



DIAL-UP

WRITING ZINE

DIAL-UP

A SPIRIT PHONE INSPIRED WRITING ZINE

LEMON DEMON FANZINE
MOBIUS STRIP CLUB

The authors would like to dedicate this publication to
Aud, Morgan, Sarah Hindmarsh, Bryce Brutal,
Mere Little, Heather & Patrick Williams, Holly Anderson,
Jimmy, Maria, Steve, Linda, & Felix's four birds and one cat.

Mobius Strip Club (joinmobiusstrip.club)
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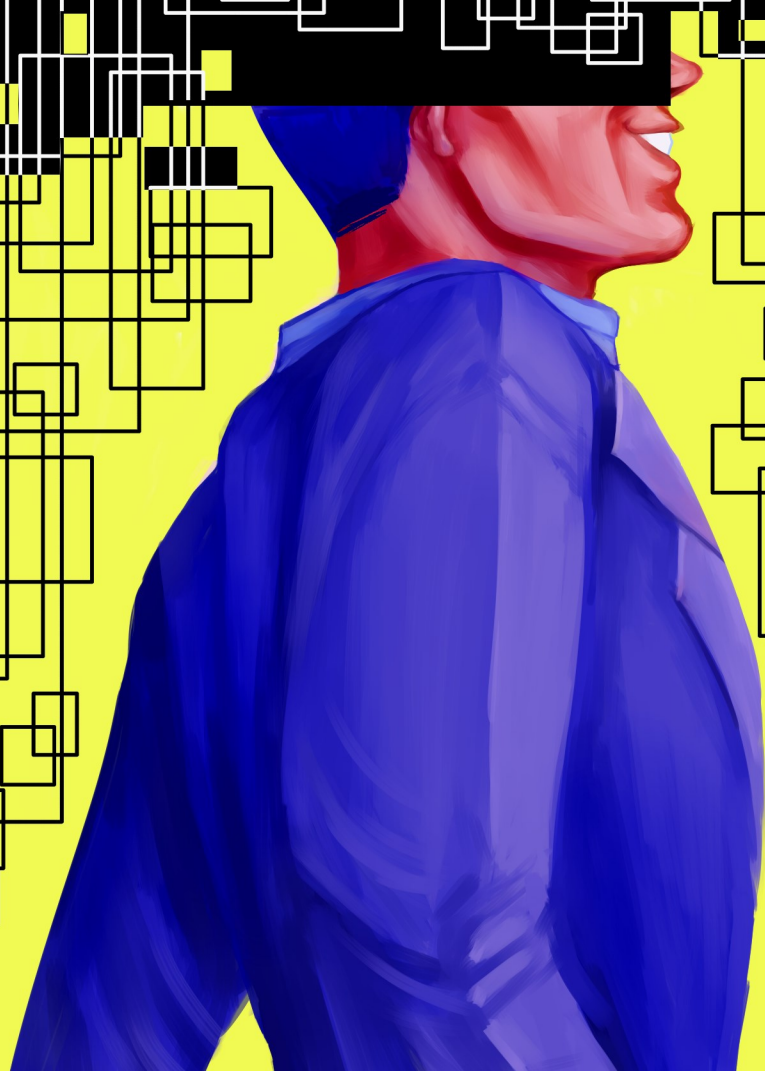
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Richard Thurston

Feb 29th, 2020, 5:00 PM

<richardthurston50@gmail.com>

to me

Herbert,

Hello, my good friend! I hope that this message finds you in good spirits, and that your excursion to Appalachia is treating you well! Yes, feel free to pick your jaw up off the ground. This isn't a dream, nor is it one of those mass delusions you teach your students about. This old fossil is finally embracing electronic communication! And it only took me several hours, a stiff drink, and a very patient grandson.

I'm contacting you to inform you of a very exciting purchase I made at auction recently, one I think you will be very interested to hear about. I'm sure by now you've heard about the passing of Maximillian Albrecht and, like me, I doubt it bothered you that much. I don't like speaking ill of the dead, but as you and I both agree, people like Maximilian, who snatch up rare texts and lock them away in private collections, are only worth maybe a thimbleful of grief.

Well, I attended his estate auction last night, hoping to purchase and redistribute some of the

dragon's hoard. Unfortunately, some artifacts did slip through my grasp into the clutches of more of Albrecht's ilk. However, I did snag two items I think you'll be particularly interested in. A set of blueprints for a particular office building in Manhattan, and a first-hand, written account of the most infamous case of mass hysteria in American history. I am referring, of course, to the 1965 Gömböc Incident.

That's right. I have, sitting on my desk right now, a written account from one of the affected. God knows how Albrecht got his hands on it. Of course, knowing your fascination with such ghoulish matters, I'd be more than happy to pass the document, as well as the blueprint, on to you. I'm sure Miskawhosit University's library would benefit from the addition of such valuable documents.

I've included a scan of the written document below. For some reason, we can't get the blueprints to scan. We keep getting a blank error message (so much for technological advancement), so I'll just hand it off to you in person when you're back in town. In the meantime, happy reading.

*Best regards,
Richard*

Still, I think it's important to document all of the valuable work that we've been doing here over the past few weeks. Never before have I seen a team come together and accomplish so much. We've truly been living up to the company motto: "Others work hard, we work harder!"

In all honesty, I had my doubts at first. I mean, we all did. When we found out that József Gömböc would be designing the company's new Manhattan headquarters, there were a lot of mixed feelings. I mean, we all knew the man was a genius. All you had to do was look at his work to understand that. In the world of corporate construction, he was a god. Other architects built skyscrapers. Gömböc built silhouettes. He built skylines. He built symbols of your company that towered over all and reminded everyone of its greatness.

However, at the time, we also all thought of him as a bit of a nut. I mean, we all knew the stories about how he was going a bit cuckoo in his old age. How he refused to go outside during the day, how he insisted on everyone wearing sunglasses around him so that he wouldn't have to look at their "awful orbs," how he blew up on that one client for offering him an orange. Also, I will admit, his decision to swan dive out of his 16th story penthouse apartment the night before the building opened definitely put a damper on the opening ceremony.

That note he left behind before jumping certainly didn't help either; three pages worth of ravings about right angles and rectangles, capped off with "now if you'll excuse me, the moon is full tonight, and I'm going to go show that round lunar bastard who's really in charge." All in all, it wasn't a great look. At least, that's how we felt at first. Of course, now we understand that there's nothing crazy about wanting to fight the moon. Hell, if the moon was here right now, I'd kick its ass. Circular asshole. [][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][]

I admit, it took awhile for me to "get" it. It seems like everyone else in the office heard His word before I did. As a result, I was lost and confused those first few weeks. I couldn't understand why Walter kept drawing rectangles on his face in pen, or why Agnes kept arranging the pencils on her desk into perfectly rectangular groups of four. In my ignorance, I even committed an ultimate sin by bringing donuts to work one Friday to offer my employees. They, of course, responded by hissing and screaming at me, some even throwing staplers or their own shoes. [][][][][][][][][]

Of course, now I realize that this was a perfectly reasonable reaction. An overly merciful reaction, even. If someone were to offer me such a blasphemous confection now, I would likely take them to the ground and shake the meat of their throat between my teeth

reading this will likely think I'm mad. To that person, I encourage them to think about their life. Really think about it. [][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][][]

You wake up every morning on your rectangular bed, get out from under your rectangular sheets, and walk through your rectangular door. You pull your rectangular blinds aside from your rectangular window to look upon the gargantuan rectangular structures that dot the landscape. You rummage through your rectangular fridge, and read your rectangular newspaper, while eating a rectangular toaster pastry.

And yet, with all these rectangles in your life, have you ever seen one occur naturally in nature? No, you haven't, because they don't exist there. So, how did they get here? Do you honestly think we came up with them ourselves? With our horrible, inferior, round brains? No.

He gave them to us. He saw us struggling in the mud and dirt, so He bestowed upon our minds an image of His form, and with it we built civilizations. [][][][]

Now it is time to repay His generosity by bringing Him through. He wishes to look upon the world He helped create. Our reality has been blessed with His image, but it is still imperfect. Once He arrives, He will fix this wretched, spherical world. We look around and we see Him everywhere, yet we do not understand Him. We do not understand all He has done for us.

HEISNOTMANMADE.

HEMADEMAN.

= BITTER = SWEETTOOTH



"it's not witchcraft. it's healthy living."

I'm often told I have quite the sweet tooth for someone so in shape. I always found that to be a weird thing to say to someone, yet I hear it more than you would expect. It's like when people see an athletic or good looking guy splurging on something sweet or "unhealthy" they must think there's some kind of trick. I mean, you know Michael Phelps, right? Olympic gold medalist for swimming? He eats junk food all the time, and he's still a star studded athlete. It's all about balance and keeping in shape. If you can exercise off the carbs and the sugar, why not eat as much as you want? I exercise daily. I participate in marathons, triathlons, pentathlons. I compete at varsity levels for multiple sports at my college. I help train with kids on weekends. I have time for my sweets. It's not witchcraft. It's healthy living.

Except when people say that to me, I don't really have an answer. Besides what I just told you, at least. I told my friend that it wasn't a trick, like I said, that it was balance and exercise and a healthy diet alongside my sugar splurges that got me to where I was.

"Come on, don't give me that bullshit. Dude, I've known you, like, my whole life," he replied one day, while we were at Dunkin Donuts and I had just downed my third of the titular donuts. "Your transformation could land you on Ellen. You seriously look like the after pic of a before and after scam ad you see on a shady

website.”

“It sounds like you’re roasting me, but with compliments,” I replied with an unserious chuckle.

“Seriously though. How did you do it? You were never a gym rat. You never had a talented coach or nutritional knowledge or a sport you were really good at and interested in, and because of that you like got into computers and all that bullshit that goes right over my head. And then, one day I blinked and you were bigger than me. Jacked athletic champion I.T. help seems like an oxymoron and yet here you are!” he continued. I could feel my jokey smirk start to fade as he went on. This wasn’t just him poking fun at me. I felt like this seriously bothered him. It started to bother me, too, because, again... I didn’t know what to say.

“Well... I’m not sure,” I mumbled.

“You should figure it out, then,” he managed a small laugh, “Shit could get you rich.”

I thought it was genetic for a while after that. It made logical sense to me, at least. My dad was quite the accomplished athlete— marathon runner, college level super star, nearly qualified for the olympics, you know, all that. Stuff things people with athletic talent do. He died soon before he could get really big— and soon after I was born— but everyone (myself included) around my town knew him as some sort of local legend. It makes

sense that I would have inherited some of his athletic genes, or however that works. I'm good with computers, not genetics. And then, my more sickly and weak side that haunted my younger years, I inherited from my mother.

My mom and dad were possibly one of the more odd couples you could have seen together. She wasn't exactly popular or pretty when they met in high school at the local church they went to, and he was the star of the football team. She suffered from a lot of physical ailments like I did when I was a kid, and he was pretty much a perfect specimen as far as anyone was concerned. But, hey, I don't know how love works either. Some things will just be left unexplained.

Bottom line is I just assumed my strange transformation and life story was a result of strange genetics.

Still, the line about me getting rich off this transformative story or whatever stuck with me, and I was just guessing. I thought I might as well go see my mother about my childhood, considering she was a pretty big figure in my life. And when I say big, I mean, crazy-controlling-protective-up-the-wazoo big.

How my mom's sister explained it to me was like this: after my dad died, my mom had nothing left but me. So she began to obsess over me, forcing me to do what she wanted-- or rather, what she thought my dad

would have wanted me to do. My dad died when I was 5, by the way, and the only memory I have of him is him sitting on the couch with me watching Looney Tunes and him eating honey straight out of the jar— and giving me some as well. I guess that's another thing I inherited from him— his sweet tooth.

My aunt said as I got older, my mom basically used me as a replacement for her husband. Not in a weird way or anything, just that she'd spend time with me doing all the things she used to do with my dad— go on runs, family outings, fun things, the works. I wasn't the best with all the things she wanted me to do thanks to my asthma and general lack of any athletics at all. Nonetheless, she didn't give up hope on me. She wanted me to be an athlete like my dad was, and wasn't going to let anything stop her. She was super stubborn, especially with her own hippie beliefs.

I mean, she was a real nut job when it came to that kind of stuff. She would only ever use home remedies for illnesses or anything like that. For the record, it worked, but she was near obsessive with how much she proclaimed her way of doing things was not only the right way, but the best and only way to go about living. She put me on this specific diet that would help me on my way to stardom or whatever. That also, for the record, worked. That, and her push for me to be more active and healthy, is where my transformation took

place. She always told me, “you have more of your father in you than you know” when I felt her efforts were fruitless. I guess she was right.

The only sweet thing she'd let me have in that diet was this homemade honey dessert that I absolutely loved. She never really called the recipe anything, just that she got it from dad, so I could never find it anywhere else. It was this super sweet honey candy with some other salty, bitter component that made it just bearable enough to not be teethrottingly sweet. She would say it was a tribute to dad, 'cuz he loved honey and all things sweet. Even as a kid, I knew that dad meant a lot to her. I knew that she'd never let him go, no matter how much time had passed. I mean, I'm kinda living proof of that. She thrust his legacy upon me to keep his memory alive, even though, when I was a kid, I was nothing like him.

After I graduated highschool and went to college on an athletic scholarship, I didn't talk to her that much. I guess that's usually what kids smothered by parents do. I needed time to myself, you know? My growth was always alongside mom. Metamorphosis from an awkward weak kid to a tough jock was all by her side. I love her for it, for pushing me and helping me, but still... It was my life to live. I didn't visit her again until she was diagnosed with cancer.

Unsurprisingly, she was stubborn and refused

treatments the hospital recommended her. She kept with her hippie lifestyle and gave herself a strict diet like she gave to me and a routine to keep her healthy. My aunt said she only ate that honey dessert she made for me. Upon hearing this, I visited her and tried to talk her out of it. I thought it would kill her, and I'd be an orphan, and that's the last thing on Earth any kid wants. She didn't listen to me, again, unsurprisingly. I was more upset than I'd ever been in my entire life. It felt like my life was falling apart. I didn't want to lose my mom, but I didn't know what to do. I couldn't convince her. It was a futile effort.

It was a dark time for me, and I had no one to turn to. For the first time in years, I visited my dad's memorial at the cemetery. I took out the urn from the niche and... spoke to it. I don't know what came over me. I just wailed at the inanimate object, yelling about why he couldn't be here, and why he could've helped me, and all that irrational shit that comes with delirious sadness and helplessness. To me, then, I couldn't stop thinking about how different I would've been now if my dad had never died. I don't know what came over me, but I was just so sad and angry at the world at that moment. I just kicked the base of the niche and knocked the urn over. In that one moment my anger and sadness dissipated and were replaced with fear.

Then, my fear was replaced with confusion.

The urn tipped over and emptied... absolutely no ashes.

There was nothing in it.

If I wasn't talking to anything before, I sure as hell wasn't now.

I stormed over to the memorial director who took care of my dad's body in a state of utter distress. I demanded to know why the hell the urn was empty. Where the hell were the ashes? Was my dad's body burned at all? Was there even a body? Was my dad even dead?

Yeah, I was hysterical, I'll admit it, but I had the right to be. The director stopped my mad ravings with a sorrowful expression and a guilty tone. He proceeded to explain to me what happened. A short while after the body arrived at the crematorium, it disappeared. Up in smoke. No trace left behind at all. The director didn't tell anyone, not even my mother, because that would put him out of a business. Who would go to a crematorium that loses bodies? Plus, he said, my mom was extremely broken up over his death and he didn't want to make matters worse. He planned on telling my mother eventually, but... it just fell through the cracks, and he never did.

Maybe it was my shock. Maybe it was just how crazy and outlandish the story was. Maybe it's because I was raised to be compliant, but I didn't press charges.

Hell, I didn't even tell my goddamn mother. She was already under enough stress from cancer. I swallowed the secret of my dad's body and went back to college. I tried to continue living, despite thinking about that fucked up discovery back at the cemetery every day. Then I thought about how fucked up it was every other day. Then, once a week. After a while, I completely forgot about it, until I got the news that my mom's tumor had gone into "spontaneous remission". After refusing all treatment— even painkillers— she was better like nothing had ever happened. They said it's odd, but possible. The body's sudden detection of the malignant tumor and immune response could've been the result of a fever or digesting something bad.

After I heard that, and after my friend pressured me to find out how exactly I became an athlete superstar after being the kid people would push into lockers, is when I decided to visit her again after all that time.

She looked fine. Really, she did. She looked healthy and robust, and you would've never guessed she was a survivor of cancer. She continued living life like nothing changed— going on hikes, on outings, and to the gym.

That night, I sat her down to tell her the news— but I couldn't do it. I didn't have the heart. She served that dessert she made and talked about dad again. She

said that dad was still here with us, inside of us, and that it was his strength that allowed her to be strong and beat cancer. It was so hard to hear, knowing what I knew. Out of the blue, while she was reminiscing, I just blurted it out.

“Mom,” I said.

“Yes, honey?”

“Dad’s body isn’t at the cemetery,” I choked out.

“Well, of course it isn’t. He was cremated,” She looked a little confused, and the slightest bit concerned— most likely because of how disgusted I looked.

“No, I mean— I visited him a while back. The urn— it’s empty. There were no ashes. The funeral director— he said that he wasn’t cremated. There was no body. It went missing, and, and he never told anyone.” It was such a fucking morbid situation to me. Visceral. I felt like I was going to throw up.

She didn’t reply. She didn’t seem to have any emotional response for a second. She just looked at me, straight faced. I assumed she was shocked. I could feel tears well up in my eyes as I continued, guilt ridden.

“I’m sorry— I should have told you earlier, but, but, your, your cancer, and— and—” I felt tears running down my face. I was overwhelmed with emotion— like everything I tried to push away after finding out my father’s father came rushing back to me all in this

moment, spilling out of my body and onto my mom's dinner table. "I lied to you, I'm sorry, I..."

It's like her emotions suddenly kicked in again after seeing me blubbering like a kid. She placed a hand on my shoulder and looked at me sympathetically.

"Sweetie, it's alright," she cooed, and after a second, I regained my composure and wiped the tears from my eyes. I didn't know what else to say, so she said it for me. "I'm not mad at you. Heck, I'm not mad at all."

That really caught me off guard. My sadness was once again allayed by confusion. "...huh?"

"I've already made peace with it. There's nothing for you to be upset about, and you didn't let me down. I'm fine," she continued, like this was a truth she always knew.

"But— well— I thought— that was fast," I fumbled over my words, no longer out of guilt but perplexion.

She chuckled and pulled me into a hug, and we went along with the night like everything was normal. She seemed content with the fact that her husband's body just... went missing. I couldn't even begin to comprehend it. She was never the type to let anything go. She was stubborn, and controlling, and obsessive— especially about dad. Only minutes ago, she was talking about honoring Dad's memory, yet upon hearing that his body was possibly stolen, she was just... fine? All "no problem", "forget about it", "it's okay"? That didn't

make an ounce of sense. She was steadfast in her beliefs and never changed. Here she is, making the most out-of-character move to the most bizarre situation I've ever heard of. It was almost too much for my brain.

I stayed over at her house that night, and slept in my old room. She hasn't changed it at all from how I left it. I couldn't sleep. Not a single minute. I laid awake in my bed, staring up at the ceiling. And then I was pacing around my shag carpeted floor. And then I was walking in circles around the marble kitchen island. My brain was mush, just thinking and thinking about all of the strange shit that's happened to me over and over again. I transformed from a shrimp to a bear in a year. My health conditions don't affect me anymore. My dad's body went missing. My mom recovered from cancer without any treatment.

I ate all of the honey dessert my mom had in the freezer.

I was in a fugue state. I don't know what came over me. I was panic eating, and I just had to have more of that. I don't know why. I just needed to.

There was no sleeping after that. I went on a midnight run. I must've gone around the entire town. I circled the park maybe 7 times. I wasn't tired. I returned home at the crack of dawn and sat in the corner of the living room couch, holding my legs to my chest, and watching the sun rise.

When my mom woke up that morning I told her I was going to leave that day to go back to college. She was sad, but understanding. “At least let me pack you some of your favorite dessert to go,” she said.

Looking in the freezer, she blinked, and then looked back at me, staring out the window again.

“I’ll have to make a quick run to the store,” she said.

She left a few moments later, and as the door slammed shut behind her I stood up. Something came over me right then. A night of roaming the town alone and a life of being controlled does something to you. I never took my life into my own hands. My mom just imported my dad into me, like that’d make up for his death. I was never my own person. I never did anything for myself.

I left the house minutes after my mom and followed her from a distance. I don’t know why, but I just needed to know. So much about my life is confusing and fucked up and strange and I never questioned why or how because my mom made it normal. I wanted to see what it was. And I didn’t even know what it was. I was delirious with the need for an explanation. I wanted answers. So, yeah, I spied on her.

She went across town to an older part of it. The stores were dilapidated and historical. It was a walk long and arduous, and not just because of the

considerable distance. Every step I took felt like another situation to deal with. Like it was just another weight to carry. My moves were rigid, yet fast, yet calculated, like at any point she would turn around and stare right at me and scream. She didn't, though. She never noticed me, or seemed even suspicious that someone was following her. She seemed calm and content, but in a way that was foreign to me. It wasn't the same calm I saw her comforting me with only a handful of hours ago. It was more like a calm someone needs to be under before firing a rifle.

She went into a store called Melli's Confections, an old-timey candy shop. It was painted red with gold lettering, with patterned wallpaper and big glass jugs of saltwater taffy. She was greeted by my uncle on my dad's side and welcomed into the store. I watched as my uncle guided her to a "STAFF ONLY" door, unlocked it, and opened it up for her, as she descended down a staircase enclosed in the room. She disappeared in the darkness and he closed the door, and didn't lock it behind him. I entered a bit after, covering my face with my jacket, and pretended to accidentally knock over a candy display to divert his attention as I slipped over to the room and snuck inside.

The staircase was dark, just as I saw it was from outside. It was hard concrete, and I could see a dirt floor at the bottom of it. The walls were chipped bricks with

faded colors. It felt like there was no air in there. It smelled sweet and sick, like if a honey glazed ham was kept in the sun for too long. It got no cooler as I descended. The smell hung in the air and got more intense as I crept along, trying to keep as quiet as possible. There was the quiet hum of an air conditioner from somewhere in the room as I got closer to the bottom— though it was still not cold at all. The heat in the room must have been completely cranked up. Sweat gathered on my face— I had to concentrate my muscles to not make a sound, and the heat was not helping.

As I reached the bottom I found small bits of grass and flowers sprouting out of where the concrete stairs met the dirt floor, and the dilapidated wall that enclosed the room was only interrupted by a single window to the outside world that served as the only light source in the room. The warm sunlight poured through the small spaces it could through the iron grate, settling on the barely disturbed dirt floor as I turned my attention to the object that was kept in this room, to the reason this place was kept.

It was encased in glass— a huge glass jar, much wider than it was tall, with the similarly glass top tossed to the side. The contents were a beautiful golden yellow-orange. The few sunbeams that illuminated the room gave it the appearance of actual gold for a second— glistening, bright, thick, translucent, sticky. The

intoxicatingly sweet smell tipped me off to what it really was— honey. The scent surrounded me— it was drowning me. I could taste the candy flavor of that golden syrup as I continued to stare at the bathtub of it in the middle of this basement.

The glassy texture of both the container and the honey allowed me to see within the cavity inducing mixture. There were little bits of something floating amongst the liquid, like bugs caught in a spider web. That's what I thought they were, until I realized what the specs were--and what they originated from.

Dark and pale. Sitting— swimming— peacefully amongst the pure gold. Familiar, familial. Spindly limbs finished with a hand missing fingers and fingers missing fingernails and fingertips. A face with a nose that mirrored my own, faded irises still staring up at his wife, and a slightly ajar mouth, permanently full of his favorite drink. Ivory white bones were visible behind the patchy bits of green skin that had been mixed in— making the orange faded and dark in the ill-lit basement. Sections had been removed entirely from the body to be coated in honey entirely like a delicacy. A silver spoon held delicately in my mom's hand, one I had never seen before, used only for this purpose, scooping up droplets of sugary sweet honey and rotting faded flesh.

My candied, dead dad.

“It was consensual,” was the first thing she said to me. “He wanted this. He prepared for years for this. He only wanted what was best for you.”

“It’s all healing. It made you what you are, it saved me from cancer, it is our lives. We owe it all to his love.”

“You’ll always carry your father within you.” She used to say to me.

“He’s inside of us.”

“There’s more of him in you than you know.”

I exercise daily. I participate in marathons, triathlons, pentathlons. I compete at varsity levels for multiple sports at my college. I help train with kids on weekends. I have time for my sweets.

It’s not witchcraft.

It’s healthy living.

THE MAN FROM HOO-ACK



If Wallace Weekly had been given a choice, he would've been somewhere interesting, looking into a government that didn't need him to. When the boss had picked the number out of a hat, he had hoped he would've been sent to Austin, Texas or Memphis, Tennessee, somewhere with good food and people who already had a handle on the Red Scare. Alas, the trouble with being a federal babysitter was that he was almost never given a choice, and so he often found himself in mundane places with governments that needed plenty of attention. Pins, California was no different—a sleepy little town in the middle of the Mojave desert with nothing to boast other than its status as a township with a strange, freethinking mayor. This made it both a breeding ground for unsavory ideals and eligible for a little check-up from the House of Un-American Activities Committee—or in Wallace's case, one of their agents to scope out the situation.

If the 8 hour drive into town had lowered Wallace's spirits, facing the suffocating Mojave heat and trudging up the forecourt to the Pins Meetinghouse had plunged said spirits through the floor. He scowled as he glanced around at the empty streets—there was none of the standard fanfare that he'd come to expect with his arrival. No nosy pedestrians watching over the tops of their newspapers. No mayor standing at the front entrance dabbing at his brow in the heat, nervous to

meet the man who could very easily lock him up for any number of petty McCarthyist offenses. No intern rushing out of the building to offer him a coffee—not that he needed one, but it would have been nice. As he approached the shoddily-upkept Meetinghouse, Wallace’s attention was drawn to movement above the main entrance. A figure had flung open the door to the balcony and stumbled through, carelessly leaving the door wide open behind him despite the heat. The man stepped forward to survey the forecourt below him, where he spotted Wallace.

“Ah!” The figure exclaimed, stepping forward into the sun and sweeping his arm up above his head in an exaggerated wave. “Hello! You must be that Hoo-Ack agent they said they’d send over!”

Wallace squinted upwards at the balcony, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. He quickly realized that the man standing there was Mayor John Doe himself, recognizable by his thinning silver hair and an ugly daisy-yellow tie that stood out even from the balcony. Though Doe’s facial features were obscured by the intense desert sun, Wallace assumed that he was smiling, ceasing his waving and instead leaning forward over the railing so that he could better hear Wallace’s reply.

“Yes, it’s- it’s not Hoo-Ack! It’s an acronym, H-U-A-C!”

“What?”

“It’s an ac-” Wallace caught himself before he could repeat what he’d said. There was no point in hashing out something as trivial from this distance. “ I said THANK YOU! I’d like to go INSIDE!”

“WHAT?”

Wallace fought the urge to roll his eyes. With every awkward shout of diplomacy, Doe leaned a little further over the balcony, and Wallace felt a little more irritated. This was ridiculous—if there had been any pedestrians out and about, they certainly would have been staring by now. There was no way Doe couldn’t hear him—he was just being a nuisance now. For the final time, Wallace addressed Doe, cupping one hand around his mouth and pointing towards the entrance with the other.

“I SAID THANK YOU! CAN WE TALK MORE INSIDE?”

“INSIDE? DID YOU SAY-”

Wallace saw it coming before it happened—gave a shout to be careful, even—but by the time he had, he was too late. With a squawk akin to that of a distressed crow, Doe leaned too far forward and tipped over the railing, plummeting head first and landing in a heap on the pavement below.

For a moment, Wallace didn’t know what to do. It was all he could do to stand there and witness it—all he

could do to look at the motionless heap of fabric and man directly in front of the Meetinghouse entrance and think thoughts of abject horror, mostly along the lines of “Did I cause that?”. Of course, his brain soon kicked in—he approached the mayor, checked his nonexistent pulse, but before he could head inside to inform someone, he stopped and actually faced the fact that John Doe was dead. His stomach lurched as he rolled him over onto his side and assessed how bad it was. Pallid, bloodless skin peeked out from beneath the suit, stretching over limbs that were bent at odd, stiff angles. He was still smiling—Oh god, he was still smiling!—that vacant politician’s smile, with nothing behind the eyes.

The inside of the Meetinghouse was claustrophobic, the air conditioning almost morgue-like. At the front desk, a secretary sat blissfully unaware, tapping away on a typewriter. It was only when Wallace stumbled up to the desk that she looked up to acknowledge his presence.

“You must be Mr. Weekly, our visitor from Hwauk!” She chirped cheerily. Wallace didn’t bother to correct her. “Mayor Doe is up in his office.”

“I- I’m afraid he isn’t, ma’am. I’m afraid he’s stepped out!”

“Of course he is, he came down here not a minute ago to check if you’d arrived!”

“Oh, he came down alright! Right onto the

pavement outside that door!”

The secretary started to reply, but the entrance creaked open and Wallace’s head snapped up to look over his shoulder. At first, he was surprised that anyone had come so quickly—but that surprise turned into shock when Mayor Doe himself stepped through the door. Wallace had barely managed to turn around before Doe snatched one of his hands and shook it with an alarming amount of vigor for someone who was supposed to be dead.

“Mr. Weekly! I apologize, I must’ve given you a fright. I took quite a tumble out there!”

Wallace’s handshake was limp, and he couldn’t meet the Mayor’s eyes—his gaze was glued to Doe’s hand, observing that his skin still had that blanched, rubbery look to it. He’d just been outside, and he was working up a sweat—he still should’ve been warm, and the clammy coldness of his skin combined with its appearance made the interaction all the more unpalatable. These traits that Wallace had attributed to Doe being deceased were all very present in the living man that stood before him. Doe paid no mind to Wallace’s lack of enthusiasm and withdrew his hand, straightening his garish red paisley tie and looking at Wallace expectantly. Wallace looked him up and down, searching for something to say, but nothing good came to him and he ended up blurting out one of the first

things that came to mind.

“Well, sir, you looked dead!”

“Oh, I’m quite dead.”

The nothing that was behind Doe’s eyes before had been replaced by something distinctly unfriendly, something just as unnerving when paired with that sublime politician’s smile.

“Dead serious about making a good impression! I’m so honored to have you visiting our little town, Mr. Weekly. I’ve got plenty to tell you!”

Wallace looked over the man again, unable to banish the thought that he still looked dead, even if he wasn’t. Something about the way he talked didn’t sit right with him either—it wasn’t an honor to be visited by the HUAC. It meant that the Feds thought he was a Communist, and that he’d better do his darndest to convince Wallace that he wasn’t. Wallace left that last thought unsaid, but he scowled to let Doe know that he meant business. Doe failed to notice this and clapped a hand on his shoulder, making him flinch.

“Well, Weekly, what do you say we head up to my office and I pour you a drink?”

“Mayor Doe, I don’t think you understand just how seriously our people are taking this. You could very well-”

Doe didn’t wait for Wallace to finish his spiel about patriotism and politics and possible jail time—in

fact, the man seemed eager to avoid it. He stepped towards the staircase to the right of the secretary's desk and caught Wallace by the arm, nearly dragging him up the rather steep set of stairs—Wallace quickly yanked his arm back and proceeded to follow Doe without any direct mayoral intervention. The pair were now on the second floor of the building. The area they were in now was odd, a long windowless stretch of narrow doors on both sides that made Wallace's head hurt as he tried to remember whether the Meetinghouse had looked so big on the outside. None of the doors were labelled, and all of them were identical—lathered in glossy cream-colored paint and accented by a faux crystal door knob.

It was along this stretch that Wallace lagged behind a bit, tucking his chin to his chest and searching the inside of his suit jacket for his notepad, aiming to scribble something down about how strange his first impressions of Doe were. Once he retrieved it, Wallace looked up and realized that Doe was far ahead of him now, apparently unaware that Wallace was no longer behind him. Wallace increased his pace in order to catch up, but this burst of speed was short lived, as he was quickly distracted again.

As he walked, Doe's hands rhythmically groped out to the side—with every door he passed, he reached out and touched the knob, quickly trying them to see if they were unlocked or not. None of them budged, a fact

Wallace wasn't sure if he was happy about or not—he retrieved a pen from one of his pants pockets and scribbled down something in his notepad along the lines of “suspicious,” or “secretive,” or “absolutely hiding something.”

“I hope you don't mind the mess, it's been a little wild around here.”

“No problem at all.”

Doe came to an abrupt halt in front of one of the doors on his left. Wallace was impressed by the fact that he'd managed to choose the right door, since there was nothing to indicate that it was different. It turned out that it wasn't too different from the others, as Doe tried the handle and discovered that it was also locked. Grumbling, Doe plunged his hands into his pants pocket, before sighing and glancing at Wallace.

“I don't have the key. I'll go find one.”

Wallace rolled his eyes and once again raised his pen to his notepad, scribbling down something along the lines of “disorganized,” or “haphazard,” or “in desperate need of an assistant.” He crossed his arms and stood at the office door, watching as Doe turned around and ambled down the hallway, coming to a stop at one of the doors and knocking. To Wallace's surprise, the door opened and the mayor disappeared inside it. Wallace stared at the door, and then at the others around it. He hadn't been aware that there were people

inside these rooms. He was eyeing one of the closer doors, listening to see if he could hear who was inside it, when Doe emerged from it, startling him terribly.

Doe paid him no mind, not sparing so much as a glance in his direction as he went straight to the door across the way and knocked, once again gaining entrance. Wallace craned his neck to peek inside, and for a second, he thought he saw the occupant of the room—but upon looking closer, it was just Doe. Before he had time to question what he'd seen, the door closed as quickly as it had opened, and Wallace was alone once again. He blinked, glancing from room to room, attempting to figure out how he'd gotten around so quickly. Maybe the doors all went to the same place—but then, why were there so many doors for one room? He frowned and considered adding “poor interior design choices” to his notepad, but refrained from doing so.

“Sorry! Sorry about that! I found it!”

Just when Wallace had managed to chalk up the inconsistency of the doors to his same-room theory, the sound of Doe's muffled voice came from one of the doors behind him, and he turned around just in time to see Doe emerge from a completely new door on the right—now his left, shattering any confidence Wallace had in his theory. Again, Doe made no comment as he approached Wallace and the office door.

“I hope you don’t mind the mess, it’s been a little wild around here.”

Wallace opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it and squinted at Doe. “No problem at all,” he replied coolly, wondering if Doe would catch on that they’d already done this song and dance once today. To Wallace’s disappointment, he didn’t.

For such a strange, disheveled man, Wallace was pleasantly surprised when he stepped inside Doe’s office. The mess that the mayor had mentioned was nowhere to be seen—at a glance, the room seemed immaculately in order. The pleasant surprise then faded into suspicion as Wallace noticed the thick layer of dust on many of the surfaces—it was so in order, almost like the room hadn’t been used as much as Wallace was supposed to believe. Doe pulled an old-fashioned green glass liquor bottle from one of the drawers in his desk, along with two matching glasses. He poured some liquor into one of the glasses and pushed it Wallace’s way.

Wallace noticed that Doe didn’t pour himself a glass and, upon picking up his, took a cautious sniff of the liquid. It didn’t smell like anything he’d ever drank, and between the dust and the drink and the doors, he wasn’t so sure that he could trust anything about Doe. He set the glass back down on the desk skeptically and tried to ask Doe what exactly was going on, but his eyes

caught on the man's tie.

“Say, weren't you wearing a red tie earlier?”

“Damn it!”

Wallace's eyes snapped away from Doe's (gaudy, incredibly blue gingham) tie and towards his hands. Somehow, while shuffling the papers on his desk, Doe had given himself a papercut. In a display of theatrics, Doe shot up from the desk and shoved past Wallace, promising him that he'd be right back. Well out of patience by now, Wallace quickly stood up to follow him.

“HEY! What are you trying to pull, you-”

Doe made it to the door before Wallace and slammed it shut behind him. Wallace was on the door in seconds, but it was apparent that Doe had managed to lock the door behind him. After attempting to force the lock, he eventually conceded to the fact that he would be stuck alone in the office until Doe got back. He swore, then swore again—then he sneezed and seized a pen from a cup conveniently located on Doe's desk. Hoping to gain some control of his situation, he pressed it against his notepad in an attempt to scribble down something along the lines of “I knew it, that shady schmuck!” or “Definitely worth a subpoena and a half,” or “I'm going to get this sucker sacked if it's the last thing I do.”

This endeavor was thwarted, as the pen was dry.

Exasperated, Wallace discarded the pen in the empty wastebasket beside the desk and paced up the (admittedly short) length of the office. The last thing he felt like doing was sitting down and waiting for Doe to get back—but then, he didn't think he was strong enough to break the door down, either. After a brief moment of looking around, his eyes settled on the balcony door. He didn't know how he had glossed over it, but it was still wide open. He supposed that if Doe didn't come back, he could climb down that way if he really had to. After all, it hadn't killed Doe the first time. Wallace grimaced at that thought, but couldn't keep himself from taking a step towards the balcony. It was sorely tempting to let morbid curiosity get the best of him and step outside to take a look, just to stand in the same place Doe had stood what seemed like only moments before.

It was nice to get out of the stuffy office and be able to breathe again, though it didn't do much to calm his nerves under the present conditions. Wallace took one last glance over his shoulder back into the office, confirmed that Doe was still gone, and stepped up to the edge, firmly fixing his grip to the railing and surveying the forecourt. He traced the path he'd taken to get here, letting his eyes meander up the forecourt until finally, he leaned over the edge and looked directly down. He couldn't contain the exclamation of shock that escaped

his lips.

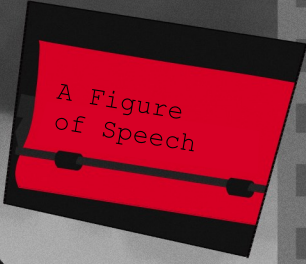
“My God!”

The unresponsive heap of suit and flesh located directly below him—the heap, Wallace recognized nauseously—did not answer him. It simply laid there face-up on the ground, proudly displaying its ugly daisy-yellow tie and its vacant, trademark smile.

Somewhere behind him, Wallace registered the sound of the office door opening, followed by the fainter sounds of more doors, maybe from the hallway. He heard the footsteps coming towards him, as well as the little voice of self-preservation in his brain that told him that he needed to book it. However, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the corpse on the pavement below him, caught up in the recognition of “I did cause that, didn't I?”

Frozen in place, jaw agape, he watched from the corner of his eye as a familiar pair of pale featureless hands and red paisley tie draped over the railing to the left of his own. The mayor didn't sound very upset when he spoke—mostly just amused.

“My, what a ghastly sight! You were right, I do look quite dead, don't I?”



It is only natural to be unnerved by angels at first. People say when you look at Them objectively, They are nothing short of grotesque, but most find it difficult to be afraid of Them long. If you have your wits about you and keep calm for just a bit, your body will eventually relax and your mind will follow. Some people describe it as magic and some describe it as being oddly tiring. Something about Their big dewy eyes tells you that you needn't worry at all anymore.

I've known people to compare them to stray cats. They roam the streets and occasionally wander up to people. They give them a prophecy or a blessing, mostly because they are divine but partially because they are hoping to be pet. I wouldn't call them a nuisance, and it is nice to know someone is watching, but I never much liked them and hid my face when they approached me. One time one showed up in my washing machine, pressed a hamsa charm into my hands with a grave, serious whimper, and left without my home a word.

It is possible that I didn't look at Them the right way, or maybe I am just stupider than my peers, but when I met Them my fear never left me. I was trotting down the street, as cheery as I could be on such an overcast day, barely a worry in the world, when I felt a tingling on my shoulder, followed by a powerful acrid smell. "Hello?" I said, meaning, "if anyone could explain to me why I feel so nauseous I'd be grateful," and I

reached a gloved hand up to meet a grey lump of divine flesh and fingers resting on my overcoat. As soon as I knew it, I was staring up into one of Their flat grey faces, my feet stuck to the pavement.

It was an inconvenience to be stopped in the middle of the city sidewalk, but when you are literally touched by an angel, you have to suffer through a couple people bumping into you and grumbling. A few passersby gawked stupidly, but most seemed content to push past and not bother with whatever Heaven had decided needed to happen with me. Even if you are considered lucky to meet an angel, they are large and tend to get in people's way. I averted my eyes which had begun to burn slightly. "Hello," I repeated, trying to sound friendly instead of shocked. "To what do I owe this pleasure? Sir?"

"Well, you seemed like a nice kid." The angel's voice was delicate but a bit phlegmy, like a woman with a cold.

"I'm honored. Truly." A car passed, splashing water on my old leather shoes. I winced. "I need to get to work, I'm afraid."

"You don't need to be afraid of me."

"Oh no. Never. It's a figure of speech, you know. I'm fine," I lied.

"Well, I'm awful with those kinds of particulars. Speech is hard, you know how it is."

“I’m afraid I don’t know, but I’m sure you’re fine.” I checked my wristwatch. “I’m not sure if you would understand this, but I really must be going. I’ve got a new apartment and I’m working off the rent.”

“I understand. I know.”

“Sorry, it didn’t occur to me that you know.”

“Well, you know. I know things.” They shrugged and checked Their fingertips, as if there were nails there.

“Now I know. That’s good.”

“You needn’t worry about the apartment anymore.”

“Sorry, but I’m sure that you really do know I do.” I turned to leave. They were being very obstructive for a perfect being.

“No, no, I mean it.” They said, grabbing me again. “Bring me there. I’ll pay it all off. I’ll tell you more once we get there. You have been selected for a very special mission for Heaven and I would never want you to worry.” I raised an eyebrow. “I’ll spare you the details.”

“I must admit that I hate to worry.”

“There you go.” They smiled widely.

“Well enough.” Hello? Well enough? Who said that? It wasn’t something I would say yet it certainly came from my lips. I wasn’t sure it was anything anyone said. In any case, I was too much of a busybody to stay at home all day. It wasn’t well nor would it be enough.

They raised a finger to Their lips, signalling quiet. “We really must be going.”

I moved to object, but something caught in the back of my throat, and I was overcome by a coughing fit before the angel ushered me on my way.

I don't quite remember walking to my apartment. It was odd walking with an angel and we got a lot of odd looks. Their hand was on my coat sleeve the whole time, like a child holding onto their mother's skirt.

The stairs up to the apartment groaned under the angel's weight. Apparently They were very heavy.

I wondered how They could fly, and then I realized I had never seen an angel fly in real life, although they always seemed to be up in the air in paintings. Each step in the building was a little uneven, so I had to be careful not to catch my feet on the gaps, while the angel had no problems. I could tell they were getting a little testy with me and the acrid smell returned.

Before opening the door, I paused. “It's a little cluttered in there.”

“I'm sure.”

“Sorry, I haven't unpacked entirely yet.”

“Well enough,” They replied. My hand shivered on the doorknob.

“You might have to stoop a little. The ceiling's built for smaller beings.”

“Less of height beings,” They corrected.

“Well.” I was a little flustered. “It’s only words.”

“Words,” They mused.

“So.”

“So?”

“Do you want me to show you around?”

“I’m fine.” They waved a hand dismissively.

“Huh?” I was puzzled.

“You know.”

“Do you want something, then? Water, coffee? I don’t have milk.”

“Shame.” Their gaze was affixed to a photograph of me during my younger, hedonistic years on my wall and I moved instinctively to block it. “No, thank you.”

“A snack? Toast? Any margarine, jam?”

“Lovely. I’ll have jam.”

“I’ve got some cheap strawberry stuff, but that’s all, I’m afraid.”

“It’s fine. I’m in a red mood.”

“Come again?”

“The jam.” They sighed. “It’s red. Please.”

“Sorry.” I didn’t want to apologize.

“Whatever you say.”

I stood by the toaster with my back turned, drumming on the counter with my fingers. I missed my typewriter at work. This was my favorite time of morning to work. I found myself tapping out random

words as if I had a keyboard right in front me. Tap, tap, tap, Well Enough. Tap, tap, tap, Whatever you say. Tap, tap, tap, I Am Afraid. The words boomed in my head.

My eyes unfocused and I began to absentmindedly touch my face.

The toast sprung up with surprising violence, shaking me out of my trance. I burned my hand a bit handling the bread, then spread a little jam on top. The jam had formed little sugar crystals from being in my fridge for too long, so it was chunky with ugly white pearls of sweetness. It was red. They were right. Funny that. Hopefully the white bits won't bother Them. I handed it to the angel without a plate. They took a dainty bite, wiping the brown crumbs from Their lipless mouth onto the floor.

"I know what you're going to say," They assured me. "The place is grungy enough already. You needn't worry."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"Were you?"

I realized I hadn't taken my coat off yet. I began to lay it on the couch, but the angel signaled me to stop.

"You can leave that on the floor, if you wouldn't mind."

"I'd rather not. See, it'd get crumbs on it."

They covered their eyes. "Don't worry about it."

"O.K." I dropped my coat on the floor. It looked very sad sprawled out like a dead thing among the dust.

Suddenly I felt very vulnerable and I drew my bare arms to cover my chest.

“Things are going to change around here,” said the angel, to no one in particular.

“Things? Change? Here? How do you mean?”

“I mean I’m going to change things here. For your sake. And mine, I guess, because I’ll be staying here. I have a very special mission- surely you’re aware- but even I can’t afford a hotel for long in this horrible godless city.”

“Godless?”

“I’m afraid my colleagues haven’t done a particularly fantastic job here. I’m here to really lay down the law.”

“You don’t need to do that. We’re quite fine, I know I am. There’s a cheap motel just outside city limits. I can show you after work. Or now, if you’d like.”

Silence.

“I don’t want- I don’t want you to stay here.” It took a tremendous amount of energy to admit. I moved to show them the door, but the position they had taken left them like a great cold wall in the middle of the room, all trouble to move around. As if in response to my realization, They unfolded Their wings, brushing against the walls and casting huge shadows, and conspicuously yawned.

“You know, I’m on a very special mission.”

“Well, that’s very nice, but you haven’t explained it at all to me.” Something snapped audibly in the back of my head, but I shook it off. “It means jack all to me. If I may make myself clear, I do not want you here.” I felt like a small dog yapping at a policeman and I knew I was about to be kicked. “Hey- no, hey, if you can’t pay for a hotel, how are you going to cover my rent?”

“I’m sure I can work something out with your landlord. He’s wicked. Wouldn’t want to meet me, I’m sure.”

“Why don’t you do the same thing with the hotel owners?”

“I respect them too much. Lots of work to run a hotel. Napkin?”

“What?”

“Napkin?” I had to get them a napkin. They were a remarkably messy eater, and now had crimson slime spread all over Their face and hands.

“Sure.” I handed them a faded dishrag. “It’s not much, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll say.”

“So,” I said. I closed my eyes, rubbing my eyelids with my hands, which now smelled like wet cloth and sugar. “If you’re staying here, what am I to do all day?”

“That’s your prerogative.”

“May I go to work?”

“If you must. I know you don’t want to.”

“Maybe I do.”

“Maybe,” They responded. “Maybe, maybe, maybe. Always maybe for humans; you never are decisive enough.”

“I have decided I do not want you here. I’ve told you!”

“Eh.”

“I have decided I want to go to work.”

“Well enough.”

“Stop saying that.”

“It’s only words.”

“May I get by?” I said, suddenly desperate. I stepped forward and pushed a little bit on the soft feathers blocking my way. My fingers burned and became slimily slippery, as if I had dipped a cut in bleach.

“Maybe. Push past me. I know you can’t.”

“It hurts,” I whined, shrinking back like a child. “It hurt my hand.”

They spoke slowly, rubbing Their hands slowly together, producing a dry, crackling sound. “You are going to have to learn,” and they took my face in their hand, irritating my chin and causing my eyes to itch, “to handle pain, child, if you want to live with me.”

“I don’t want to live with you, I told you. I want to get back to my typewriter.”

The air was quiet, and cold but my vision most of

all became loud and oppressive. Walls. Toaster. Angel. My hands. Their hands. Jam. Jam on the napkin, jam on the floor, jam, filling up my eyes.

“I don’t-” Their eyes met mine and I groaned fantastically, breathing hard. “I don’t- hey, don’t touch me!” They had grabbed my forearm.

“You will stay here. It will be nice for you to make toast. It is far better than a typewriter.” I could feel my brain clicking slower and softer. Click, click, tap, tap.

“I don’t think it would be- I don’t think-” Well. I tried to feel calm as my instincts told me I should. Wasn’t this a predicament? Wasn’t this odd?

“I’m sure you will like it.”

A wave of pain flashed in my stomach, making my eyes water and I knew I had to submit. “Well enough.” They let go of my arm. It continued to burn. I felt like a piece of twisted metal, weak at the joints but rigid.

This time the angel didn’t say anything, instead making a strange gurgling sound that felt like the opposite of language. My brain buzzed with static, but I could tell what they were saying. “Well enough.” It looped and looped until I started mouthing the words myself.

“Well-” I gasped. “Hrgh-” I knew I was going to pass out if I had to endure this any longer. Suddenly my only worry was that I’d have to clean my apartment when I woke up. I opened my eyes wide and looked at

the angel with more direct focus than I ever had before.

What everyone said was true. Angels are grotesque.

“Well enough,” I murmured. I still did not feel calm.



Ramon
Daisy
2020

Light

Tuesday, 3:31 a.m.

His eyes were bloodshot, scanning the small screen that flooded his dark room with light. Hours of work finally paid off. Jay had poured blood, sweat, and tears into constructing the device, not all of it his.

The device had come to him in a series of dreams, and his base instincts pushed him to take them seriously. Capturing the plans took innumerable pages. Actually constructing the device took months upon months of prep and labor, not to mention the time it needed to grow.

Looking over the screen, Jay struggled to discern the figure peering back at him until his eyes adjusted to the bright white light. Then he saw her, and a chill worked its way up his spine, settling around his brain. He blinked away the static it left, feeling how raw his eyes were as his eyelids fluttered shut and open. The figure on-screen stayed still, continuing to watch him.

His chest seized up and he realized he forgot to breathe. Slowly inhaling, Jay held up his hand, partly to block the light, partly to wave. Finally, she reacted, lifting a long shimmering tendril that he had thought was hair. This was more than anything Jay could have hoped for. Not just the reaction, but even making contact. By all rationality it shouldn't have worked, but he was face to face with something else. Her. Well, he was pretty sure it was a her.

The room was nearly silent, save for the light static hissing from the device, and Jay had his hand raised awkwardly for a minute too long. It was starting to get sore. He knew he had to say something. This was first contact and history demanded that he say something important. Something quotable, classic. Not only to fill the silence, but to make his mark.

“Hey,” was all he could eke out.

He could not understand her response. The static that emanated from the device rose in volume, and the lights in his room turned on. Something primal welled in the pit of his stomach and his body shook from pure ecstatic energy.

Then the device shut off, leaving him in the dark again. The time was 3:42 a.m. and he was enraptured in the buzz from those few short moments. He didn't go to sleep that night. He couldn't.

Wednesday, 2:56 p.m.

“Jay, what's going on?” Her voice snapped me out of my stupor.

“Huh? What— Nothing much, what's going on with you?” I blinked a few times, rubbed my eyes and yawned.

“No, Jay. I mean, what are you doing? You've been staring off in space for, like, ten minutes,” she began to inspect my face, looking at every shadow, every hanging bag.

“Max, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Maybe I was just, I dunno, thinking some deep thoughts or whatever,” I yawned and stretched again; coffee wasn’t doing it for me like it used to.

“It’s just—” She reached out to me, but I gently pushed her hand away.

“I’m fine.”

She didn’t keep it up. We were in public and neither of us wanted to make a scene, even in this dim cafeteria. It was close to empty since the lunch rush had ended hours ago. It was when I liked to eat the most. There weren’t too many people around, so it was quiet, and the university kept the lights low to save on power. It was easy on the eyes and I could relax some. Well, until Max started tagging along.

It wasn’t that I disliked her. She had just entered my life at a difficult time. It was hard enough managing my night project with schoolwork; the added social obligation she brought made everything more complicated.

I hadn’t known her for too long, a month or two at most. She sat near me during a lecture and asked to borrow my notes. The next thing I knew, she had my number and was texting me about how she couldn’t tell if the thing hanging on our professor’s forehead was just some misplaced hair or a disturbingly large vein bulging out. The TA kicked me out of the lecture for laughing

too hard. Max followed me out and bought me a coffee to make up for it.

I rubbed my eyes and looked at her. She was sulking, probably because I spaced out again.

“Hey Max, let’s hit the soft serve machine before we head out.”

She smiled and nodded, and we left.

Wednesday, 2:23 a.m.

He pricked his finger and squeezed out a drop of blood. He could only faintly make out the crimson color in the darkness of his room. Jay reached out to the device and rubbed his bloodied finger across the side of the channeling stone. It quivered in response and began to hum in resonant tones. Soon, those tones turned to static and softened. His room was once again flooded with light. She was there, on the other side of the screen. He smiled.

“Hey, I’m Jay.” He looked at her expectantly.

The figure didn’t respond. Instead she lifted a tendril and waved it at him slowly, but it looked different from last night. Her tendril was split at the end into five digits. She was emulating his hand.

Jay laughed and waved back at her.

She stopped and came closer to the screen, letting Jay discern more details on her head for the first time. It was pristine. It wasn’t that she had no face, but that

she had no eyes. She wasn't lacking in any aesthetic sense though, and Jay was hypnotized by the elegant and soft slopes that made up her features. It nearly seemed human.

The figure lifted her tendril and tapped the screen with her hand. Jay fell back, surprised, as the static grew again. The lights in his room flashed on once. The figure paused, watching Jay. He slowly sat back up and looked at her, confused.

“What? What’s wrong?”

She tapped the screen a few more times, and the lights in Jay’s room flashed along with it. Then she waved her hand and paused again, watching him, seemingly expectantly.

Jay chuckled. This was their first conversation. She’s communicating with him. It felt so amazing and mundane at the same time. He was breathing heavily and his heart was pounding. Jay laughed again, harder.

Then, a sound quietly came through the static emanating from the device, but Jay couldn’t quite parse it. It slowly rose in volume until it became clear: she was laughing, too. It sounded like the slow, rhythmic ringing of a bell. The lights in his room gradually grew brighter as her laughter grew louder and faster until the bulbs in his overhead lights burst and plunged him into darkness, her laughter ringing on in echoes and vibrations on the glass of his bedroom window.

Jay's heart was almost full. Almost.

Thursday, 2:36 p.m.

I let a laugh escape.

"What's funny?" Max gave me a look while twirling up a forkful of spaghetti.

I didn't mean to laugh, but last night had left such an impact on me. I kept replaying it over and over in my mind, unable to forget the sound of her laughs. But, I couldn't share that with Max. I didn't know what would happen if she were to find out. I didn't want to know.

"Nothing, just thought of a joke I heard once."

"Yeah? What was it?"

"Uh. It's complicated."

"Hrm," She eyed me for a moment, then returned to twirling spaghetti. She hadn't eaten any in a while. I took a sip from my drink and noticed it was near empty.

"Hey, I'm gonna grab a refill, do you want anything while I'm up?" I started getting out of the booth.

"I dunno."

"Okay, it's on you if you find yourself needing more napkins." I fully stood up, then nearly fell over. Max caught me before I could.

She looked me directly in the eyes. I knew she could see the red veins strangling the whites, and the ever growing dark circles underneath. I shook her off

and grabbed my cup before she could see the Band-Aids wrapped around my fingers.

“Jay, wait,” she whispered.

“What?” I didn’t turn to face her.

“What’s going on with you?” She was quiet, but I could hear the concern. It wasn’t unfounded; I hadn’t slept since I met Her. I couldn’t.

I bit the inside of my cheek, frowned, then plastered on a fake exasperated smile before turning to face her, “Sorry, Max. Midterms got me out of whack. I’ve been doing a few all-nighters to prep. I didn’t mean to take any frustration out on you.” It hurt to lie, but I didn’t have any other choice.

She smiled, at first quietly to herself before putting on a big toothy grin, playfully punching me. “Hey! Don’t go learning everything by yourself, save some of that info for everyone else! Let’s have a study sesh soon, maybe I can show you some of my de-stress methods.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot how effective the slack-off strat was. I’ll keep it in mind.” I flashed her a smarmy smile.

“Hey, don’t knock it ‘til you try it,” she giggled, paused, then said more seriously, “But really. This Friday night. Bring your best studyin’ boots.”

This was a problem. “Uh. Friday’s no good, I have to stay home and watch my roommate’s... cat?” I felt an itch grow in the back of my throat. I coughed.

“Oh, I didn’t know you had a roommate,” Max knit her brows and tightened her lips.

I couldn’t let her find out. “Yep, I’m chained to the apartment all weekend long, I’m not sure if I can go out to do a study session.”

“How about I just come over? I love cats, and we can order pizza. I’ll even cover you! I’ll accept an A on the test as payment.” She winked and I felt a weight drop in my stomach. I didn’t know how I could turn her down.

The blood drained from my face. “We-We’ll see, I guess! Ha-ha.” I walked off to the soda fountain as she took a bite of spaghetti.

“Awesome! It’s a date then.”

Thursday, 7:52 p.m.

There was a real wrench thrown into his plans. His room was a mess; he didn’t have a roommate, much less a cat. Or at least he didn’t have one before today, if you could call the small tabby demon he found wandering out nearby a cat.

The sun was setting soon, and he still hadn’t replaced the bulbs in his overhead lights. Between picking up the heaps of garbage lying around his room and avoiding the corner that Asmodeus, the cat, had claimed as its own, Jay was quickly running out of time to figure out what to do with the device. Max said she

would come home with him after classes the next day, meaning Jay had to have his studio apartment ready and normal looking tonight.

With only a few minutes until sunset, there wasn't much time until his apartment would be completely dark, and if he couldn't hide it, he didn't know how he could explain the device to Max. The stone, steel, and flesh made it clear that it was something that didn't belong. Anywhere. In fact, the device couldn't be moved. Or shouldn't. There wasn't a conclusive answer in his dream journals.

Asmodeus left its corner and began to circle the room, examining each nook and cranny, but avoiding the device. Jay stayed opposite of the small demon to avoid invoking its wrath, while occasionally dipping down to pick up grease-stained take out bags or empty to-go cups. The room became dyed orange and red as the sun set into twilight before slipping into the dark of dusk. Jay had cleaned up most of his room to a near presentable degree, if not for the device sitting in the center of the room, seemingly absorbing whatever moonlight filtered in through his window.

Jay was well acquainted with darkness, but ever since he met the figure, he found himself looking for more light. He sat on his bed and looked at the device; it was lightly expanding and contracting, almost breathing. Asmodeus leaped onto the top of Jay's

bookshelf, knocking over a few figurines, and hissed at the device. Jay paid the cat no mind and stood, approaching the device.

He had never activated it so early in the night before, but he wanted to see her again. To look at her no-eyed face.

Jay bit his lip, tasting iron mixed with saliva, kneeled next to the device, leaned over, and placed his lips on it. The stone was warm and soft. Its life blood quietly pulsed behind it. The device shivered and the static once again began to envelop Jay's apartment. Its light slowly leaked out until the apartment became awash with brightness. Jay sat back and looked at the screen.

She was there.

Asmodeus leaped from the shelf and ran into Jay's bathroom, but Jay didn't notice. He saw Her face and smiled.

She smiled back.

Friday, 6:40 p.m.

"So, this is what your apartment looks like, huh?" Max looked around the small room, "You said you have a roommate?"

"Oh uh, he has a futon," I lied, more focused on conjuring an explanation for the large oblique object in the center of the room: The device covered with a tarp.

Max took a seat at the table and laid her backpack beside it, then causally pointed at the device, “So—”

“That’s my roommate’s. It’s a, uh, art project,” I tried my best to hide the nerves in my voice, “Do you want anything to drink? I have water.”

“So, it’s like a sculpture or something?” Max stood back up and approached it.

I cut between it and her, “Something like that. Let’s not mess with it. My roommate said, um, that it reacts to light or something and we could ruin it, so it’d be best for everyone if we just left it alone, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Okay. That’s fine. Water would be good.”

“Huh?”

“You offered water?”

“Oh yeah.” I went to the refrigerator and began filling up two glasses, “Sorry about the lighting, by the way. The bulbs in the overhead light burned out due to a, uh, lightning strike. I hope the lamps are enough.” I handed her a glass and sat down at the table.

She sat next to me. “Yeah, the lamps are fine. It gives the place a bit of mood lighting, you know?”

“Ha ha, yeah. Anyways, let’s study.” I pulled out my notebook as Asmodeus approached us, sniffing at our feet.

“Oh, cute! What’s his name?” She reached down to pet him, but he swatted at her and jumped back.

“Asmodeus.”

“That’s a pretty intense name.” Max crouched down to the floor and followed him, trying to reach out to pet him, but Asmodeus kept jumping back and trying to scratch her.

“Maybe you should not do that, let’s just study,” I was getting nervous. As she was chasing Asmodeus, she was nearing the device.

“I haven’t met a cat that I couldn’t pet, and little Azzie won’t be the first,” she waddled after Asmodeus, staying near to the ground. The little devil was getting more agitated.

“Look, just lay off—” I stood up, then it happened. Asmodeus leaped up and attacked Max, knocking her onto the device. Both fell over and all the lights were extinguished.

“Jay, could you help me up?” she groaned.

In the black, the static began.

“Jay, what’s happening?” There was fear rising in her voice, “There’s something wet and moving. Please help me up.”

“Don’t move.” I didn’t know what to do, but something was happening and a voice in the back of my mind told me to let it keep happening.

A light appeared from under Max, but she was smothering it, blocking it from reaching out.

“Jay. Something just ran against my skin and I can’t see

anything. Please, it hurts.”

“Stay. Still.”

The light pierced Max. Straight through the chest, splattering something against my face. I wiped it off and watched as the light consumed Max, became her.

Became Her.

Max’s closely cropped hair illuminated and grew into thick tendrils, her body disintegrated into pure light, and for a moment, I couldn’t breathe. She was here. She turned, looking, then stopped once She saw me.

She floated towards me, and I towards Her.

There was something in the air and I was drunk on it. Her body, scintillating and brilliant, seemed holy, and drew me closer. Specks of light flaked and fizzled off Her.

I sobered up quickly when She cried out in pain, falling to the ground.

The darkness was coming, and Her light was fading.

I reached out and grabbed Her.

Jay embraced the figure and placed his lips on Hers. The light from the white hole She emerged from shone brilliantly. However, with the light came darkness. Her entrance into Jay’s world brought instability. Molecules that didn’t belong bounced off

particles that shouldn't have been, opening a tear. A black hole.

Jay and the figure held each other in a tight embrace, being both pushed and sucked into the event horizon. Bridging light and dark, forever in each other's arms. They couldn't have been happier.

CREDITS

“The Gömböc Incident” by

Henry C. Williams

@henraptor on Twitter

“Bittersweetooth” by

Multi S. V. Pulyze

@opossumgod on Twitter

@multiverse on Instagram

@re3koning on Tumblr

“The Man from Hoo-ack” by

E. A. Dolby

@atvacuum on Instagram

@atvacuum on Twitter

@atvacuum on Tumblr

“A Figure of Speech” by

Ethan Moses Kelly

@bantam#2227 on Discord

ethanmoseswriting@gmail.com


“Light” by

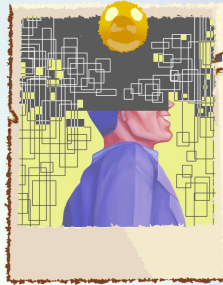
J Evan Parks

@Dr_Lemons on Twitter



Rowen

 @_guffaw_



Fiona

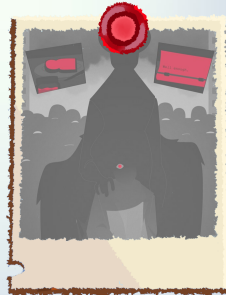
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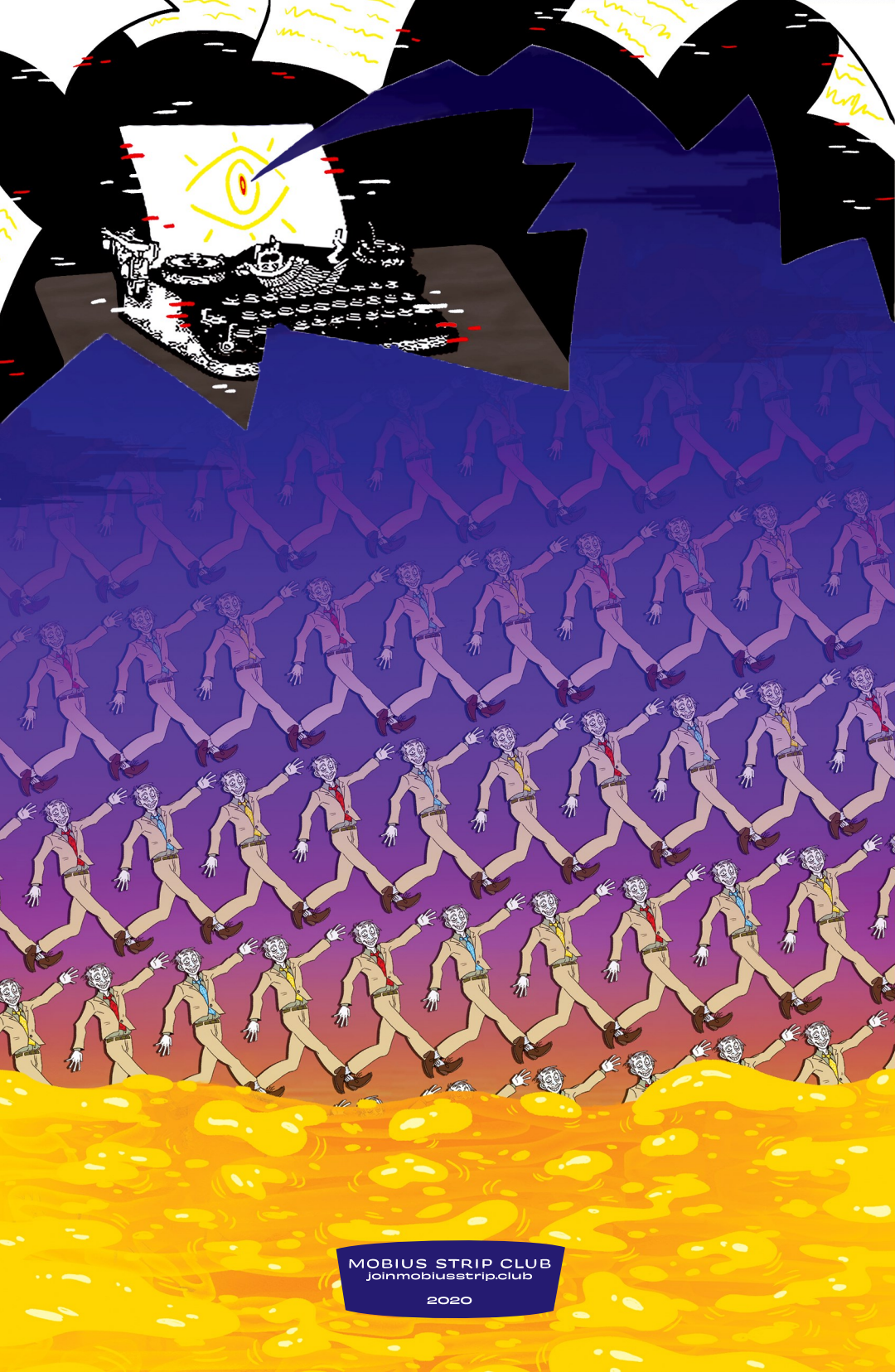
Leads Jonny  @aperture102  @weenis
Felix  @ohboyfelix  @ohboy

With editing by Splat
 @captain.splat  @captainsplat

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