciled out the calculation. *What is the plan, really?* She found herself blushing. *I guess I'll know soon enough,* she thought with newly rediscovered girlhood glee.

The man named Slick had petitioned her to plot a physical line between Gloverville and mainland Europe, one that arced up and over the Atlantic. When she asked why, he responded with a smirk, a cute little squint, and the words, "How bout I tell you over dinner after this is said and done?"

Cheryl felt her stomach get warm as she stuttered her ascent. Then she speedwalked out of the room, had herself a giggle in the storage room, and returned with an old world almanac and some textbooks. *Just be cool, like a cucumber,* she told herself as she slapped the stack of books onto her desk.

"Woah," Slick shouted, playful concern on his face. "They aren't making those anymore."

"You're right," Cheryl replied. She bent down, whispered to the well-preserved objects, "sorry, lil guys."

Thankfully, Cheryl didn't have much of an ego, so she wasn't entirely bothered by how difficult it proved to figure everything out. *You figured out how to make your own erasable ink when the markers started drying out, you can do this!*

The first hurdle was determining which formula they actually needed. She wasted a good chunk of time flipping

through Calculus, then Advanced Calculus, then down to Trigonometry, until finally realizing all they needed was simple geometry.

If she flattened the Earth to a circle, an arc between two points could be plotted with nothing more than a slightly smaller circle.

“And you can’t be more specific than ‘mainland Europe?’” She asked again.

“No, I cannot. Striking land is the important part.”

“Okay, well,” She replied, “here’s an arc from Gloverville to Vienna, which looked about center to Europe on the globe.” *Striking land? Is this man building a rocket or something?*

“I’m confused,” Slick said as he leaned down over the page. “This goes up and out of the atmosphere, doesn’t it?”

“I mean, I guess?” Cheryl had chosen to write the calculation with the smallest circle possible, producing the most prominent arc.

“You tryna get rid of me, woman??” He nearly shouted the question, and Cheryl felt a pang of unease, instinctively took a step back. She was alone here with this stranger. Nobody would be returning until Tuesday. *Why am I only just now realizing that?*

When she tried to speak to ease the tension, she found herself instead sputtering like a tot, a white hot terror biting

at her throat, threatening a wail. “N-no, no. How... How would I?” *Get rid of him? What??*

The man named Slick seemed to come back to himself, realized the effect he’d had on her. Cheryl, though still on edge, couldn’t help but tilt her head as she watched this man’s eyes well up, his pallid complexion turn all tomato in seconds. “I’m,” he said, then choked on the frog in his throat. “I’m very sorry for my outburst.”

When he suddenly dashed past her, for a split instant she’d thought he was moving in to kiss her, and her heart had swelled with a forbidden mix of fear and arousal. *This is real life, not one of those old world smuts the ladies from town love to read*, she reminded herself, slightly disappointed.

Cheryl turned to see the handsome, potentially dangerous stranger holding the globe in his hands. His voice was unsteady, his speech over-enunciated, like he might still break down crying at any moment, was willing himself not to do so. “Thank you for helping me, Miss Doone. Would it be possible to redo the calculation with a lower arc, perhaps one that starts off around twenty-five degrees? And could you visualize it on this globe with some string or something?”

Cheryl nodded, the spike of fear dissolving into frustration. She was growing weary of this strange game. *This man is a child. And what is he plotting?* If she didn’t know any better,

she'd've said the man was planning to climb into a rocket, probably homemade. *He'll kill himself if he does that.*

"I'ma go have a smoke. Meet me out in that field," he said, pointing at the window. "Bring the globe and a protractor, please and thank you." He replaced the globe on the table, made for the door. *Cigarettes? Eugh!*

Cheryl found a broken guitar string in her junk drawer, cut it with pliers and poked it into the globe at the two chosen points. It wasn't accurate to the calculation, but she was done pandering to this man just because he had nice teeth and wore the same cologne her father had.

As she was drawing up the amended calculation, her mind bounced back over the past thirty odd years since the storm, how many tales she'd since heard of fools getting themselves killed. She'd read about the dead cults who were always burning themselves in rituals; the national press loved to report on such things.

There were also the paradoxical luddite inventors, those whose religions believed the ways of the old world had directly caused the Carrington Event. These makers were forbade from the relics of the past, but still dreamed of innovation. Cheryl thought maybe this man was one of them, thought he hadn't objected to the use of old world literature.

Naturally, very few newspapers were run by the luddites, as they had yet to rediscover the litany of technologies that

made the printing press possible. Instead, these enthusiastic inventors were oft reported on for comedic relief by the national press. *Luddite Inventor Rediscovered Wheel, Runs Himself Over With It* was the headline for an inventor who'd actually built his own steam engine from scratch. An impressive feat, no matter one's religion. He then made the mistake of strapping the engine to a giant wheel with a seat inside it. Lacking any stabilization, the inventor was immediately flung forward from his chair and crushed beneath his invention. This is how he would be remembered.

As she gathered up the globe and her notebook, Cheryl decided she would demand an explanation *before* they went to dinner. If this man was a loon, or willfully ignorant, she would *not* be entertaining him past their little experiment. *Besides, I have half a lemon meringue sitting on the counter back home. I'll choose sweets over most men's company.*

Cheryl stepped onto the brown, patchy field of dirt and dead grass. She'd helped her father sod the land as a teen, back when they first founded the school.

The scientific duo used a compass and the branch of a red maple to actualize their calculations. The tree branch was, supposedly, pointed directly at the center of Europe. The man—who in the golden light of dusk looked even more striking than before—was lifting his arm up and down be-

fore him, hand doing a slow chop parallel with the eastward-facing stick.

“Maybe we measure it again,” Slick muttered, the compass in his fist rattling as he shook. All suaveness had evaporated from his personality over the past ten or so minutes in the field. The man before her had actively devolved into a nervous wreck, looked like he was nearing a breaking point.

“I think that would put us in the double digits,” she replied, trying and failing to hide the annoyance in her voice. Despite the warm light, the wind in his hair, and the autumn backdrop making him look like the love interest in an old world rom com, Cheryl was entirely over this man’s inherent charm. *So over it*, she tried to convince herself.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Slick sighed. He let out a long moan that grew into a shout as he began to bounce his shoulders, his hands forming fists that pumped the air. “C’mon, c’mon! It’s go time!” He hopped in place, then settled, his soft features hardening into a look of determination. It was, Cheryl had to admit, rather adorable. *Okay, maybe I still give him a shot.*

“And after you do whatever it is you’re doing, you’ll explain it all over dinner?” Cheryl found herself blushing. In an attempt to flirt, she added, “You’re paying, of course.”

“Of course,” Slick repeated back, but there was a sadness to his smile that made Cheryl doubt her own ability to charm.

“This last part ain’t gonna be super precise, but it’ll hafta do. Ya got the protractor?” Cheryl held up the small piece of flat metal. It had been made in the early oughts, back before the world changed. She’d had to etch her own lines many years ago, after the original paint had flaked away to nothing.

Slick positioned his feet on either side of the maple branch. “Arright. Get level with muh squat,” he said as he bent his knees and arched his back, straightened one arm out before him. “Tell me when my arm’s at twenty-five degrees.”

Cheryl sighed, hiked her skirts and dropped to one knee in a small patch of brown grass. *What am I doing?* “Your back looks like a question mark.”

“Oh, thank you,” the white-haired stud replied, his spine straightening in response.

“Up just a little bit. There you go, twenty-five degrees.” Cheryl stayed kneeling, waited to see what this fool was planning to do. The last thing she expected was for him to reach up and grab the collar of his shirt, give it a tentative tug. *Oh my god. OH MY GOD.*

From what she’d just witnessed, this man was under the delusion that he would be able to fling himself across the Atlantic. She found herself laughing enthusiastically, slapped a hand over her mouth when Slick turned to glare.

“You’ll need to look away now,” he said, completely serious. She lowered her hand, shot him a look of defiance, laughed louder.

The man’s eyes widened unnaturally, veiny sacks bulging out of his skull as he bellowed, “TURN. AROUND.” His voice was unnaturally strong, so much so it made the base of her skull ache. All of Cheryl’s attraction for this odd stranger that had been percolating in her heart burst at the terrifying sight before her, was replaced by an animalistic fear as his lips curled into a snarl. Then, just as quickly, her fear was replaced by anger, and then embarrassment. *What a dick!*

Cheryl rolled her eyes, obliged with open indignation. *Petulant child, asshole man.* Once she’d turned away, she intended to *continue* turning, steal a peek from over her other shoulder the moment he thought she’d obeyed. She didn’t get the chance.

A massive concussive blast threw the forty-three-year-old woman face-first into the dirt, hard enough she heard a tooth crack. And then she was tumbling, rolling, somersaulting across the field. She finally stopped when she slammed painfully into the rusted chain link fence that surrounded the field, plopped to the dirt in a heap.

Cheryl moaned, disoriented by the explosive force that had thrown her. She spit blood, and her tongue discovered one front tooth broken, the other dangling by its nerve. She

couldn't move her right arm, was pretty sure it was broken. Dust filled the air, and Cheryl got to experience the pain that coughing brought to internal injuries. Then she remembered the stranger, and her heart sank. *Did he just blow himself up? Or did something crash to Earth? What WAS that??*

The field was a cloud of pale orange, and it took more than a minute for her to see through the haze to where Slick had been. The man was gone. *No flames or body parts, so he hasn't blown himself up*, she thought. *Small consolation, I guess.*

Despite all logic, Cheryl found herself searching the eastern sky for a flying man in a pale grey suit. She saw nothing, thought she did, for one instant, swear she'd seen a twinkle of light. *Like the Sun reflecting off the face of a watch*, Cheryl theorized before shaking the absurd notion from her mind. Had Slick been wearing a watch? She wasn't sure.

It was a twenty minute walk into town, but it took her near double. She told Doc Roberts that she'd been climbing a tree, slipped, and hit multiple branches on the way down.

Cheryl Doone would live for another twenty-three years and die peacefully, surrounded by her grandchildren, her veins pumping with ample amounts of meds. She never told anyone about that single afternoon she'd spent with the pale stranger, even at the end.

When she closed her eyes for the final time, Cheryl dreamed of a candlelit dinner atop a white stone dais that

overlooked a beautiful valley. The man across the table had aged greatly—far more than twenty years—and his white hair now befit the rest of his person. He answered all her questions, and kissed her wherever she told him to.

* * * * *

At approximately three hundred hours, on the morning of May 16th, 2046, a great boom was heard across half of continental Europe. The location of the mysterious explosion was determined to be somewhere within the Swiss Alps, though no one was every able to agree on what exactly had caused it.

The story was forgotten about rather quickly, replaced by a troubling rise in unexplainable deaths, disappearances, and disasters across the continent. The fact that the former explained the latter was never directly connected.

THANK YOU

Hello, y'all. If you're reading this, it means I love you. I am so grateful for your support, and I really hope you are enjoying these works. Hopefully, you're starting to get a sense of how these seemingly random shorts are actually far more connected than they appear. Summer Culling isn't just a collection of shorts, but a foundation for the larger world of Post Carrington.

To be honest, I didn't have much of a plan when I released the first volume. I was originally thinking I'd return to *Spring Peeling*, my first novel. After reading the manuscript, I loved it, but found I was still buzzing to write more short stories, to continue fleshing out the world of Post Carrington.

It wasn't until I actualized all the shorts, put their titles on little squares of paper and stuck them to my wall that I saw

how much I had already done. *Summer Culling* covers the Post Carrington timeline leading up to *Spring Peeling*, which takes place roughly eighty years after the eponymous solar storm. Turned out, I'd already put a good chunk of that timespan to paper!

So the plan to release more volumes over the coming year was born. Each volume, while containing nightmares from the Carrington Event, also loosely covers a period of Stig's life leading up to the first novel. This volume was perhaps his most painful: the years following his escape from The Worthy. (*Yes, Stig is the little boy in Summit from V.1*)

He has a much better run of things in Europe, which will be covered in Volume Three. Ironically, you won't see much of him, but his team of cosmic investigators are some of my favorite characters I have written thus far. I definitely think they could (and should!) have their own book series, but that won't happen for quite a while.

My hope this time around is to complete Volume Three early, so that I can spend the month leading up to its release creating supplemental content around the stories, perhaps animated vignettes, or an audio drama. I don't know yet.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to the fundraising campaign I ran on my Ko-Fi. It is deeply important to me that these works remain completely free for all to download, and you helped ensure that. Though I didn't re-

veal it at the time, this was a trial run for the Kickstarter I plan to roll out in spring. With very little promotion, I was able to raise about 1/5th of what we'll need to make the book happen. Come spring, we'll be doing a crowdfund on Kickstarter, with the goal of getting a physical edition of all four volumes pressed and unleashed upon the world.

Alright y'all, I'm gonna go have myself what is sure to be a terrible steak and a glass of wine to celebrate the completion of Volume Two. I'll speak to you again in December, when Volume Three drops.

Bye bye!!

Sincerely,
Jon Smith