

*The Way of The  
World:  
A Collection of Short  
Stories*

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Luke Colomey

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I dedicate this collection of stories to my family: my hill.



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# Introduction

A lesser author (and a younger me) would've written a few platitudes with an ending remark of something along the lines of "welcome to the inside of my head." But what's in my head doesn't matter, it's not about me. Make no mistake, these are my stories and I very much care what people think of them. But what's important is the story itself. Stories make the world go 'round. Stories were important at the dawn of man and they are no less important now. Stories entertain, inform, and persuade. Sometimes all at the same time. This book is me offering my stories into the annals of history to be read and judged alongside the many stories that have gone before. I too hope that this collection of stories entertain, inform, and persuade whomever they are read by. I hope that these stories help their audience reckon with the past, understand the present, and hope for the future.

# I. Reckoning With the Past

*“The Mean Streets” (2022)*

*Luke Colomey*

The skies were clear this night, but snow and ice had built up from previous storms along the normal cracks and crevices that they frequently made their home. The temperature matched the remnants of the wintry scene; the wonder of the season had long passed, leaving nothing but the worst type of cold behind. And the towering concrete behemoths certainly did not help. The city itself seemed to trap the miserable temperature down to the streets where its inhabitants could wallow in it. One particular inhabitant seemed not to mind the weather, or at least it was not a top priority of hers at the moment. Her fashionable white peacoat exhibited preparation for the conditions and locks of sleek black hair flowed out of a wool knit hat. She did not shiver like other passersby who braved the elements. Instead, she intently stared at a red door across the road barely visible from the light of street lamps. There was no sign or other indication of the name of the establishment and the lack of windows ensured that the only way to discover what was inside was to enter. Following a preparatory sigh, she hurried across the slick city street and pulled the red door open.

The common phrase, “a hole in the wall,” could not have been a more perfect descriptor of the interior. A long wooden bar took up the right-hand side of the room while the left was filled in by tables and billiards. Several televisions were hung up in strategic locations and swaying lamps kept the lighting situation dull, but manageable. Not one pair of eyes looked over upon the woman’s entrance, even though the establishment had a crowd that any owner would be satisfied with.

She slowly walked across the sticky floor, noticing that most of the patrons were not the sort she would voluntarily choose to spend such a night around. If her eyes did not deceive her, the woman swore she spotted several weapons not so securely hidden. At the far end of the long bar, a particularly well-built older man in a white buttoned shirt allowed the contents of a shot glass to pour down his throat, adding the empty cup to an already impressively constructed pyramid. She made her way over to this giant of a man and took possession of the stool to his immediate right.

“What can I get you?” A male server approached and asked from the other side of the bar.

“Modelo?”

“Sorry ma’am, that’s a little too fancy for our blood.”

“Bartender’s choice then.” She answered him with a smile, sliding a five dollar bill across the counter.

A cold glass bottle was placed in her hand promptly, of which she raised in gratitude and took a hefty sip from.

“I’ve never heard of this place.” She declared, staring at her drink.

“Hmph. I’m guessing you still haven’t.” The broad-shouldered senior to her left responded without looking in her direction. “These folks like to keep certain details to themselves.”

“And just who are these ‘folks’?” The woman followed up.

“You’d have to ask them.”

“I’m asking you.” She took another drink from her bottle.

The man’s chuckle utilized his entire body as he turned to meet her eyes. “I’ve heard about your moxy. The reports were not mistaken.”

She mirrored his movement. “Cut the shit. Why did you ask me here?”

“Cause I wanted to talk.”

The woman’s stool screeched against the floor as she rose to her feet. “Next time, leave the creepy note writing to the comic book super villains and just call the office.”

He grabbed hold of her wrist as she turned to leave. “Miss Hannigan, wait-”



The grip did not last long. “Don’t touch me!” An expertly manicured fingernail nearly scratched a cornea. “You are drunk. You have no story. I’m going home.”

A meaty thumb motioned to his glass pyramid. “That’s a Tuesday afternoon for me. I’m sober as a priest.” He strained against his body weight to slide off the stool. “And I most definitely have a story.”

Miss Hannigan crossed her arms in the shadow of the much taller man. “It better be a good one.”

“I doubt you could find a bigger one if you tried.” He swiped a bottle off the wooden surface. “But first, I have to use the bathroom.” Another bulging finger pointed across the room. “I’ll meet you at the booth in the corner.”

The roar and clutter of the bar came back into focus as the man made his way to the restroom. Odors of sweat and alcohol were hard to ignore, but she retrieved her own beer and waded through the unsavory crowd, warding off several interested glances. Reaching the designated corner, Miss Hannigan removed her hat and made herself as comfortable as possible on a sparsely padded bench. A television happened to fall directly in her view; most likely not a coincidence. A blue-suited man just past the middle of his life stared back from the screen. Even if the volume had been turned on, one could not have heard it over the sounds of the bar, but hand gestures and text captions conveyed a majority of the message.

My opponent will not, in fact cannot, deliver on any of his promises. The scrolling words read. He is selling a bill of lies. A vote for him is no better than one thrown in the garbage.

A familiar mass of flesh plopped down onto the other bench, causing Miss Hannigan to ever so slightly flinch.

“This is a strange place to be playing the Vice Presidential Debate.” She recovered.

“Hmph. What, we bar-scum can’t be politically active? You need to be more open-minded Heather. Can I call you Heather?”

“I don’t care what you call me.” She took a swig of her bottle. “What do I call you?”

“The name’s William.”

“Last name?”

“I think I’ll keep that to myself for now.” He ran a hand over his lack of hair.

Heather materialized a pad of paper and a pen. “My recorder won’t pick up anything with the noise, do you mind if I take notes?”

“Be my guest.”

She scribbled a few marks. “Alright then, William, I’m all ears.”

He pondered a moment. “Well, I suppose the best way to start this story would be with my role in it all. I’m sure you’ve already noticed that this bar caters to a pretty specific type of customer.”

“There is definitely a pattern.” Heather scanned the room.

“Security guards. Bouncers. Bookies. Body guards. You need a big body that packs a wallop, this place would’ve been the place to go. Of course, now they’re all saggy and old.” William raised his glass in the direction of just such a character staring at him from the bar. “But, back in the day, these were some of the scariest goons in town. There’s ‘Stoneface Sam.’” He gestured to Frankenstein’s monster reassembled, belly-laughing at a friend’s joke. “Playing pool at the farthest table is ‘Terrible Tony.’” His description led to an escaped silverback gorilla lumbering in circles, looking for a viable shot. “Coming out of the bathroom is ‘Harry the Hammer.’ Now that guy was a force to be reckoned with.” Heather’s eyes widened at the thawed-out neanderthal who barely squeezed through the door frame.

“I’m a well-read woman who grew up in this city, William, I know who all these people are.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Hmph. Once again, your reputation does not disappoint. Yes, you are surrounded by some of the most dangerous mob enforcers this world has ever known.”

“And I’m guessing that you count yourself among their numbers?” The reporter drank from her glass bottle, checking the level of liquid with mild concern.

“In fact, I do Heather.”

“So, what’s your scary mafia moniker then?”

William sat back. “They called me ‘Billy the Club.’”

Heather nodded. “Alright, yeah, I’ve heard the name before. Color me intrigued.” She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “But most of this I could find on public record. And if not, this information is a few decades too late for a headline. Where’s the story?”

“Relax darling, I’m just setting the scene. My story has got to do with my boss. But before I get into the good stuff, I’m going to need two things from you.” William held up one meaty finger. “If I’m going to tell you this tale, you have to understand something. You’re not going to find any evidence. No documents. No comments. Nothing. Hell, there’s probably more evidence against what I’m going to tell you. But I swear on my life that it’s all the honest truth.”

“I’ve heard crazier things.” Heather narrowed her eyes. “And second?”

He shook his empty glass. “We need another round.”

She scoffed, but William gave his drink another shake. “Fine. But you better start talking when I get back.”

Heather rose from the bench and weaved through the crowd, this time taking additional care to avoid some select patrons. She leaned a padded white arm on the edge of the bar and silently ordered more drinks. Her eyes wandered for something to hold their attention, finally settling on a familiar salt-and-pepper haired gentleman standing stoically behind a podium.

These accusations are obviously false and defamatory. Block letters translated. It is the incumbent VP’s finances that you should really be paying attention to. They are questionable to say the least. This man may very well be a foreign agent.

Peeling her eyes away from the screen, Heather nodded in gratitude for the newly opened bottles. After setting down more money on the bar, she took one drink in each hand and braved the boisterous crowd once more. She squeezed by a final pair of aspiring sumo wrestlers and presented her companion with the spoils of her journey.

“Thank you.” William took a frothy sip. “Now, where were we?”

The reporter maneuvered the wings of her peacoat back into the booth. “You were telling me about your boss.”

“That’s right...hmpf.” He rubbed his chin. “Now that man was a true leader. Polite to everyone until he absolutely couldn’t be. Did all the dirty work himself. He never took it from anybody. He really could-”

“I need a name, William.” Heather stared up from her notepad.

‘The Club’ raised his swollen hands in surrender. “Sheesh. Okay, his name was Bennie.”

She put the pad down altogether and tilted her head. “You don’t mean...”

“The one and only.”

“You’re telling me that you worked for Bennie ‘No Bones’ Jones?”

William gulped down a drink through a smile. “That’s what I’m telling you.” He scoffed. “Shit, I haven’t heard that name in so long. What’s that line they used to say about him? They call him that ‘cause if you ever crossed him-”

“They’d never even find your bones.” Heather locked eyes with him.

“That was it.”

“He skipped town and left the country a while back, didn’t he? Something about an upstart District Attorney running him out?”

He leaned back and felt his alcohol-filled stomach. “That’s what the papers said.”

“Are you saying something different?” The reporter unbuttoned and pulled her arms out of her white coat.

William pursed his lips. “A table just freed up, let’s play a game of pool while we talk.”

Eyes closed; Heather let out a stream of air from her nostrils. Nonetheless, she followed as her drinking buddy lumbered out of his seat and over to an unused billiard table. He racked the glossy balls without a word, retrieved sticks for both of them and positioned his own in between his finger and thumb on the green surface. Clak. Clakakakak!

“The table’s still open. Your shot.” He offered.

The reporter chalked up her stick and promptly sent a colored ball into the nearest pocket. Clakak. “So, what can you tell me about the infamous capo, Bennie Jones, that a trip to the library can’t?”

“I can tell you that he didn’t leave the country.”

Clak. “Where’d he go then?”

“Not sure exactly. But couldn’t have been too far outside the city limits.” William took his time with every syllable, bending over to line up his next shot.

“So, he went underground then?”

“Could’ve.” Clakakakak.

“Meaning that you don’t know?”

“Meaning that I have a rough idea.”

Clak. “Was it because of the cops? That DA?”

“Hmph. Yes. That I can tell you for certain.”

“What’d they have on him? Drugs? Girlfriend? Tax evasion?”

“Something like that.” Clakakak.

“Don’t know again?”

“Not positive.”

“I’m done with this.” Heather threw her stick onto the table, disrupting the placement of several balls. “You give me the story now or I’m walking out of here.”

“Alright, alright.” William carefully placed his stick against the side of the table.

“Get on with it.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

He took an abnormally deep breath. “This is all hard to say out loud, I’ve never told a single soul.”

No sympathy could be found on Heather’s face.

“You’re a reporter, you don’t care.” He shrugged. “I guess I was the one who reached out to you...” Another breath. “Okay, here it goes. I worked real close with Bennie about three decades ago now. I was lucky he took me, ‘cause I was pushing old age for an enforcer even back then. He had a few others working under him, but he really only trusted me. Me and my fellow soldier, George, actually.”

“George...” Heather questioned while scribbling on her pad.

“I ain’t giving you that one. George was like a brother to me.” He wagged a finger. “And Bennie became our father. He was younger than both of us, but he always knew what was best.” William stroked his chin. “We were riding real high for a while there. Us and two other crews had half the north-side under our thumbs. George and I’s job was to protect Bennie, but we barely worked cause no one ever dared to come near him.” His shoulders sagged. “Until one winter.”

“I’m assuming this was the same winter Bennie disappeared?”

“No, about two years before actually. A newly elected DA took an awful interest in Bennie. He was the youngest the city had ever seen so he must’ve had a chip on his shoulder. I really don’t know what he had on him, but Christ did Bennie dance like a monkey for that little weasel. Bennie ratted on or set up people he’d known all his life, one or two blood relatives even. Whatever he had to do to stay in the DA’s good graces.” He sipped his drink. “Of course, it was all hush-hush, he needed to keep up appearances. A lot of hiding and running around.” Hands threw up in a shrug. “Then, one day, he’d had enough. Bennie refused one of the orders given to him, made a big stink of it over the phone. Some suit walked into one of our buildings and told us to meet at a spot near the docks the next night.”

Heather raised her pen. “Were they from the DA’s office? A cop? Or...”

“Couldn’t tell you. But if I had to guess, I’d say he wasn’t with the government.” He traced the story in his head, then raised his eyebrows when he found his place again. “I’m sure Bennie knew what was going to come next, but I think he was tired. He’d done so much and the top brass still seemed to be out of his reach. We all thought he had reached his peak. Besides, prison wouldn’t have been too bad for him, he had a lot of friends there; prisoners and guards.” He took a large gulp from his bottle. “Then, like the leader he was, he told George and I not to come along with him to the meeting. He said we’d ‘served him faithfully.’” William shook his head. “But we couldn’t let him go alone. We put on our best suits and drove to the docks.”

“On the river or the ocean?”

“Ocean. Just south of the mouth of the river.” William drew a diagram in the air with his hands. “Well, when we got there, there was no one to be found. But we knew their tactics and waited for the sirens and the lights. They never came. What did come were bullets. Sounded like a fireworks show. I saw-” His throat caught for a moment. “I saw George’s head open up like a watermelon.” William took a second to collect himself. “In the middle of the chaos Bennie pushed me off the dock and into the water. I still got one in the calf though.” He folded up a pants leg to expose a faded scar and then returned to the story. “Before I reached the ocean, I watched as Bennie’s chest was shredded apart. With all the adrenaline pumping through me I don’t remember a whole lot after that. When I went under the water, I must’ve swam like hell until I was far enough away.” He laid his head in a meaty hand. “I’m a coward. A damn coward. I left them both on that dock.” A few snuffles escaped from behind the fingers before they were taken down and rubbed against a bulging thigh.

They both stayed silent for a brief moment.

Heather laid a light hand on William’s arm. “I’m sorry.”

Aggressively running his fingers over his nose, he nodded and attempted a smile. “Anyway.” He sniffled. “I’m not sure what happened to them next. The papers didn’t report anything for a while. A few months later I spotted the first story of Bennie leaving town. After that, I knew it was over. I guess that fucking goldenboy DA thought it’d be ironic for Bennie’s bones never to be found. To this day, I haven’t the slightest idea where he or George might be.”

“William.” She craned her neck to look at his face. “Do you know the name of the District Attorney?”

He pursed his lips. “He went by Teddy.”

“‘Teddy?’ As in the bear?”

“No.” He took a drink. ‘Teddy,’ as in ‘Ted Johnson.’”

“Ted Johns-” Her head darted sideways then returned alongside a pointing finger. “As in the same Ted Johnson that is currently on the television running for Vice President?”

William nodded sternly.

“Way to bury the fucking lead.” Heather waved her arms and then just as quickly raised a finger. “That’s right, he was our District Attorney a while back.” She retrieved the finger and leaned against the pool table. “Prove it.”

“Hmph. I can’t. I told you that from the beginning.” He flipped his drink up and down.

“Well, can you give me something? Anything to back up what you say?”

“I mean, I don’t think that th—There!” He waggled his stubby finger at the nearest television. “His walk. I know it’s hard to tell, but if you pay attention real hard you can see he’s got a limp in his right leg.”

“Um.” Heather squinted and twisted her neck. “Alright, yeah, I can see it. So what?”

“So, I gave him that.”

She turned toward him. “You gave him that?”

“Yes.” William propped himself against the table next to her and began utilizing his hands. “A few years after the whole thing happened, I tracked him down. I surprised him and whacked him real good in the right knee with a bat. He fell to the ground.” He motioned harshly to the floor. “I...well I pulled out my revolver and I looked him in the eyes. For Bennie, you know? For George. I put the barrel to his forehead.” He dropped a defeated arm. “But I couldn’t do it. Not even for them. Like I said earlier, Bennie always did his own dirty work. I ain’t no killer. And I couldn’t start then.” He moved several fingers to his lips. “No matter how much I wanted to.”

Heather’s mouth lay slightly agape. She looked at the nearest television screen for a few seconds before returning to meet his eyes. “Alright then.” She slammed the pad of paper and its accompanying pen on the table. “Write down your number.” Taking long strides across the sticky floor, paying no mind to those she passed, Heather retrieved her coat and hat from the booth, slipped them on, and upon arriving back at their location, snatched back the pad. “When I call, you need to be ready so we can get some usable quotes.”



He raised an eyebrow and shook his head. “I ain’t giving no quotes. I do not want my name in the paper.”

The look she gave him suggested he had struck her mother. “What? William, we’re going to need your comment on this story alongside any evidence we can—”

A meaty hand waved in the air. “I already told you, there’s no evidence.”

Heather smacked a hand against the pool table. “There is always evidence.”

William let out a huff, but instantly grew more somber. “Look, I can’t do it. You can do whatever you want. I...they’d find me. They’d kill me.” He threw up his arms. “Not to mention my family and friends. I don’t have a wife or kids, but I got siblings, nieces, nephews.” William hunched over. “I can’t put them in danger.”

“William, we have to do this. I need your help. Ted Johnson is running for Vice President of the United States, his ticket’s poll numbers are in the lead, and the election is four months away. People need to know.” Heather was still talking to the top of his head at this point. She reconsidered her tactics and placed a hand on his shoulder. “We have to William. For Bennie. For George.”

Loud breaths escaped from beneath a hand, and eventually his head began to nod furiously. “Okay...alright...this has to happen.” William lifted his body and stared off into the distance. “I can’t carry this anymore.”

“You’re doing the right thing.” She smiled softly. “Now, is there somewhere safe you can go?”

“No. There’s nowhere safe for me.”

“What do you mean?”

He turned his head toward her. “Wherever I go, they’ll find me. These are powerful people.” He sighed. “But it’s okay, I’ll have to make my peace.” William stood tall. “If we are going to do this, print this story, I need you to protect my family, keep them out of it all. Guards, Witness Protection, whatever it takes. You do that and I’ll

give you your quotes.” He stuck out a bulging hand. “What do you say?”

The reporter stared at the offered gesture and then back at William. “I...”

“Heather. You’re right. This is what has to happen.” Gleaming eyes and a friendly smirk added persuasion. “I just need you to make sure my family stays safe. Can you do that?”

She stiffened her spine and nodded. “I can do that.” Heather clasped his hand. “I promise.”

They pulled apart and William managed a smile. “You better get going.”

Heather shook herself back into focus. “Yes, you’re right. I’ll be in touch. Don’t stray too far from your phone and keep a low profile until I call.” She started to walk past him, but suddenly turned around. “I guess I have a presidential campaign to ruin.”

“Hmph.” He raised his bottle. “Good luck.”

Heather nodded. “You too.”

She walked across the sticky bar floor and out the red door.

THE END

## *Old Friends (2021)*

### *Luke Colomey*

The sky was a disinterested shade of gray. A colorful sunset had already come and gone, early even for this time of the year. The street lamps had illuminated well before they were needed, but an old-school navy blue Dodge Charger welcomed their aid as it steadily drove down the vacant road. The tops of pine trees and distant mountains covered the landscape to all sides. It was quite picturesque scenery, but it was also a continuous reminder of how remote the area was. The vehicle turned into a dirt lot, the only sign of civilization for miles. A vintage diner separated a small two-pump gas station complete with a service booth from a motel designed in the style of a log cabin, made up of a welcome cottage and three wooden buildings with another three living quarters built into each. This trio of establishments was constructed atop a cliff, allowing the motel rooms and any passersby a bird's eye view of a majestic valley. Once the vehicle had parked near the welcome cottage an older gentleman with an almost-fully-white head of neatly groomed hair stepped out of the driver's side. He wore a yellow polo shirt tucked into a pair of pressed khaki pants. The man surveyed his surroundings and then proceeded to make his way over to the restaurant, a mere sixty foot distance.

A friendly bell tinkled as he entered through the doorway, a male chef and female waitress—both on the heavier side—peered up from their duties to acknowledge his presence. Nodding his head satisfied the staff's curiosity, and ignoring the father and son seated on stools at the counter and the pair of college-age women near the door, the gentleman strolled over to a booth tucked away in the corner. He slipped into an empty seat. Waiting across from him was a man that was even his senior, boasting a salt-and-pepper hair color with a matching short, but thick mustache and beard. A black tank-top clung to the man's upper body and worn blue jeans were hidden below the plastic table between the pair.

“Wonderful! Now we eat.” The bearded man exuberantly exclaimed, calling over the waitress.

“Why did you ask me here Igor?”

“Come now John, food first.” Igor avoided eye contact and instead leaned towards the approaching server. “I would like a steak with mashed potatoes and green beans. Yes, thank you.”

“And for you sir?” The waitress turned to John, pencil to paper.

“A cheeseburger please ma’am.” He pondered a moment. “French fries and corn on the side if you could.”

She emphasized her completion with a prominent final jab of the pencil. “Coming right up. I’ll grab y’all some waters as well.”

Igor shifted around his utensils and collected the menus together. “I am glad you came.”

“You said it was urgent.”

He met John’s eyes and then leaned backward. “Not urgent. Just said that to get you here.” Igor bared his teeth. “Call it a reunion between old friends. Yes?”

“Have you been in the States long?” John fiddled with his leather watch.

“Going on twelve years. Ever since Isabelle passed away.”

John’s tone softened. “Sorry to hear that, Igor.”

“Yes. She was a good one.” He retrieved a golden cross tucked underneath his shirt and pressed his lips to it.

“She was. Ruthless and absolutely terrifying. But a good one.”

The waitress placed two cups of water on the table followed shortly by plates brimming with fresh smelling food. The pair ate in silence for a few minutes, tasting each individual component of their meal.

“You Americans and your French fries.” Igor scoffed aloud. “Eat a damn potato like a real man.” He motioned to his own dish.

“It’s less messy. You should try them.”

“Bah! They are French. You always hated the French.”

“Well, I like their fries. I’m pretty sure they were invented in the States anyway.” John popped a handful of fries into his mouth. “You never used to eat vegetables.”

Igor shrugged with his entire body. “I don’t know what I am living for anymore, but I have always been a survivor. Doctor says I die if I don’t, so I eat vegetables.”

“Fair enough.” John sipped his glass. “So, tell me, why Montana?”

The bearded man finished chewing another piece of steak. “Less people. More mountains. What is not to like?”

John smirked and took another bite of his burger. They concluded their meal with barely another word, Igor paid the bill, John left a tip when he refused to do so, and they agreed to reconvene once John was able to book a room and briefly settle in.

\* \* \*

Under an hour later the night had completely overtaken the sky and countless bright stars illuminated the valley below in an ominous light. The moon reflected off of a wide river that sliced through the endless trees. Igor answered the knock on his door with a cigar in his mouth and a glass of vodka and ice in his hand. John followed his host to the back porch, carrying a small brown paper bag.

Igor sat down in one of the two wooden chairs and raised an empty glass paired with a bottle missing only a few cupfuls. “I bought this from the shack there. It is nothing compared to the homeland. But it is vodka. It will do.”

“No thank you, I brought the good stuff. But I will take that empty cup.” John retrieved a glass bottle of whiskey from the paper bag and poured himself a drink.

Igor stuck out his tongue. “I do not know how you sip that piss water.”

“It is a sophisticated drink.”

“How is this? I tell you how. It is not.” He breathed out a cloud of smoke and offered the cigar to his companion.

John waved his free hand. “Haven’t smoked in decades. Bad for the lungs.”

Igor let out a grunt. “You have done many things that are bad for you. Why stop at smoking?”

“That was then.”

“You refuse my vodka, now you refuse my-”

“Alright, alright. Give me that.” John took the cigar in his fingers and puffed it, watching the end light up. “Cuban?”

“Straight from Castro himself!” Igor raised his glass into the air.

“I will drink to that.” The pair clinked their cups.

Bzzzt. Bzzzt. John gave back the cigar, reached into his pocket and pulled out a smartphone, touching its surface in various places.

“What the fuck is that thing?” Igor furrowed his brow.

“An ‘iPhone’. My kids got it for my birthday a few years back.” He returned it to his pocket. “I just use it to make calls and check the weather. I refuse to let it replace my watch.” He showed off his wrist.

“I remember that old piece. Your father’s, right?”

“Good memory.”

He refilled his empty glass. “So... children?”

“Me and my wife had a daughter and two sons. Our first grandchild is turning two soon. I would show you pictures, but it’d take me a few hours to find them on that damn phone.” John chuckled. “How about you Igor, you and Isabelle ever have kids?”

He shook his head slowly. “We thought about it once or twice.”

“You two were always solitary creatures.”

“That we were. Tell me, does your family know about your old job?” Igor tilted his head in the direction of John.

“They know I was in the military.” He looked up at the stars. “They’d never understand. Some things are better left unsaid.” John absentmindedly sipped the whiskey.

“John. My friend.” Igor stirred his drink in a small circle. “I did not ask you here for memories.”

“I figured.”

“I have guilt. I am old. There is no more need for secret.” He heaved a sigh. “Panama...Daniel...that was me.”

John eyed him sternly. “I did Nikolai over that.”

“Yes. That is why I tell you.” Igor waved a hand dismissively. “I would not shed tears over that bastard Nikolai.” He looked away. “But I thought you should know.”

“Huh.” John shook his head. “I knew he couldn’t have made that shot.” He pulled away from his whiskey before it touched his lips. “But he took credit?”

Igor shrugged. “He owed me a debt. Said he could take you.” He smirked, cigar between his lips.

John scoffed. “What an amateur.” He peered into the bottom of his whiskey and then raised his glass once more. “Here’s to Daniel.”

“To Daniel.” They both drank.

“I-”

Igor silenced John with his finger. “Another thing. While I am being honest.” He yanked the cigar out of his mouth and pointed it at his guest. “Kennedy was a coward. He died like the pig he was.”

BANG! John smacked the chair’s armrest with a fist. “Kennedy was a good man!” His eyes dropped to the floor. “But his death was not unwarranted.”

“It never is.” Igor sipped his vodka.

John sat back in his chair. “I can’t believe we were the ones who made it.”

Igor allowed more smoke to escape his lips. “I would not have bet on it back in the day.” He stood up with a strain of effort, hobbled over to the wooden railing and leaned against it, breathing in the night air and gazing at the valley below. “You know, I was going to kill you.”

John nodded. “For Romania?”

Igor shrugged his shoulders and turned around once more. “For everything.” He puffed the cigar. “But instead, I tell you secret.” He rolled his eyes. “I am going soft.”

“You’re not soft Igor. We’ve grown up. These things don’t matter as much. We change.” John sipped from his cup. “But not that much.” He stared at his companion with a blank expression. “I nearly poisoned your drink.”

Igor's eyes returned the steely look, smoke still billowing out of his mouth. Their drinks remained at their sides and their eyelids forgot how to blink. Slowly their flat lips began to waver and simultaneously the pair broke into chest-heaving laughter.

Igor brushed away a tear from the corner of his eye and consolidated his cigar into the hand grasping his cup. "We are too old for that nonsense. Let the past die, yes?" He stretched out a grizzled but firm hand.

John rose to his feet, hoisting himself up by the chair's arm. "Sounds good to me...old friend." He gripped the offered hand tightly.

After smiling at each other, the two men moved to the wooden railing and peered longingly over the landscape.

"You know, after all this time, I have never been to Montana." John confessed. "It's nice."

"Yes. I suppose America is not all bad."

They clinked their glasses.

THE END



# II. Understanding the Present

*The Hill (2019)*

*Luke Colomey*

On a grassy hill, four trees of different sizes stood proud. The largest tree stood in the back right, the large-middle tree to the far left, the small-middle tree to the front right, and the smallest tree to the near left. The four trees stood upon the hill, and they were happy.



One day the small-middle tree spoke to the other three trees.

“I must go.” The small-middle tree told them.

“But where will you go?” Asked the largest tree.

“To the forest. I must learn what it truly means to be a tree.” The small-middle tree answered. “Fear not, I will return to you.”

True to its word, the small-middle tree left for the forest. And so, the three trees stood upon the hill.



As winter set in, the three trees lost their leaves. But when winter came and passed, the largest tree still had no leaves. Fearing the worst, the trees sent for a bird, who came as quickly as it could. The bird sat upon the largest tree, buried its beak into the tree, and pulled out a squirming worm.

“I have removed the parasite.” The bird explained. “But it will take time for your leaves to grow back. Even then, the parasite may also grow back.”

“I understand. Thank you, bird.” The largest tree replied in gratitude.

“I wish you well.” The bird answered, flying off.

True to its word once more, the small-middle tree returned to the hill, but before long it had gone back to the forest. And so, the three trees stood upon the hill.



One day, the smallest tree made an announcement to the other trees.

“I have decided that I no longer want to be a tree.” The smallest tree declared. “I want to be a bush.”

“Impossible!” The large-middle tree cried. “You are a tree. You can not be anything else than a tree.”

“Watch me.” Responded the smallest tree.

The trees sent for a lumberjack, who came as quickly as he could. The lumberjack, with his saw, put up a curtain over the smallest tree.

After some time, the lumberjack removed the curtain to reveal a bush.

“Look!” The lumberjack exclaimed. “I have made you into a bush. May you be happier this way.”

The trees thanked the lumberjack and he took his saw and walked off.

Shortly after the smallest tree became a bush, the now middle tree spoke to the others.

“I cannot be with a bush.” The middle tree told them. “I must be with other trees.”

True to its word, the middle tree left the hill. And so, the tree and the bush stood upon the hill.



At last, the now smallest tree returned to the hill.

“I have returned as I said I would.” The smallest tree exclaimed. “I have learned what it truly means to be a tree.”

“And what is that?” The largest tree asked.

“It means that I must stand upon this hill, for it is my hill.” The smallest tree explained. “But I do not understand. When I left there were three trees, now there is one tree and a bush. What happened?”

“The smallest tree is now a bush. And the third tree could not be with a bush so it has gone.” The largest tree replied.

“I see.” The smallest tree answered. “Then we will wait for its return!”

And so, they waited, and the two trees and the bush stood upon the hill.



As time passed, the largest tree’s leaves did not grow back, and their worry grew even more. One day the largest tree fell over.

“Farewell tree and bush.” The largest tree told them. “I have come to my end; may you grow tall.”

The largest tree slowly faded away. And so, the tree and the bush stood upon the hill.



As the smallest tree prophesized, the now largest tree returned to the hill.

“I have returned.” The largest tree announced. “I am sorry bush. I thought I must be with other trees, but I now realize that this is my hill, you are my trees, and this is my place.” The largest tree apologized. “But where is the other tree?”

“It has fallen over and left.” The bush explained. “For this we are sad. But look! A new sapling has begun to grow.”

A small sapling, sprouting just one leaf, grew from the ground where the largest tree once stood.

“Hello trees and bush.” The sapling greeted. “I am but a little sapling. Please do not leave me.”

“We never will.” The largest tree promised.

And so, the two trees, the bush, and the sapling stood upon the hill, and they were happy.

THE END

## *(“Don’t Touch Me Air!”) (2021)*

### *Luke Colomey*

Fourteen months ago, we got the first whisper of a scary new disease popping up in some distant jungle belonging to a country I do not remember the name of. Ten months ago, my wife and I welcomed our second child into the world, a boy this time, and we named him Todd. Nine months ago, the first case of the disease was reported within my own country, suddenly making it seem a little more real. Seven months ago, we bought a wonderful new house to fit the expanded family at a below-market price because - rather luckily for us - the previous owners were apparently moving overseas to escape the disease. Five months ago, the worldwide death toll reached one million people, a landmark number, but not a whole lot when you stop and think about it. Four months ago, I changed jobs to an exciting new company that needed workers who could operate technology so as to do the job from home to avoid exposure to the disease. Three months ago, news reporters and medical professionals informed us that the disease had mutated into a form in which it could indefinitely persist in the air we breathe, symptoms began immediately after contact, and that it was not safe to leave our houses for any reason. Since then, we have been locked up.

After “Mutation Day,” as the media enjoys calling it (I prefer the term “The Day Fun Died”), we had to quickly and correctly transform our house into a disease-free fortress, before the air around us was contaminated. Some of the work was relatively simple; boarding up all the windows, spraying sealant on any crack or crevice found, closing off fireplaces and vents, and so on. Then came the specialty items. A few days after the announcement, a commercial ran consistently on every channel from an apparently new company called “Stay-Alive,” and as the name suggests, survival was its chief product. According to the commercial, every household absolutely required their top three products; the “Stay-Alive Decontamination and Food Retrieval Doorway Extension System” (complete with a “Don’t Touch

Me Air!” suit-and-mask), the “Stay-Alive Disease-Killing Residency Covering” (installation costs extra) and the “Stay-Alive Air-Recycling and Temperature-Setting Indoor System.” The whole package cost everyone in the neighborhood a fortune, but we all ended up shelling out. Because, of course, you cannot put a price on safety...right?

Anyway, aside from all the politics, my family and I have been enclosed in our house for three months now and I think we might all be going a little crazy...

\* \* \*

“DING.” A harmless but dangerously annoying sound originated from the front door, alerting us that this weeks’ groceries had arrived.

My beautiful and stubborn wife, Josie, sat next to me on our sofa as Todd and Katy (our only daughter and eldest child) watched some absurd new kids show about space monkeys saving the universe with math.

Pfff. I wish all it took to solve our current situation was multiplication tables. I wonder if anyone has tried that? They probably have.

“It’s your turn to get the groceries honey.” Josie warmly, but with a hint of hostility, reminded me.

Smiling, I nodded my head in understanding. “I’ll go grab it.” I forced myself off the comfortable sofa. “Come on Katy, want to help daddy with the groceries?”

“Yeah!” She squealed, her four-year-old brain still making every mundane task into an adventure.

I unlocked the glass case containing my “Don’t Touch Me Air!” suit-and-mask and proceeded to put it on. Katy fake-assisted me as I pulled each appendage through its designated hole, until I was wrapped up like a present carefully packaged, but containing nothing but socks. Strapping my breathing mask to my face, I undid the lock on the door and stepped out into the “Stay-Alive Decontamination and Food Retrieval Doorway Extension System,” my steamy breath

ricocheting back into my eyeballs and the stench of sweaty feet violently invading my nostrils.

My wonderful wife was supposed to wash this thing, but I'm sure she just forgot. That, or she is conspiring against me. Eh, she probably just forgot.

I flipped the latch that held the exterior door shut and clumsily strutted outside. The view that was allowed through my gas mask was not much, but it was something. I took a moment to peer around at the neighborhood houses, all comfortably snug under their "Stay-Alive Disease-Killing Residency Covering," before reminding myself of my mission. I located the bulky metal crate lazily dropped on my lawn by some amateur with a drone and shoved my fat fingers into its handle to lug it back to the house.

They couldn't even put freaking wheels on this thing. Better yet, should've just found a way to drop it into the house. Well, I guess they tried their best. But did they really? They probably did.

When I finally dragged the crate into the confines of the extended doorway, I shut the latch behind me and prepared for the coming onslaught. Bright fluorescent bulbs bathed me in light, streams of water aggressively tickled my skin, clouds of chemicals quickly fogged up the enclosed space, and when the barrage finally ceased, heavy-duty fans blasted my body with cold air. A light flashed green, indicating that the process was complete, and I crossed triumphantly, but defeated, back into the confines of my house.

"Good job daddy!" Katy yelled exuberantly. "My turn! My turn!"

I chuckled at my daughter's eagerness, and after peeling off the unwanted second layer of skin and being able to breathe once again, I scooped her up into my arms.

"Now I know that you remember you are not allowed to go outside."

"Maybe." She did not meet my eyes.

"Good." I carefully set her back down onto the rug. "Let's see what we got for food this week!"

With the push of a button, the metallic crate's lid burst open, allowing steam to escape out of the box. Peering inside its confines, I was not surprised, although a little disappointed, to find familiar foods laid out.

"Looks like rice, cheese and chicken for another week." Josie grumbled, in a grateful manner of course, leaning over my shoulder with Todd squirming in her arms. "Take off the top, what is the vegetable and fruit?"

Slightly lifting up the tray making up the first layer of storage, I attempted to identify the make-up of the secondary row. "Broccoli and watermelon. Not bad." I shuffled around a few more things. "The drink is apple juice."

Food is food, but I mean come on, I would appreciate a little variety here. Maybe throw in some chocolate or ice cream once and awhile. I'm sure they are giving us all they have. But are they though? I'm sure they are.

"I ordered another round of toiletries." Josie informed me, setting Todd down on his baby-blanket. "They should come along with next week's shipment."

"Sounds good sweetheart. Ready to make the same dinner we've made for the past three months?" I grinned happily through painful boredom.

As a team, we got to work on the food. Italian chicken was the go-to, as Josie was very fond of her heritage and would not let me forget it. Rice is rice, so you know, rice was cooked. We have been steaming broccoli, but my wife wanted to start baking them, and let me tell you, it is growing on me.

Once we finished dinner, we tucked the kids safely into bed and instead of reading a book like every other night, I was in the mood for some social interaction. In the name of that goal, I had set up a scheduled video-call with my neighbor and friend, Keith. When the agreed upon time arrived, I stepped into my office and logged on to my computer provided to me by my job. Within moments the



unusually, but expected, scruffy face of Keith was visible on the screen.

“Hey Keith, how are you holding up?” I greeted him in a friendly tone.

Do I really care how Keith is holding up? Does he really care how I am holding up? Probably. But, I mean, come on though? I am sure we do care.

My neighbor’s lips noticeably moved, but no sound escaped from them.

“Keith, Keith.” I attempted to gain his attention. “I think you are on ‘mute.’”

“-ry there.” He finally became audible. “It is good to see you neighbor! How have you been?”

“Good.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“How’s the family?”

“Great. How about yours?”

“Fantastic.”

“That’s good.”

This conversation is as dull as the rest of our world. But, it’s good to talk to my friend. Is it good? Yeah, I think it feels good.

“Alright, I’ve got some big news.” Keith announced, rousing the emotion of excitement inside of me that I was not sure I was capable of anymore.

“What is it?”

“I’ve been surfing the internet lately and ran across some interesting information. I’ve done all the research and as your friend I need to tell you.” He paused for dramatic effect. “The disease, it’s all a lie. Fake numbers, fake bodies, fake news. Manufactured by the government. And big corporations. And the media. And Hollywood. And the post office. All of it is to keep us locked up. Like animals!” Keith was practically screaming at this point. “I’m telling you, the disease, everything, it’s all fake!”

I won't lie, Keith is sounding pretty freaking crazy right now. Or maybe he is making all the sense in the world. No, he's probably crazy.

I decided to test how convinced my neighbor was of his theories.

"So then...have you gone outside?"

Keith's face drained of all color. He allowed his head to drop in defeat.

"No."

I continued with some platitudes with my friend and neighbor, and after a few more minutes of riveting, bland conversation, we said our goodbyes. After powering down my computer, I tip-toed my way upstairs, but caught myself before making it past the first step. Absentmindedly, I opened and walked through the front door, shutting it behind me. In a manner that would suggest it was predestined, my hand firmly grasped the latch of the outermost door. My body began swaying physically back and forth ever so slightly, but my grip never changed its pressure. My eyes fixed on the point, as if I was waiting for something to happen without my doing so. At last, I released my hand from the lever, ran it through my hair in exhaustion, once more tip-toed my way upstairs – this time with a little more speed—and crept into what little room was left in the bed by an already snoring Josie. I forced my eyes closed, visions of space monkeys, baked broccoli, and fake news swirling around in my mind until I finally drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

The next morning started like every other fantastically dreary morning. Josie had still not woken up, but I did not mind. I dropped each foot down the stairs, following a direct path toward the kitchen and the magical awakening powers of caffeine. Once the pot had begun brewing, I found myself adjusting our "Stay-Alive Air-Recycling and Temperature-Setting Indoor System," as I was feeling the slightest bit chilly. After the temperature was set to an acceptable

level, I snatched up the television remote, and turned to face the front door, which was...open?

“Morning daddy!”

My grip went limp, allowing the remote to slip through my fingers and clatter to the floor. Katy’s tiny fingers confidently pulled the latch of the exterior door downward.

“Katy!”

I eyed the newly washed suit-and-mask hanging in its glass case, and then proceeded to take off in a sprint towards the door. Crossing the threshold of the first doorway, and then the second, I entered the outside world unprotected for the first time in three months. Without another second’s hesitation I scooped up my daughter into my arms, and with no real reason to hurry back into the house, I embraced Katy with my entire body, closed my eyes, and waited for the inevitable. Seconds, then minutes passed. My throat began to get irritated...wait, no, it is fine. A rash started to form on my arm...hold up, just an itch. Carefully, I opened my eyes. I extended my arms to look at my daughter; she gave me a beaming, toothy smile. I surveyed my neighborhood, watching a man leaving his house wrapped in a “Stay-Alive Disease-Killing Residency Covering,” wearing his “Don’t Touch Me Air!” suit-and-mask, exiting from his “Stay-Alive Decontamination and Food Retrieval Doorway Extension System,” retrieving a brand new “Stay-Alive Air-Recycling and Temperature-Setting Indoor System.”

“Son of a-”

THE END

## *The Masked Champion (2020)*

### *Luke Colomey*

I don't remember when it all started. To be quite honest, I don't even remember why it started, and I am not sure it truly matters. All I am fully aware of is that we were in the thick of a full-scale nationwide protest that reached the largest cities and the most backwater, off-the-path rural settlements. To classify the movement as entirely peaceful would be a gross misrepresentation. Things were broken. People were hurt. There is no avoiding that fact. All of that withstanding, the fundamentals of the protests remained rather intact, if not the slightest bit tainted.

However, as the number of days dragged on and jobs, friends, and families were repeatedly put on hold, the fire behind the movement slowly, but surely began to dwindle. With the driving force beginning to dissipate and countless members leaving by the day, fissures erupted from different regions and fractured the protests, leaving it leaderless and by result, directionless.

Out of this chaos, and in the proverbial nick-of-time, saving the entire movement from collapse, there arose a champion. This biblical hero was a faceless entity, in both literal and figurative sense. When I first gazed upon those black, soulless eyes and the mechanical half-smile-half-frown that made up the facial expression of that mask, I had no earthly clue what to make of it. Whether he was an angelic figure or an inspired man-of-the-people or even a CIA spy, he quickly won the favor of the masses and took over the reins of the movement. The blank canvass of this savior allowed for various angry people to project their emotions onto this figure. He was nobody, which meant he became everything to everyone. Protesters thought of the masked man as a champion fighting for racial equality, for gender equality, for economic equality, and for any such cause one could feasibly battle for. For me...well it doesn't matter what he meant to me. What matters is what he meant for the movement.

“We have talked long enough.” An unwavering voice would announce from behind the mask. “The time for talking is past. What we need now is action. Rise to the call my brothers and sisters. Tear down the oppressors. Act against this injustice. Bring in the new world.”

In the back of my mind was always the fear that some foolish and misguided soul would don a fabricated face-covering and tarnish his reputation. But as events unfolded and no such situation came to pass, I arrived at a realization. He was a ghost, a messiah, a legend. He was in a word...untouchable.

As the days, weeks, and months passed by, the previous blunt instrument of the movement had been transformed into a precise and pinpoint scalpel. Our champion moved from state to state, from city to city, rallying support, informing, inspiring and directing the masses, burning it all to the ground, and then moving on to repeat the process again. Wherever he went, I followed, along with several other self-proclaimed “acolytes.” I was always wary of the level of devotion of some of these men and women, but they seemingly all turned out to be loyal servants. Each of them were furthermore just as destroyed at the end of it all.

After cutting a swathe through the country, the movement ended up on the door of the nation’s capital. After several violent and bloody days, our masked champion stood victorious outside the infamous building. With the crowd, the country, and the world waiting and listening for the next step, their masked hero did the unthinkable.

“I have watched this country rise up and take action against oppression!” The microphone rang out. “It has been a pleasure acting as your leader, but I am afraid I must now leave you. My mission is finished. My end goal has been accomplished. I have taken you as far as I can. It is up to you to go the rest of the way.” His voice picked up again. “I tore down the establishment! I gave you a blank slate! I leave you now with the highest expectations of what you will build. This is an opportunity, don’t fuck it up.”

And with that, as quickly as he had appeared, he was gone. We were left with the memory of a mask and a new world. I wish I could thank this person, wherever he is, but for some reason, I think he already knows.

THE END

## *The Propaganda Machine (2020)*

### *Luke Colomey*

A well-lit bullpen of several desks covered with papers were randomly strewn across the marble floor. No sign of life was visible aside from a lone secretary sitting behind an elevated reception desk at the front of the room, a few yards from the main entrance. However, transitioning through a pair of oak doors into a glass surrounded conference room, one would find a completely different environment. Having the pleasure, but not the opportunity to enjoy a wonderful view of an inner-city landscape, was close to a dozen men and women of all ages waiting patiently around a room-encompassing round table. BAM. Without so much as a warning, a middle-aged, brown haired Caucasian man harshly entered the room adorned in an expensive expertly-tailored suit. Making his way towards the end of the table, he situated himself in a central position and began his routine greeting.

“How are we today?” The man exuberantly cried out through blinding white teeth.

Before anyone had the chance to think of a response, a younger man, most likely approaching thirty, barged through the doors, picking up pieces of paper as quickly as he dropped them.

“Sorry I’m late Jack, the new baby is kicking my ass.” He answered apologetically. “I don’t know how Melinda does it.”

“She can do it Chuck, because women, especially mothers, are super-human.” Jack chuckled, before pivoting to begin the meeting. “Alright folks, this is a big one.”

Responding to the click of a button resting on a small controller in Jack’s hand, the black wall behind him erupted to life into a fully-capable television screen that began sliding from one newspaper headline to the next.

“Stephen Yang is a bright young man who is currently attending Harvard University.” He pointed in the direction of a photo displayed on the screen of a neatly dressed Asian teenager. “Mr. Yang achieved a perfect SAT score and currently boasts a four-point-zero GPA as a

sophomore. He is the student-body treasurer with presidential aspirations and had an internship with a large business lined up for next semester. Unfortunately, young Mr. Yang was expelled from Harvard due to a third incident with alcohol, him of course being under twenty-one years of age. No damage to property, no instances of violence, simply the consumption of alcohol while being nineteen-years-old.”

“Ah, I see the angle.” One of the women around the table spoke out. “Who’s the benefactor this time?”

“All I am at liberty to say, Lorraine, is that he is a very powerful man.” Jack smirked before his next sentence. “And all I am willing to say is he is a senator.”

“Very interesting.” Lorraine followed up.

“We are going to put this story everywhere.” Jack motioned to the television still transitioning through several photographs. “So that when our benefactor puts forth a certain law, the stage will be set for a decisive victory.”

“And how do we do that?” A considerably younger blonde-haired woman sitting next to Lorraine inquired.

“We of course will – who are you?” Jack questioned mid-sentence.

“I’m Kathryn Fox, but you can call me Katie.” She innocently, but proudly answered. “I’m the intern.”

Directed by the queue of Jack turning towards her, Lorraine began to speak. “We hired her last week, Jack. The one I emailed you about. She’s from American University.”

“Right, right, thank you for reminding me Lorraine.” Jack thanked her with a slight flash of annoyance that disappeared as soon as it came. “Well, Ms. Fox, was it?” He continued after a slight nod of approval. “The renowned American scholar Noam Chomsky wrote about how the American for-profit corporate media was and currently is controlled by five different filters, but he left out a sixth: me.” With a large smile on his face, Jack turned once more to the entirety of the room. “Down to business. I want you three covering social media.” He pointed to Chuck and another younger man and woman next to him.



“Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Tinder if you can manage it. If someone opens a phone, tablet, or computer, I want this story staring back at them. Lorraine, I want you and Peter on CNN, I know you have that cousin there.” She rolled her eyes while smirking. “You three are going to cover the local stations and papers. Get this out to everyone and their grandparents.”

“I am a grandparent.” An older gentleman belonging to the last team assembled cried out, evoking chuckles from the room.

“Even better. Use that!” Jack exuberantly encouraged. “I want our hands all over this. I want to be at the forefront. But I don’t want anyone to know we ever had anything to do with it.”

“And what will you be doing, Jack?” Chuck wondered aloud.

He grew intense and moved slightly to lean his arms on the table. “I’m going after Fox.” After giving his dramatic answer a few moments to sink in, Jack began frantically clapping his hands together. “Let’s go, troops! Move out.” He pointed a determined finger at Kathryn as the room began to erupt with commotion. “Intern, you’re with me.”

Amidst the sudden ruckus, Lorraine bent over and whispered gently in Kathryn’s ear. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. Just follow his direction and don’t be afraid to speak your mind.”

“What am I going to do, get him coffee?” She asked nervously.

“You’ll see.” Lorraine laughed. “Now go. You’ll do great.”

Kathryn smiled appreciatively, took a deep breath, and began to swiftly move to the elevator where Jack was already waiting for her.

Jack and Kathryn sat on opposite sides of the backseat of a rather expensive limousine as it made its way through the crowded city streets. Jack flipped through a carefully put-together packet of papers while Kathryn repeatedly momentarily turned towards him, only to look back out the window barely a few seconds later.

Without looking up from his papers, Jack broke the silence. “I can tell you have a question. It’s okay, I won’t bite.” He turned to meet her gaze, grinning in a friendly manner.

“It’s just...” Kathryn stopped a moment to properly phrase her inquiry. “I heard people at the office call you Jack ‘The Propaganda Machine’ Pillar.”

He settled his packet of papers gently on his lap and returned another question at her in response. “What are you studying Ms. Fox?”

“Majoring in Communications, minoring in Psychology.”

“An admirable choice. Quite similar to my own actually.” Jack nodded approvingly. “Why did you choose my business to intern at?”

“I don’t know.” Kathryn shrugged her shoulders. “My guidance counselor gave me a few options, yours seemed like the most interesting. It was kind of a last-minute choice to be quite honest. I put it off too long and needed to pick one.”

“Well, I’m flattered.” Jack chuckled to himself. “As for an answer to your original question: watch and learn. We’re here. Don’t speak unless spoken to and mind your manners. Now come on.” He invited as he held the car door open for his young new intern.

After entering the building, checking in with the reception desk, and being escorted up several levels, the pair finally reached their desired destination. Their guide carefully opened a door to reveal a glamorous, but elegantly simple office, whose sole occupant was standing in wait for their arrival and shared a tight embrace with Jack, giving off the impression that they had a history together.

“How are you, Jack?” The similarly aged, but clearly more sleep deprived executive greeted excitedly.

“Just great, Frank. How’s the wife?” Jack answered in a comparable, but slightly less enthusiastic manner.

“Happy and healthy. As all beautiful women should be.” Frank chuckled, just now noticing Jack’s companion for the first time. “And who might you be, young lady?”

Kathryn met his hand in a friendly introduction. “Kathryn Fox. I’m Mr. Pillar’s intern.”

“Intern? You need an extra hand now Jack?” The executive teased as he made his way to a comfortable seated position behind his rather large oak desk. “Sounds like you’re slipping.”

“Quite the contrary. I am merely passing my extensive and quite revered expertise on to the next generation.” Jack answered with a smile as he and his intern took seats on the opposite side of the desk.

“Oh my mistake, of course that’s the reason. How could I ever have thought otherwise?” He gave the sarcasm a few seconds to permeate through the air before changing the conversation to professional matters. “Now, what business did you want to discuss?”

Without a word, Jack pulled several select papers from his collection and placed them on the desk in front of Frank. After enough time had passed for him to reasonably have skimmed through most of the material, Jack started his pitch.

“I want you to put this story everywhere. I want you to make it huge.”

Frank shook his head. “I can’t swing this, Jack. There’s nothing here.”

“Come on, when have I ever led you astray?” Jack prodded.

After a moment of recollection, the executive came up with an answer. “South Beach.”

Jack rubbed his forehead with his fingers as he laughed. “I knew you were going to bring that up, you jackass. I mean in the last twenty or so years. And in regards to professional matters.”

“I’m sorry. I need more than this.” Frank explained. “I got viewers and advertisers to think about.”

“Frank.” Jack changed his tone to a more serious one, firmly planting one elbow onto the oak desk as his intern looked on in interest. “Trust me. There’s something here. And if there’s not enough right now, there sure as hell is about to be.”

“You’re up to something.” An uneasy Frank accused. “What is it?”

Mr Pillar once more leaned back in his chair and brought his hands together in his lap. “I’m going after the drinking age.”

“With this?”

“With this.”

After giving himself a second to reflect on this new information he locked eyes with Jack. “What do you need from me?”

A sly smile etched onto Jack’s face. “I need you to force it down people’s throats. If it’s not big enough, speculate, over-analyze, dig way too deep.” His enthusiasm grew and his speaking pace quickened with each syllable. “Just get it onto people’s televisions and into their minds. I’ll do the rest. You’ll be glad you ran the story; you’ll be ahead of the curve. And you’ll have little old me to thank for it.”

Frank heaved an amused sigh and reached out his hand. “Alright Jack, you have a deal. Your smart ass hasn’t been wrong yet, so what the hell.”

Having completed their objective, Jack and Kathryn found themselves back in the limousine. This time the intern wasted no time opening her mouth.

“That was incredible.” She remarked, clearly more comfortable. “You had that guy in the palm of your hand.”

Jack smiled. “Frank is an old friend. That was the easy part.”

“Of course, so there has to be a lot more to all of this. I can see what you’re trying to do. How do you control it all? How is it going to work?” Kathryn rambled on skeptically.

“We can’t control it, but we can guide it.” He answered. “As for how it’s going to work, the drinking age, like many other ideas, is a social construct. If enough people believe in an idea, that idea becomes true. This truth has been very dangerous throughout history, but in our case, it can be very beneficial. The drinking age is a well-established and long standing law, but it is by no means set in stone. We have the necessary material, and the financial backing, all we have to do is make enough people believe it. Now, are you ready for our next stop?”

“And what might that be?” Kathryn asked.

“I’m going to introduce you to another friend.”

“An even more influential friend?”

“Something like that.”

The elongated automobile pulled to one side of the road and parked safely in front of a meter. The pair exited the limousine and under Jack's direction, crossed the street to reach a classy restaurant that had a pleasant fenced-in seating area outside the main establishment. After searching for and finding a particular table, they walked through the mass of chattering customers enjoying their lunch in order to reach said table. The man occupying the table who was picking at a salad and adorned in a blue suit perked up as soon as he spotted Jack.

"How are you, Derrick?" Mr. Pillar politely inquired.

"I'm well, Jack." The man turned a nervous eye to Kathryn. "Who's the girl?"

"Intern. Don't worry, she won't say anything. Will you Ms. Fox?"

"No sir." Kathryn answered sternly.

"Good." Jack smiled as he sat down. "Now allow me to introduce you to Senator Derrick Hanson from Wisconsin."

Kathryn shook the Senator's hand who maintained his suspicious eye contact a few seconds too long.

"Is it in motion?" Senator Hanson questioned.

"All the pieces are just about set." Jack responded. "I'm waiting for confirmation from my people, but it shouldn't be long."

"Alright Mr. Pillar, what happens now?"

"Now you sit tight and let us do what you hired us to do." Jack explained as he placed one leg over the other. "And when the time is right, you propose your bill. And please, wait for my word to do so."

"Understood." The Senator nodded in agreement before completely changing his tone to a much more friendly one. "Who's hungry?"

After a rather unexpectedly pleasant and delicious lunch, the familiar sight of the felted inside of the limousine greeted the now full Jack and Kathryn. Barely before the pair had managed to button their seatbelts, the now energetic intern blurted out a question.

"So how does this go? Someone just calls you up and asks you to create news for them?"

“I don’t create news.” Jack chuckled, settling himself in his seat. “I merely highlight certain stories and broaden their reach using my channels and expertise. Mike, can you take us back to the office?” He requested from the driver who nodded in response and proceeded to turn the wheel. “All I do is design the ideal climate for a specific goal to be achieved, and I do this by carefully selecting what the populace sees and what they don’t. And even then, I only have limited control.” He shifted his position to face Kathryn and began using his hands to make his case. “It’s a simple matter of preparing the public subconsciously, through the information they absorb, for an event that is about to happen. And when it does happen, to create the most likely situation in which the most people will be supportive, or at the very least willing to accept the new idea, whatever it may be.”

“In this case, a new law about reducing the drinking age?” Kathryn put the pieces together.

“Exactly.” Mr. Pillar affirmed.

“Isn’t that kind of...?”

“Deceptive? Manipulative? Yeah, a little.” Jack cut in, nonchalantly. “Big businesses do it all the time. By controlling what their customers see, they can in part control what their customers buy. Someone is always going to do it, at least I don’t use my super powers for evil.” He smirked.

“What’s the next step?” Kathryn changed the course of the conversation.

“The next, and final step with any luck, is to monitor what we just set in motion, and when we deem the environment to be primed, we call our friend, Senator Hanson, and tell him to move forward with his bill. And then we get paid.”



The remainder of the office solemnly shuffled into the glass-encased conference room, joining their peers who all attempted to avoid making direct eye contact with a seething Jack Pillar, standing

at the head of the table with his arms crossed over his chest. His left foot tapped incessantly against the marble floor as he eyed each person who entered through the doors up and down.

“You can see the steam coming off of him.” Kathryn heard someone mumble behind her.

After a few more minutes of silently fuming and a few more people taking their seats, Jack finally opened his mouth to a crowd that knew exactly what he was going to say.

“Good, I’m glad you are all here.” Mr. Pillar began in a very unglad tone. “If you don’t already know, our kind and now public benefactor, Senator Hanson, has proposed his ‘Drinking Age Reform Bill’ ahead of schedule, against my, and this company’s, wishes. I spoke to the senator and he said that his advisors told him that it was, quote, ‘now or never,’ end quote. Showing our hand days before anything should have been released has resulted in protesters of a noticeably older age gathering outside the Capitol building and each and every news outlet turning against us.”

“Jack, we knew there would be backlash.” Lorraine attempted to comfort him.

“I know that, but we didn’t have nearly enough time to minimize the damage.” Jack’s knuckles turned white as he clenched his fists. “Now we have the full unbridled wrath of concerned parents and stuck-in-their-ways in front of us.” The volume of his voice grew with each syllable.

“There’s nothing you could have done about it.” Chuck answered calmly. “You advised him and he didn’t listen. That’s all we can do.”

SMACK. Jack’s hand connected with the table’s surface in a frighteningly forceful manner. “Damn that idiot! I told him to wait. Why don’t they ever wait?!” He lowered his head down to meet his hand and when he came back his tone had completely switched. “Alright, now we do clean up and keep moving forward. I want a comparison of the drinking ages of other countries to ours. I want a line circulating about something to the effect of kids under twenty-one serving, fighting, and dying for their country but not being able to have

a drink. I want statistics about the effects of drinking on kids eighteen and up. If they don't bode well for us, scrap them. Do we have the Yang kid yet? We need an interview stat."

Every person in the conference room stared at him in response and did not utter a word.

"Hello? Anyone awake?" Jack mocked the entire room. "Come on folks, let's move, let's move. There is no time to waste!" His voice picked up in enthusiasm and the room jumped to life, as questions and demands began to echo across the area and bleed out into the bullpen.

In a few mere minutes, the men and women working under Mr. Pillar had revved into full gear and were now putting the office to good use. Pieces of paper were practically thrown from one end of the room to the next, fingers furiously typed away at keyboards, and several voices speaking into phones continually elevated their volume to out-compete each other. Amidst the rush stood a confused Kathryn, who was not given the slightest direction on what it is she should be doing at the current moment. She awkwardly shuffled over to the door of Jack's office and knocked on the wooden frame.

"Who is it?" His voice carried through the barrier. "Essential information only."

The intern slid the door slightly so that her face could be squeezed through.

"It's me, Mr. Pillar." She answered sheepishly. "I was just wondering what I should be doing."

"Um..." Jack muttered, rifling through papers on his desk.

Before he could give any direction, an older man opened the door much wider than Kathryn's previous attempt, rushed through the entrance way, and approached his boss' desk.

"Here's the statistics about underage kids that currently consume alcohol." The man explained, handing him a stack of papers. "It took a little finangling, but I got the demographics too. I emailed you the digital copy if you don't like the paper."



“This is great work, Danny!” Jack exclaimed. “I’m going to take a quick look before my call, but I want you to send this to Chuck and have him go through the whole thing.”

“Yes sir.” He responded, smiling, before exiting the room as quickly as he came.

“Mr. Pillar?” Kathryn practically whispered.

Jack looked up at the call of his name and blinked to life when he made eye contact with his intern. “Oh, um, I don’t need anything here. I’m actually just about to make a call. Why don’t you go out into the office and help anyone that could use it.”

“Yes sir.” She bowed her head slightly and carefully shut the door behind her.

Turning around to face the bustling bullpen of people, she locked on to the nearest desk and began her walk over to it. After nearly being run into by a tall stack of papers with legs, she made it to the desk, only to get unceremoniously brushed off. Five more attempts resulted in the same outcome, and Ms. Fox was becoming rather agitated. Moving over to a somewhat familiar face, she stood next to Lorraine’s desk who put a finger up while she broke the words-per-minute record. Finally finishing her masterpiece, Lorraine delivered the message in satisfaction, only to show regret a moment later, that was brushed aside after another thought.

“What can I do for you Kathryn?” She asked as politely as the hectic situation would allow.

“I’ve asked everyone, I-”

“Toby, are those the files on the Yang kid? Give them here. I’ve been waiting for so long.” She snatched the files from the man’s hand. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“Mr. Pillar asked me to help someone, but no one needs anything right now.” Kathryn replied, solemnly.

“Everyone is just busy.” Lorraine paused for a moment when she noticed the look in the young intern’s eyes. “I know this is not what you’re looking for, but could you go grab us some coffee?” She requested, squeezing Kathryn’s hand tight as she handed over a folded

up collection of dollar bills. “Let us do our jobs right now, I promise I will have something for you to do later.”

Ms. Fox let out an appreciative, but disappointed smile. She shuffled across the marble floor, avoided several would-be collisions, and made her way into the elevator to complete her task.



Several days had passed and the office had gone through several high-stress days before deescalating back to a semi-normal state. Jack was perched comfortably on his swiveling, padded chair peering out thoughtfully onto the city landscape through his large office window. The desk that once supported mounds of papers and files was now relatively bare aside from a few remaining articles. A polite knock on the door announced the presence of Lorraine, followed closely behind by Kathryn.

“Ms. Fox has offered to give your daily briefing, Jack.” Lorraine explained excitedly.

Mr. Pillar’s stoic face showed a hint of a smile and he waved his hand in an inviting manner, motioning for the commencement of the report.

Kathryn moved closer to a still window-facing Jack, raised the stapled packet of papers in her hands, and cleared her throat.

“The most recent polls for the ‘Drinking Age Reform Bill’ have just come in, and while the numbers were initially low, they have steadily risen to a now 52% positive reaction. This is still not the numbers we were hoping for, but we are seeing signs of hope. Several congressmen and governors have commented that-”

“Now.” Jack suddenly interrupted with a single finger extended.

“Now?” Kathryn responded in a confused tone.

“Mr. Pillar is quite rudely expressing his opinion.” Lorraine’s glance pierced the back of Jack’s head. “Now would have been the opportune time to propose the drinking age bill, had our senator friend not gone against the company’s wishes.”

“If only that idiot had listened.” Jack muttered, visually still upset. “By this time, news coverage could have forced the idea to sink in comfortably and positively into the public’s mind. Even the ones that got all riled up for one reason or another.”

“You don’t know that for sure.” Lorraine answered, shaking her head.

Mr. Pillar spun around in his chair, placing a hand firmly down on his desk. “But I do. This is my job. The idea needed more time to settle. The early introduction of the bill brought the statistical chances of success down by entire fractions.”

“So, what does that mean?” Ms. Fox inquired.

Jack turned his head and made direct eye contact with his young intern. “Huh?”

“What does that mean?” She repeated. “Is it over? Did we lose?”

He took a half second to ponder the question before a devilish grin crept onto his face. “Let’s go find out.”

Jack led Kathryn through the bull pen, down the elevator, and into a familiar limousine that quickly joined the oncoming traffic. In a few minutes’ time, the vehicle had reached its destination and pulled into a parking spot that allowed for a clear view of an easily recognizable building with a large dome-structure placed expertly on its top.

“The nation’s Capitol building.” Jack announced. “That’s where the magic happens. That’s where our bill will go through its real test.”

“Why are we here? What are we looking for?” Kathryn questioned.

“So many questions.” He laughed. “Look over there. That’s what we’re here for.”

Following the line of sight created by Jack’s gaze, Ms. Fox searched around until she locked on to what he was referring to. A group of protestors, numbering in the low thirties, gathered at the base of the steps, holding large signs and heckling passersby.

“A few days ago, that group was easily in the thousand range. It seems they have settled down. The initial burst of anger has given way to more reasonable senses.” Jack observed and commented.

“That sounds like a pretty good sign to me.” Kathryn smiled.

“That it does.” He returned the facial expression.

“So, what now boss?”

“Now, we’re done. We planted the seeds. All we can do is watch them bear fruit. With the current trend of policy and the atmosphere of politics, the bill should pass with no problem. I was more worried about the populace, and therefore the constituents that back each and every politician. Without any strong protest, the economical, social, and moral advantages should give way to a clear path.”

“Congratulations, Mr. Pillar.” Kathryn outstretched a warm hand.

Jack met her in gratitude and then slouched down in exhaustion into the leather behind him.

“And that’s how you do that.” He admired himself, before turning towards his young intern. “Now...how old are you? Care for a drink?”

THE END

# III. Hoping For the Future

*An Apocalyptic Future, A Utopian Future, A Future (2020)*

*Luke Colomey*

A man-made blackness filled the open area, the stench of anticipation was ripe in the air. Muffled murmurs were the only sound an attentive ear could pick up, as no one in the room dared to raise their voice past a certain volume. At long last, the meticulously-designed lighting began to slowly, but surely illuminate, revealing hundreds of occupied seats that wrapped around a large, flat stage, allowing everyone a satisfactory view of the show to come. Once the room reached a sufficient brightness, two older gentlemen, dressed in suits, claimed the stage from different sides. Their entrance was met with roaring applause which continued to gain in magnitude while they both made their way to center stage and waved to the excited crowd. After a few minutes, the noise died down and the two men began to speak, echoed by the microphones they wore on the collars of their jackets.

“Good evening, everybody, we really appreciate you all coming out tonight!” The more neatly trimmed of the two greeted the crowd to another round of applause. “Before we begin, allow us to introduce ourselves.” This man sported a hint of gray in an otherwise black head of hair that matched well with his carefully pressed navy two-piece suit. “My name is Donald Perriman, and I am a professor of engineering here at the university.”

“And I am Edward Syphner, environmental professor.” This speaker was even older and brandished an impressively long gray beard coupled with a tweed suit jacket and a slightly different colored

pair of pants. “I would like to reiterate my colleague’s gratitude for your presence here today. We thank you all for coming out to hear a couple of senile old men talk at you for two hours.”

The joke was received well by the audience, arousing quite a few polite laughs.

“What my dear friend is trying to say is that we are on this stage tonight to speak about some very profound topics that will hopefully interest you and give our students out there something to write about in their extra-credit papers.” Professor Perriman explained with a smile, resulting in a few more chuckles.

“There has actually been a slight change in plans, as we will be moving away from our joint lecture on new environmental-related technological advancements. Instead, the two of us are here to discuss the topic of our collective future, and the moral, philosophical, and practical implications that such a topic brings along with it.”

“You see, Professor Syphner and I recently had a rather illuminating experience that opened our eyes to new ways of thinking.” He smirked as he announced his next sentence. “We won’t bore you with the details now. It’s a rather uninteresting story to be quite honest.”



It being a weekend, Saturday to be more precise, the halls of the university building were relatively empty. A spare few professors, janitors, and eager students accounted for the only occupants, two of which were a very tired Professor Edward Syphner and a typically excited Professor Donald Perriman. The pair made their way down the tiled hallway at noticeably different tempos. The environmental professor dragged his feet as he shuffled along, using a left hand gripping a newspaper to stifle a yawn before sipping from a steaming mug of coffee held in his opposite hand. In stark contrast, the engineering expert practically skipped across the floor, his gaze firmly set upon a lone door at the far end of the hall.

“Please tell me again why we are here so goddamn early?” Edward mumbled while rubbing the sleep out of one eye.

“Cheer up.” Donald enthusiastically nudged. “We are here so goddamn early because it is going to take a goddamn long time to clean out this hoarder’s office. But we are going to have fun doing it!”

“And you are still not the slightest bit disconcerted about moving into a dead guy’s office?” Professor Syphner questioned through another yawn.

“Nope. And I’ll tell you why. It’s an exceptional office. Air conditioning. A great view. Right near the elevator which I can now see. And it’s on the end so it’s got more square footage.” He went on.

“That all sounds great, but seriously...dead guy.” Edward shuttered. “Did you know...what’s his name?”

“Maxwell Roker.” Professor Perriman informed. “Only by reputation. Applied physics professor. Weird dude apparently. I’m guessing that we are going to learn a good amount about him very soon. This is it.”

Having reached their destination, Donald presented a key retrieved from a small envelope and unlocked the door, allowing it to swing open to reveal a virtual pig-stye in all but smell. The office’s newest occupant strolled through the doorway while his counterpart sheepishly peaked his head to a position where he could observe, but still make a successful escape. One would not guess that the room was of a substantial size due to the ceiling-high piles of papers and books, the oddest placements of the most curious objects, and an overall clutter that would force any rational human being into an uncontrollable sense of pure claustrophobia. Any tables or flat surfaces were completely hidden by any possible assortment of readable or writable materials and Donald guessed that the bookcases went at least three volumes thick. A contraption of waist-height was hidden under a gray tarp tucked away in a corner and Professor Roker had apparently run out of room on his several chalkboards as the notes bled onto the adjacent open walls. The suddenly not-so-energized engineering professor turned around to lock eyes with a still-peaking

Edward who had a wide smile painted on his face, in which he wasted no effort in hiding.

“So... still happy about the new office?” Professor Syphner teased, fully joining his colleague in the room.

“All it needs is a little cleaning.” Donald answered, attempting to hold on to his previous optimism. “We’ll have it done in no time.”

“Ha!” The teacher of all-things-environmental mocked. “We’re going to have to open up a whole new landfill just to find space for all this shit.”

“In that case, we’d better get started.” Professor Perriman tossed over a black trash bag. “They said we can move out anything that looks sentimentally valuable and throw out anything that seems like trash. Apparently, his family did not want anything particular from the office.”

“That’s sad, I keep all my valuables in my office.”

“You don’t have any valuables.”

“Well, if I did, I’d keep them in my office. Probably safer here than at my house.” Edward continued as he picked up the nearest stack of papers and began leafing through them. “How did he die?” “Heart attack.” Donald returned, sweeping an entire table-covering of folders into a bag. “He was older, but it came as a surprise. I guess his work got the better of him.”

“Among other things.” Professor Syphner held up a half-empty cartridge of cigarettes before moving on to the next stack of papers.

“Would you get going? If we don’t start this soon, we will be here all weekend. I’ll start over here; you take the other side.”

“I knew it was a mistake getting up today.” The bearded teacher mumbled under his breath.

Shuffling over to the opposite side of the office, Edward began gathering handfuls of clutter and shoving them into his trash bag. After several more minutes of this, the gray tarp caught his attention. A previously unnoticed label read “Time Machine” in scribbled handwriting, intensifying the curiosity of the nose professor.



“Wouldn’t hurt anybody to take a look.” He smirked. “I’m sure Mr. what’s-his-name won’t mind.”

Carefully pulling off the covering revealed an apparatus straight from a science fiction movie set. A padded metallic disc that would uncomfortably fit three standing men was accessorized with a quasi-guardrail that held an attached computer screen that offered a selection of dates and times down to the minute. The contraption as a whole was clearly quite new as it lacked the coat of dust the rest of the room shared. A doubtful grunt escaped Professor Syphner’s lips, but a second twang of what could be described as academic inquisitiveness prompted a follow up response.

“Donald, come here and take a look at this.”

“Yeah Ed, I’ll be over in a second.” The still busy engineering expert absentmindedly assured.

“Seriously, come over here.” A sense of urgency accompanied the request that forced Professor Perriman to look up from his work and make his way over to his companion’s side of the office. “What is it?”

Edward gestured at the apparatus in front of him, to which his friend squinted at in an attempt at identification.

“Is it some kind of new-age treadmill?”

“It was labeled ‘Time Machine.’” Professor Syphner scoffed. “Ridiculous right?”

Donald repeated the scoff. “Really? I guess the old guy was crazy. Some might say, off his Rocker...” The pause for comedic effect was met with an unimpressed glance. “It was there, I had to take it.” He rubbed his hands together in preparatory fashion. “Alright, let’s give her a whirl.”

The environmental professor stopped his colleague’s forward movement with an outstretched arm. “Hold on. We have no idea what that thing is. It could be a bomb.”

“A bomb? Come on. At worst, it’s a television prop, and at best...well, at best, where is your scientific enthusiasm?” He playfully nudged Edward’s arm before boarding the strange contraption.

“Please don’t touch anything.” Professor Syphner cringed.

“Great idea, where should we go? Past or future?”

“I know you know that is not what I said.”

“I do know that.” Donald slyly smiled. “Now hop on. I ask again. Past or future?”

After a moment’s thought, an answer was given. “We know what happened in the past, the future is unexplored territory.”

“Good answer. Now, let’s do a nice rounded number of fifty years.” Professor Perriman approximated, while tapping the arrows on the screen. “Looks about right.”

“Wait.” Edward heaved a sigh of acceptance and reached over to grab the newspaper he brought with him, showing off the front page brandishing pictures of the two professors in an article about their upcoming joint lecture. “On the wildly, extremely, minute off-chance that this thing works, we’ll need this to prove we are who we say we are.”

“That’s the spirit!” The engineering professor encouraged, gripping his companion’s shoulder. “In the name of discovery!”

A firm finger pressed the bright green activation button and immediately the device jumped to life. Hidden lights illuminated and a buzzing sound erupted from the platform underneath their feet. Every inch of the pair’s bodies began to defy all rules of normalcy as they stretched and bent, forcing them to be helpless observers as the cluttered office around them began to disintegrate into a formless black. As the scene around them melted away, the brains of the two professors felt as though they were being scrambled and they experienced each individual molecule tear itself away from its neighbors. The buzzing’s volume exponentially grew and once their surroundings had entirely faded to black nothingness, they lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

Without reason, without explanation, the two professors rematerialized, alive and well, their knuckles pale white from

clutching the guardrail with every ounce of strength they could muster. It took several life-spanning minutes until either man was able to utter a single word, and when their verbal abilities returned to them, eloquence was certainly not the first thing on their minds.

“What...the fuck...just happened?” Professor Perriman stammered, cautiously stepping off of the metallic platform.

His counterpart dismounted the apparatus in similar fashion, crumpling to the floor as his knees gave out. “I would really rather not think about it.” Edward answered sheepishly, holding a supportive hand to his forehead.

“Did that...did we...what the fuck?” Donald continued, spreading his fingers out to assure he was still in control.

“Well put.” The retort came with a snort of approval.

A few more precious seconds of recovery was cut short when, in eerie unison, the pair took time to notice their surroundings. The fluorescent lights that once illuminated the office were now dim, each and every piece of paper had vanished from their many resting spots, and thrice-fold layers of dust covered every surface, making the air rather difficult to breathe in.

“Is it just me, or did this room look a whole lot different a second ago?” Professor Syphner inquired nervously.

“No, I’m noticing that too.” The engineering teacher affirmed. “I will reiterate; what the fuck is going on?”

“You don’t think-”

“There’s no way.” Donald cut the sentence short, vigorously shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s impossible.” He took one more look around. “Isn’t it?”

Edward blew out a flustered breath. “I really don’t know. But I suppose there is only one way to find out.” He gestured towards the closed door that they had seemingly just entered through.

His colleague nodded his head in agreement and filed in behind him as he traveled across the floor and reached for the handle. A turning of the nob alerted them to the fact that it was bolted shut.

“Did you lock the door?” Professor Perriman questioned.

“Nope.”

“This is too weird.”

“It’s not unlocking, it must be boarded from the outside.” Edward informed.

“Step aside.” Donald instructed, holding up a steady elbow.

CRASH. The appendage burst through the glass window, felt around outside the door, and hardily ripped down two wooden boards that allowed the door to freely swing open.

“Impressive.” The environmental professor conceded.

“I do push-ups every once and awhile.” Donald candidly responded as he tended to his sore hand.

“After you.” Edward offered, yielding the lead.

“Let’s take the elevator down.” In reply to his suggestion, he looked over to a bright yellow warning sign. “Stairs it is.”

The pair traversed the solemnly quiet and dark hallways until they approached an exit.

“Wait, check your phone!” Professor Syphner cried, reaching into his pockets.

“I didn’t even think of that!” Donald followed suit.

The pair let out disappointed sighs as “No Service” notifications crushed any small glimpse of hope they might have mustered.

“Okay, I’m convinced.” The younger of the two relented. “That Time Machine worked. We are in the future. Whatever is behind those doors is where the human race ends up in fifty years. Let’s make a bet.”

“A bet?”

“Yeah, a bet. We were flung decades through time in an absolutely terrifying experience. Might as well make the best of it. What do you think it’s going to be like behind those doors?” Donald challenged.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Edward began his prediction. “That’s easy. Pollution, deforestation, overfishing, and a slew of other problems caused an irreversible and worldwide apocalypse. We are about to walk into a hell-hole.”

“No way!” Professor Perriman dismissed nonchalantly. “You are being too pessimistic. Technological advancement and human ingenuity elevated our society into a utopia and the world’s issues have all been solved.”

“And that is optimism at its finest.” The bearded teacher rolled his eyes.

“Fantastic! We disagree. Time to find out who is right.” Donald braced himself as he placed a hand on the door. “Here we go.”

Luckily, this door swiveled open with no further assistance and the future was revealed. It was magnificent, it was horrifying, it...appeared as though nothing had changed. People strolled along the sidewalk, cars sped down the road, children played gleefully in a park. An unavoidable wave of disappointment washed over the two professors, but after a more careful second glance, their mouths slowly opened in awe. The citizens walking down the sidewalk were dressed in strange, plastic-like garbs, the cars speeding down the road had no tires to speak of coupled with inattentive drivers at the wheel, and the children gleefully playing in the park tossed around a holographic ball. Further observation exposed digital street signs, small robots that cleaned the city around them, and holographic advertisements that appeared and dissolved every few seconds.

“I win.” The professor of engineering announced his victory. “This place is paradise, just as I predicted.”

“Easy there oracle.” Edward cautioned. “Give me a little time to investigate before you celebrate.” He offered, as he walked down the steps and into the new world.

“Give it up.” Professor Perriman encouraged. “It’s over. Look around.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” Professor Syphner warned as he approached a wandering robot. “Do you sell newspapers?”

“Are you requesting a daily information cube?” It inquired in an eerie, emotionless tone.

“Um, yes?” He skeptically replied.

“Dispensing daily information cube.” The robot declared, retrieving and placing a small metallic cube into Edward’s palm. “Have a good day citizen.”

“Thank you.” The environmental professor answered in uneasy gratitude.

“How does that thing work?” Donald asked.

“Beats me.” Professor Syphner shrugged, touching it with a finger that resulted in a projected hologram of news stories. “There we go.”

As Edward flipped through several reports, his companion spoke up. “You’re not going to find anything because there is nothing to-”

“Thirty percent of the Amazon Rainforest is now uninhabitable and scientists believe it could continue.” He read.

“Alright, well that is one-”

“Pollution levels consistently rise each year, causing many citizens to despair for the future.”

“That still doesn’t prove-”

“Overflowing garbage disposal centers are backing up, leading to violent protests in lower income areas.”

“Okay, okay. I get your point.” Donald relented. “There are still problems.”

“That is all I wanted to hear.” Professor Syphner smiled.

“But robots and news reports can only reveal so much. Let’s talk to somebody, get the details.” The engineering teacher proposed.

“I’m not sure that is a great idea.” Edward returned, unconvinced.

“We’re here, we can’t stop now. We’ll talk to one person and then we’ll head back.” Donald suggested with a single finger raised in the air. “Come on, that house over there looks nice.”

“I knew it was a mistake waking up today.” He mumbled, following his colleague across the street and up to the nearest household’s front door.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK. Professor Perriman enthusiastically banged on the frame.

“Maybe we should try the next-”

The door receded into the ground to unveil an average, bespeckled gentleman adorned in a buttoned shirt that resembled the plastic-like material they had noticed before.

“Can I help you?” He politely questioned.

“Hello. Yes.” The engineering professor spoke up politely. “My name is Donald, and my colleague here is Edward.” He gestured to his bearded friend who waved awkwardly in response. “We are...eh...new in town, and we were wondering if we could ask you some questions.”

“Um?” The future-man mumbled in a confused manner.

“What he’s trying to say is we are just saying hello to our new neighbors.” Professor Syphner cut in, pushing a disgruntled Donald to the side. “We don’t know very many people and we’re trying to reach out.”

“I... unfortunately, I can’t right now.” The man stammered, reaching for a button that one could only guess would “slam” the door in their faces.

“Alright listen, that was a lie.” Professor Perriman cried out. “We are from around here. Just not here, here.”

“What does that mean?” The future-man questioned.

“Yeah, what does that mean, Donald?”

“We are from fifty years in the past.”

“Hey!” Edward scolded angrily.

“What?” Donald shrugged his shoulders. “It’s better to be honest.”

“Yeah...um...I’m going to have to ask you to-”

“Wait! We can prove it.” Professor Syphner interrupted the man, reaching into his coat pocket to retrieve the newspaper he brought with him and handing it to their new acquaintance.

The owner of the house stared at the newspaper in his hand for a moment before looking up. “What is this? Why did you print out the news? On paper? No one has done that in decades.”

“Look at the photographs on the front page.” Edward directed. “That’s us.” The pair grinned as friendly as they could while the man compared them to their pictures. “And look at the date. Fifty years ago.”

“That could easily be doctored.”

“Humor us. For argument’s sake. Please.” The environmental teacher pleaded. “We traveled a long way to get here and all we are asking for is a conversation. We aren’t carrying any weapons. We will leave whenever you ask us to. We are not dangerous people. Please.”

The future-man skeptically stared at the two professors, weighing his options. “Alright. I don’t have that much time. We’ll have to make it quick. Come on in.”

“Thank you. We’re grateful.” Edward answered genuinely, following the man into his house.

“Nicely done.” Professor Perriman whispered in his ear.

They passed through the doorway and entered into the cleanest living space that either of them had ever seen. Everything was spotless from the floors to the walls to any surface in sight. A small robot brandishing a vacuum and duster sped past their feet; the most likely reason for the immaculate household. Each piece of furniture or appliance was a chrome color, or some variation thereof. Strange liquid statues decorated the room and they caught a glimpse of a floating holograph in the place of a television on their way into the kitchen. There were certainly several objects that neither professor could identify, but for the most part, the house’s makeup did not differ greatly from those of their own time.

“Would either of you like a drink?” The man offered.

“No, we are fine, thank you...” Donald politely refused, but paused when he realized he had no way of addressing their patron. “I’m sorry, we didn’t catch your name.”

“Raltz. Raltz Hephnee.”

“Well, Raltz, thank you again for your hospitality.” The professor of engineering graciously thanked him as the pair accepted an offering of seats around a chrome dinner table.

“Of course. It would be rude to turn away weary travelers. Even if they do dress a little oddly.” Raltz commented, but quickly changed the subject. “So, what can I do for you gentlemen?”



“Hmm. How do we put this?” Edward pondered. “Pretend as though we have no knowledge of the past fifty years and explain to us what has happened.”

“There is a lot to unpack from that request. Perhaps a starting point would be helpful?”

“Technology.” Professor Perriman blurted out. “What is technology like?”

“Well, let me think.” Mr. Hephnee thought for a moment. “We have our gravity-powered vehicles-”

“Gravity-powered?! That’s incredible!” Donald exclaimed.

“Yes...um...holograms are quite prevalent nowadays-”

“I saw those. Amazing. How do they work?” The engineering professor asked in a completely fascinated tone.

“As I said before, I do have a limited amount of time, so allowing me to go over what I can would probably be more beneficial to you.” Raltz explained in a matter-of-fact way.

“Of course. I apologize.” Donald excused himself as he attempted to avoid a seething glare from his companion.

“No worries.” Mr. Hephnee continued on. “We have made many advancements in robotics as I am sure you’ve seen, genetically-engineered food is a big one, they cured cancer quite a while back now, we-”

“I’m sorry for another interruption, but I just have one quick question.” Professor Perriman promised. “All of these marvels in all these fields and they still can’t fix your vision?” He inquired, referring to the transparent pair of glasses that rested on Raltz’s face.

“Oh, these are not for sight. They are my all-purpose goggles.” He revealed, removing them from his nose and offering them to Donald. “Try them on.”

As his colleague tried on the glasses and began looking around the room mesmerized, Edward took advantage of the break from conversation and spoke up. “Could you tell me about the environment?”

“Why sure. There has-”

“Dad!” A noticeably younger voice cried out in enthusiasm.

“I’m in the kitchen Zaim!” Raltz responded in equal volume.

“I just finished the newest-” A boy, recently reaching his teenage years, raced down the stairs and stopped mid-sentence when he saw the two strange characters sitting around his dinner table.

“These are my friends.” Mr. Hephnee explained. “This is Donald and Edward.” He introduced, before turning to his guests. “This is my son, Zaim.”

The child, a spitting image of his father, stood confused in the doorway, adorned in a face-covering headset and sensors stuck to various parts of his body.

“What is that he’s wearing?” Professor Perriman inquired, returning the transparent glasses to its owner.

“It’s a personal simulation headset complete with sensors. It simulates all five senses. Used for movies, video games, whatever you want.” The mouths of both academics did not stay closed long. “Zaim, could you go back upstairs while I talk with my guests? You can play with that thing for a little longer and then you have to start your homework.”

The uttering of that dreadful word formed a frown on the boy’s face, but he waved slightly in a sign of compliance and made the trek back up the stairs.

“It really simulates all five senses?” Edward asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. Fully immersive. Although it has been linked to several incidents of seizures and schizophrenia.” Raltz shrugged. “They assured us that these problems have been fixed in the latest model. Now where were we?”

“The environment.” Professor Syphner reminded him.

“Ah yes. Well, after the three-degree mark in rising global temperature was reached twenty years ago we lost several coastal areas. Lots of displacements and such, but the deaths were minimal.” Mr. Hephnee recalled. “A few years after that, scientists found a way to artificially destabilize and eventually remove carbon-dioxide from

our atmosphere and the temperatures have almost gone back down to normal.”

Reacting in a sneer from Donald, Edward promptly asked a follow-up question. “But surely there are still problems?”

“Oh, you bet, we humans have still not learned to respect nature.” Raltz chuckled. “They are now predicting that deforestation and overfishing will cause a global crisis. A good portion of the Amazon is gone and new species of fish are put on the extinct list daily.”

Ignoring the gloating body-position of his colleague, the engineering professor wondered aloud. “You seem very knowledgeable on all these topics, Raltz.”

“I should hope so! I am a history teacher at the local high school.”

The two professors glanced at each other. “That is a very honorable profession.” Edward remarked.

“They haven’t replaced teachers with robots?” Donald asked.

“We use technology extensively in the classroom, but the politicians thought it smart to keep a human touch in education. Lucky for me.” The future man smiled.

“Speaking of politicians, what do they look like?” Professor Syphner questioned.

“Well, let me see.” Raltz dug through his memory. “Fifty years ago, there were the Republican and Democrat parties. They have since dissolved.”

“Interesting.”

“But new parties formed. We now have the Traditionalists and the Liberationists. Relatively similar ideologies, but slightly more radical on both sides.”

“What about war? Surely war is now a thing of the past.” Professor Perriman nudged hopefully.

“It’s been relatively peaceful since the ‘War of the Americas’ ended a little over fifteen years ago.” Raltz admitted.

“The ‘War of the Americas?’” Edward scoffed.

“Yeah, South America got tired of the United States’ meddling and we went to war. Most of the fighting was below the northern Mexico

border, but there were several battles that took place in Texas and the surrounding states. Up here it only reached the headlines.”

“Woah.” Donald mumbled. “Was it a nuclear war?”

“No, there was only one nuclear weapon used in the last few decades.” Mr. Hephnee remembered painfully. “It was dropped on the Middle East twenty-five years ago.”

“That’s bad.” The environmental teacher shockingly commented.

“Ten million souls gone in a flash of light.” Raltz nodded grimly. “Luckily, contrary to past belief, scientists found a way to expunge the radiation and made the land hospitable again and the area is mostly repopulated. It hasn’t come to that since, and I pray it never does again.”

“Alright, so war is still around. A hard thing to get rid of.” Donald admitted. “How is the world in regards to differences? There must have been some progress on that front.”

“Some. There was a world peace treaty signed, but it didn’t last long. As I told you, war still happens. Racial, religious, and ethnic conflicts persist. There is still a large language and cultural barrier. But I’m still hopeful.”

The three men sat in silence for several minutes, reeling from the vast amounts of information that had been discussed.

“One last question. Before we take our leave.” Professor Syphner politely prefaced.

“Ask away.”

“Did overpopulation ever become a problem?”

“It did. Things got pretty bad for a while.” Raltz described. “Forty years or so ago a virus out of Japan wiped out a third of the population. That, coupled with our limited colonization of Mars recently has mostly made the issue moot.”

Edward nodded to himself after receiving the information and proceeded to stand up, extending a warm hand to their host. “We have taken up enough of your time. Thank you for inviting us into your home and answering our questions.”

Raltz met his hand firmly and did the same with Donald. “You are a couple of strange fellows, but it wasn’t the worst way to spend a morning.” He smiled, beginning to walk the pair of professors to the door.

Before leaving, Donald turned around to face Mr. Hephnee. “The world is still a fucked up place, huh?”

Raltz pondered the statement for a moment. “I don’t know if I fully believe you two are from the past, and if it is true, I will not pretend to know the world you come from. However, while this world is by no means perfect, it allows me to raise my family, and for that, I’m grateful.”

His two guests smiled appreciatively. “It has been a pleasure, Raltz.” Donald bowed his head.

“Same to you.” The future man waved goodbye as he watched the strangest pair of people, he has ever met walk out of his house and back onto the street. “Good luck gentlemen.”

\* \* \*

“You ready?”

Professor Syphner adjusted his head to stare at his colleague, his face grim. “You think it’ll be better this time?”

“Nope.” Donald nodded, an uneasy fear in his eyes of the event about to come.

“Alright. I’m ready.”

“Here we-”

“Wait.” Edward cut the engineering professor short, taking a look around a familiar dusty room and moving his gaze downward to reassure himself of his steady feet placed on the metallic platform. He heaved a sigh. “Do it. Quickly...before I lose my nerve.”

“Take us home baby.” Professor Perriman requested of the apparatus. “And please be gentle about it.”

Donald had already readjusted the date to their original departure time so all he had to do was press the bright green activation button.

When he did so, the machine hummed to life and lights illuminated that had previously been dim. The room around the pair began to spin and distort with seemingly no rhyme or reason. Their bodies twisted into dimensions too great to count or even imagine. The color and form of the room was sucked away, leaving behind black nothingness. Once the mind-numbing and indescribable ordeal reached its peak the two time-travelers lost hold of their consciousness.

\* \* \*

In what appeared and felt to be instantaneous, both professors reformed into the still unbelievably messy, but quite welcome scene of Donald's new office. A half-second later, the two colleagues fell to their knees and praised the ground beneath them.

"Thank God!" Edward cried out in sheer appreciation. "We're home."

"Who knew I could be this happy to be back in my office?" Donald relished in his gratitude.

"Fuck, that was crazy." Professor Syphner recalled, flipping over on his back to stare at the ceiling, followed by his companion.

"You can say that again." Professor Perriman let out a deep breath of relief. "We're pretty sure that actually happened, right?"

"God, I hope not."

Laughter burst out of Donald's lips, picked up and continued by Edward. The pair laughed hysterically for minutes on end, enjoying the action of laughter as no soul had before, living or dead. After the amusement wore off, they laid silent for several minutes, appreciating every calm and uninterrupted moment.

"You know what I just realized?" The environmental teacher broke the quiet.

"What's that?"

"Raltz never mentioned time travel. That means that we destroyed the machine."

Donald rolled his head to lock eyes with his colleague. “A paradox. So we don’t have a choice?”

“I wouldn’t say that. We always have a choice. It’s just that, if we make a certain choice, the implications could be catastrophic.”

“Translation: we don’t have a choice and we have to destroy it.”

“Looks that way.”

“Shame. I really wanted to see the Roman Empire.”

“The Roman Empire?” Edward scoffed. “Try the beautiful landscapes of an untouched America.”

“There’s a few baseball bats in the corner.” Donald suggested.

“Let’s smash this thing to little pieces.” Professor Syphner smiled.

The pair jumped to their feet, retrieved the blunt instruments and went to work. BAM. SMACK. BAM. The once fully-functional and shining marvel of innovation was reduced to broken fragments and dented metal. They placed the parts into a plastic bin, shoved pieces of paper in between the crevices and dropped a lit match that Edward found in one of the desks’ drawers into the remains. The two professors stood over their handiwork and watched the orange flames dance.

Donald leaned over. “You know the fire isn’t going to melt the metal, right?”

“It’s more for dramatic effect.”

“This is going to set off the smoke alarms, isn’t it?”

“Yeah probably. We should put it out.” Edward doused the few burning flames with his still warm cup of coffee.

“We need to make a pact.” The engineering professor proposed. “To never tell anyone about what just transpired, for fear of being sentenced to the madhouse.”

“To the grave.” Professor Perriman extended an inviting hand.

Donald met it with a firm grip. “To the grave.”



“Long story short, we did like scholars do and read some books and put our heads together.” Professor Syphner smiled as he projected to the crowd before him.

\* \* \*

Endless minutes and eventually hours passed as the two academics regaled their audience with knowledge, warnings, and aspirations. As the lecture drew to a close, the pair moved on to their closing remarks.

“There may not be a perfect, heavenly future.” Professor Perriman admitted.

“Or even a terrifying and dismal future.” Edward continued the train of thought.

“In all likelihood there will simply be...”

“...a future.” They spoke in unison.

“We must always keep pushing and striving for the next invention or advancement.” Donald advised.

“And we must never forget the world’s pressing issues.” Edward added.

“But in the end, we needn’t worry about the trivial. Or things we cannot control.”

“Focus on the here and now.”

“Hold our friends and family close.”

“And enjoy the present while we are still in it.”

THE END



## *The Overview Effect (2019)*

*By Luke Colomey*

Television Program: March 18th

Millions of black screens suddenly came to life, portraying a rather colorful scene. Whether through televisions, computers, or smartphones, the eager onlookers were now watching a baby blue background with a wooden podium acting as the centerpiece and a unique character standing behind it. This man proudly sported sleek, white hair, slicked back with gel, coupled with a flamboyant, neatly-pressed maroon suit.

“My fellow Americans...” The person began with a wave of his hand. “Whoops, I’m sorry, wrong speech. In fact, I am not addressing Americans at this moment, but the entirety of the world. I am sure many of you know me, but for those who do not, my name is Edmund Gregory. Whether you wish to call me an eccentric billionaire or a raving lunatic is beside the point. The point I am on your screen to make is my upcoming project: the largest human experiment ever attempted. For those who are unaware of my passion project, I have funded the development and construction of a state-of-the-art space station in the name of science. Furthermore, through a vigorous vetting process involving both physical and psychological tests, we have selected twenty voluntary applicants of all different races, genders, creeds, and orientations to spend a period of three months cut off from the outside world. For the next few days, the participants’ sleeping schedules will be synchronized to ensure a seamless transition. And, of course, to maintain the integrity of the experiment, most of the details have been withheld from them all.” Mr. Gregory lifted up a schematic of the aforementioned technological marvel. “The key component of this machination is the large viewing window that will allow our participants to regularly gaze upon the beautiful jewel that is our planet. Have you ever heard of the ‘Overview Effect?’” He gestured from side to side, posing his question to an invisible audience. “I’ll take that underwhelming response as a ‘no.’ Allow me to

enlighten you by defining this term. The ‘Overview Effect’ is a phenomenon that astronauts have reported occurring as a result of being able to peer upon the Earth in person, in which they realized the connectivity of all human life. It is this scientific premise that I base this unprecedented experiment on. We plan on testing whether this anomaly is strong enough to overcome our age-old enemies of racism and other discriminatory behaviors. The failure of this effect being the reversal into a virtual ‘State of Nature’ in which laws and morals are completely ignored. This will be accomplished through extensive surveillance and consistent video logs that will be analyzed through the course of and following the experiment. After that wondrous explanation, I would not dare leave you without a date and time. We will launch our space station on the first of April at eight o’clock Eastern United States time from Florida. Be there, or risk missing the biggest, farthest reaching scientific enterprise in history.” Mr. Gregory caught his breath for a moment, retrieving a pink handkerchief from his jacket pocket and using it to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “That took a lot out of me. I’m too excited for my own wellbeing.” He chuckled. “But, let me leave you with this fact. The term ‘barbarian’ comes from the Greek language, meaning any person who did not speak Greek. The human race has often been a persecutory, superstitious, and unfair lot, but hopefully, soon enough we will be able to put that all behind us once and for all.” The wealthy elite bowed in gratitude and waved his hand in an irresistibly friendly manner. “Thank you and goodnight.”

The screen continued to show Edmund Gregory continuing his farewell for a few more moments until returning to black once more.

Video Log - Subject 1 - Entry 1: March 26th

“State your name please.” A voice requested.

“Carl Johnson.” A Caucasian gentleman of around forty, sporting a stubble beard and a cowboy hat, answered.

“Place of origin?” The voice continued.

“The only place worth living.” Mr. Johnson smirked. “The Lone Star State.”

“Occupation?”

“I drill for oil. Simple enough.”

“Reason for wanting to participate in the experiment?”

“The money of course.” He tipped the rim of his hat upward, revealing gleaming eyes. “I can do a lot with fifty thousand dollars. And all I gotta do is spend a few months in a fancy space station with some other losers? Piece of cake.”

Video Log - Subject 6 - Entry 1: March 26th

“State your name please.”

“Abdul Jaharri.” A slender, but tall black man spoke, dressed in a ceremonial robe with exotic designs woven into it.

“Place of origin?”

“Nigeria, Africa.” Mr. Jaharri responded in a deep voice.

“Occupation?”

“Banker.”

“Reason for wanting to participate in the experiment?”

“A combination of curiosity and opportunity.” He answered politely.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” The voice concluded, expressing their gratitude.

Video Log - Subject 7 - Entry 1: March 26th

“State your name please.”

“Ling Mei.” A young, attractive Asian woman with jet black hair explained.

“Place of origin?”

“The People’s Republic of China.” Ms. Mei matter-of-factly answered.

“Occupation.”

“Currently a student. Future doctor.” She announced proudly.

“Reason for wanting to participate in the experiment?”

“It’s gonna look great on my resume!” The young lady ecstatically cried, drawing chuckles from her interviewers.

Video Log - Subject 12 - Entry 1: March 27th

“State your name please.”

“John Andrews.” A disinterested voice responded, belonging to a Caucasian man typing away on his smartphone, adorned in a neatly pressed suit with sleek black hair combed backward.

“Sir, I am going to have to confiscate your phone.” The voice asked, annoyed.

After heaving a deep sigh, Mr. Andrews handed his phone over to an unseen pair of hands.

“Thank you. Now, place of origin?”

“Good ol’ New York City, New York.” He answered, visibly not over his lost mobile device.

“Occupation?”

“Lawyer.”

“Reason for wanting to participate in the experiment?”

“What do you think would sound good on the transcript?”

“It’s actually a live video recording.”

Mr. Andrews’ eyes narrowed and moved his head upward to stare at the camera.

“Ah.” He acknowledged. “I just thought the idea seemed interesting.” The business man finished, holding his hands over his eyes.

Video Log - Subject 15 - Entry 1: March 27th

“State your name please.”

“Sanju Amin.” An older Indian woman replied, wearing a simple cloth outfit and slippers.

“Place of origin?”

“India. Is that acceptable?” She asked politely in broken English.

“Yes, that is fine, thank you. Occupation?”

“I do not work no more, but I used to make blankets and clothes.”

“Reason for wanting to participate in the experiment?”

“The money will help my family, but I really like to see space.”

Mrs. Amin beamed.

Video Log - Subject 19 - Entry 1: March 27th

“State your name please.”

“Ahmad Shadid.” A young Middle Eastern man with a well trimmed beard answered, checking a golden watch on his wrist hidden underneath a sweater sleeve.

“Place of origin?”

“Israel.” Mr. Shadid mustered a slight smile.

“Occupation?”

“Um, I would say philanthropist, but I inherited all my money.”

“Fair enough. Reason for wanting to participate in the experiment?”

“Beats going to a few more boring parties. Who wouldn’t want to do this?”

Surveillance Video - Entry 1: April 1st

Twenty seats were filled by twenty completely different people under the same bulky, white spacesuit. Each newly trained astronaut was tightly secured to their chair by several straps that ensured a safe trip out of Earth’s atmosphere. Countless switches, buttons, screens, and lights of all colors covered the walls of the station’s cockpit, each one with a specific purpose.

“PREPARE FOR LAUNCH!” A mechanical voice warned over the ship’s intercom. “LAUNCH IN TEN, NINE, EIGHT...”

As the countdown continued, the participants of the grand experiment shuffled nervously in their seats as much as the restrictive wear would allow.

“...SIX, FIVE...”

Red lights flashed throughout the cabin as everything began to shake with the background noise of a fierce rumble.

“...THREE, TWO, ONE, LIFTOFF!”

Whooooooosh. The rattling turned even more violent as the off-camera rocket thrusters erupted into bright flames and the technological masterpiece of Edmund Gregory lifted off the ground. The vast majority in the cockpit clung to their chairs for dear life, as the sensation and emotion that only a select few have ever felt washed over them. The unfathomably loud noise and intense vibrations persisted, even growing for several more seconds, until the visual feed cut out, resulting in nothing but static.

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 2: April 1st

The static suddenly disappeared and a new camera angle reestablished itself, presumably once the launch finished and a relative state of normalcy was achieved. The surveillance showed a large, round room with several couches, chairs, and tables acting as the centerpiece. On the far side were twelve doors; ten leading to individual bedrooms, one labeled “bathroom,” and the other labeled “storage.” This exact layout being duplicated on the other side of the station out of sight of the camera, a reinforced door labeled “cockpit” on the right, and a large rectangular window allowing a view of the vast emptiness of space on the left rounded out the area. Without warning, the thick, steel door on the right swung open and twenty helmetless men and women spilled out into their temporary new home.

“Here we are y’all!” Mr. Johnson hollered with his arms spread out wide.

“This should be interesting.” Mr. Shadid mused through a smile, making himself comfortable on the nearest couch.

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 3: April 1st

Around half of the passengers of the space station were congregated in the comfortable middle area sitting on the several chairs and couches. Each person had disregarded their space suits and now lounged in identical skin-tight, gray uniforms. With the presence of so many inhabitants the room was surprisingly silent, each

individual person keeping to themselves and their own activities of reading, knitting, and listening to headphones on modified tablets. The clean-cut John Andrews stood up from his seated position and walked to a substantially large speaker that in moments, he had hooked up to his tablet.

“If no one’s gonna talk, then I guess I’m going to have to lighten the mood.” He jokingly announced.

Mr. Andrews hit play on his device and music that could be classified as “Classic Rock” began flowing from the sound-amplifying mechanism. He began nodding his head to the melody and softly singing the lyrics to the song.

“This is too loud and obtrusive for my taste.” The young Lin Mei commented. “May I suggest Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony?”

“It’s supposed to be loud, sweetheart.” John replied, beginning to strum an invisible guitar. “Keep your Beethoven.”

“This is what you call music?” The deep voiced Abdul Jaharri questioned. “You should try listening to the songs of my country.”

Mr. Johnson made a dismissive snort. “I’d rather put a shotgun in my mouth than listen to that crap. Give me some country any day.”

“Please, for Allah’s sake, put anything you want on, just not country.” Ahmad begged.

“Hey!” Carl quickly stood up, frightening the quietly knitting Sanju. “Don’t you dare insult country music! Go back to your sand pits and listen to your broken fiddles if you can’t handle some good music!”

Ahmad jumped off his seat to meet the instigating Mr. Johnson. “Fiddles? Is that all you think of my culture?”

“Oh, I apologize. I forgot the plastic drums.” Mr. Johnson sneered. “If you could manage their difficulty.”

“Back off cowboy!” Mr. Shadid warned loudly in response.

Before the two could come to blows, John inserted himself between them, pushing the two apart. “No need to fight, I’ll just turn the damn music off.”

With a scoff and a growl, the two aggressors eased up and each stormed over to their respective rooms.

Video Log - Subject 1 - Entry 2: April 1st

“Swear to God, I’ll break his fucking nose.” Carl Johnson grumbled.

Video Log - Subject 19 - Entry 2: April 1st

“Some people...so ignorant.” Ahmad shook his head.

Surveillance Video - Entry 5: April 1st

With the rest of the participants having retreated to their quarters, a lone figure stood with his arms crossed near the window, staring into the black emptiness of space. The black-colored hair of John Andrews glistened in the stars’ lights. Carl calmly walked over and joined John in his silent vigil.

“Got pretty heated there earlier, huh?” Mr. Johnson recalled.

“Yeah.” John answered halfheartedly. “The company said the station would rotate to face the earth one day every week. It’s going to be pretty amazing to see.” He explained eagerly, changing the subject.

“Whatever you say man.” Carl brushed off his response, leaning closer to Mr. Andrew’s ear. “Listen. You and me gotta stick together up here if we’re gonna survive.”

“What?” John asked, confused.

“I know you ain’t from Texas, but we’re both Americans through and through, and that’s good enough for me. There’s a lot of weird characters up here. Don’t even believe in God.” He scoffed.

“I’m not sure it’s that-”

“What’d you say, you got my back?” Mr. Johnson interrupted.

Mr. Andrews stared at him for a moment, and then blinked his eyes to refocus himself. “Yeah, sure.” He answered unsurely.



“That’s what I thought.” Carl smiled, placing his hand on John’s shoulder. “See you in the morning. Keep your eyes’ open.” He warned as he strutted back in the direction of his room.

Video Entry - Subject 12 - Entry 3: April 2nd

“I mean...” John shook his head in disbelief. “We’re going to tear each other apart up here.” He rubbed his eyes and yawned. “I have to hit the hay. John Andrews signing off.”

The exhausted New Yorker reached forward with his arm and the video cut to black.

Surveillance Video - Entry 23: April 5th

Nearly the entirety of the ship’s population had gathered in the central area in order to eat the packaged food kept in storage for a midday meal. Quiet conversations permeated through the air. All the packets containing food were nearly empty, except for one that remained unopened next to a sprawled out mat. Sanju Amin was positioned on its surface on her knees with outstretched arms and a bowed head.

“What is she doing?” Ling inquired quietly.

“She is praying, little one.” Abdul told the puzzled young woman. “In the ways of her people she is thanking her God for the food she has been given.”

Ms. Mei stared in awe and interest at the older Indian woman.

“I don’t know what she’s thanking anyone for.” The eavesdropping Mr. Johnson grumbled. “This stuff tastes like dirt.”

“Be grateful you have anything to eat at all. Some people do not have that luxury.” Mr. Jaharri eyed him.

“Well sorry, but in the land of America we’re used to some higher class grub. It ain’t our fault people can’t get enough food.” Carl retorted. “Tell him John.” He encouraged.

“I’m just minding my own business.” Mr. Andrews held up his hands and continued to eat. “Tastes fine to me.”

“If America was so great, it might have the decency to feed the starving people of the world with its vast resources.” Abdul pointed out.

“Don’t you dare mock the red, white, and blue you black bastard!” The aggravated Mr. Johnson cried, rising to his feet.

“I wouldn’t have to if those colors did their job right.” Mr. Jajarri sternly answered, standing nearly half a foot taller.

“Take it back.” Carl threatened, pursing his lip.

“Come on guys.” Ahmad appealed. “Sit down.”

“Not until he takes it back.”

Abdul stood motionless and silent, his eyes narrowing.

“You got three seconds pal.” Mr. Johnson warned.

“I wouldn’t hold your-”

SMACK. The Texan’s knuckles made contact with his large opponent’s nose, forcing Mr. Jaharri backwards, and causing blood to drip down to his upper lip. The African man stood in bewilderment for a moment, before his solemn demeanor turned to rage and he thrust himself forward, tackling Carl to the ground. Before long, the present passengers had gathered around the two men writhing around on the floor trading blows, and those that were in their quarters were soon drawn out by the commotion. Several minutes passed and the violent encounter did not seem to be coming to an end, so a few participants decided to intervene and began separating the two combatants. Once both were constrained and taken to different rooms to be calmed down and tended to, the general populace soon lost interest and returned to finishing their meals.

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 27: April 6th

The circular common room only held two occupants at this late hour; John reading a magazine at one end of the room, and Ahmad playing against himself on a wooden chess board at the other. After a few minutes, Mr. Andrews closed his reading material and slowly walked over to the young Middle Easterner deep in thought.

“You want an opponent?” John offered with a smile.

Mr. Shadid was briefly surprised, but his lips soon curled into a smile. “You play?”

“My father taught me.” He explained, beginning to return the pieces to their starting positions. “Any good?”

“Better than the average player I’d say.” Ahmad answered.

“Well, let’s see what you got.” John challenged, reaching over and moving one of his white players.

The pair traded several moves back and forth.

“What do you do for work?” The American inquired.

“I don’t...work, I mean.” Ahmad correct. “I inherited a small fortune and I’ve lived off of that money my whole life.”

“Woah, must be pretty sweet.” John mused.

“It can be.” He grew solemn. “But it’s often lonely and unfulfilling.”

“I’m sorry.” Mr. Andrews offered condolences.

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t really complain about much.” Mr. Shadid relocated another chess piece. “What about you?”

“Lawyer. In New York. It’s a pretty good living, and it took a hell of a lot of work to get there.” John explained, capturing one of his opponent’s players.

“Can I ask you something?” Ahmad requested, never taking his eyes off the board.

“Sure.”

“I don’t wish to stereotype, but you and Mr. Johnson are from the same country-”

“You’re wondering why I don’t share his...limited views?” Mr. Andrews interjected.

“Yeah.” Mr. Shadid placed another piece down and met his gaze.

“I’ve never been, but I would guess that Texas is a much different place from New York. Where I grew up, I interacted with all kinds of people and I never thought anything of it. Lady Liberty watches over us all, the color of your skin doesn’t matter. It’s just the way I was raised I suppose.” John recalled.

“That’s a good answer.” Ahmad nodded. “The world needs more people like you.”

“Checkmate.” The victorious Mr. Andrews smiled.

“Damn, will you look at that.” He stared at his defeat in shock. “Good game.”

“Good game.” John returned, meeting his opponent’s outstretched hand.

“I’m going to head to bed. Big day tomorrow.” Mr. Shadid announced.

“Yeah, I’m going to do the same.” He replied, grabbing his curled up magazine and heading towards his room. “See you in the morning.”

Almost on the same beat, the two doors clicked shut and the station returned to an eerie silence.

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 28: April 7th

At a time that most would describe as ungodly early, the complete roster of the participants were gathered shoulder-to-shoulder, virtually pressing their faces against the glass window. Quiet murmurs in the form of small talk were audible, but all were focused out into the vast expanse of space.

“There it is!” One suddenly exclaimed, met by gasps from those around.

Outside the glass viewing area, a majestic blue orb slowly, but surely came into view. Within minutes, the large planet that each person called their home stood in its full glory before them. The vast sparkling oceans, separated by large portions of green and brown, were covered by a thin white veil of swirling mist. The incredible display could be seen reflected in each and every pair of wide eyes and no mouth was left closed. The glistening stars and black nothingness acted as a complementary background to the breathtaking centerpiece. Not a word was uttered as every ounce of attention was devoted to the scene before them.

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 29: April 7th

One would be unaware of the hours that had passed due to the still motionless group of all different races and ethnicities that stood rooted in place. After a short while longer, several men and women moved to couches, but their gaze had not left the large window.

“Beautiful.” The first awestruck word that was uttered came from the mouth of young Ling Mei.

Video Log - Subject 1 - Entry 34: April 7th

“Definitely can’t see anything like that from Texas.” Carl shook his head in disbelief.

Video Log - Subject 15 - Entry 17: April 7th

Sanju Amin sat there, silent, with a smile so large it made visible every wrinkle she had obtained over the years. She opened her mouth slightly, but just as quickly shut it, tears welling up in the corner of her eyes.

Video Log - Subject 19 - Entry 31: April 7th

“I mean...wow.” Ahmad mumbled.

Surveillance Video - Entry 68: April 15th

Among many occupants, two sat on a couch next to each other, absorbed into very different activities. Ahmad sat, intently watching a video on his tablet, while just a few feet to his left, Sanju calmly continued what seemed like an endless cycle of knitting. The young Muslim’s expression did not alter, his blinking the only movement that could be registered. However, beyond the extent of vision, his mind was deep in thought, processing the material of the video he watched. The older Indian woman’s fingers moved rapidly, manipulating the long needles to do her bidding. As her eyes portrayed, her mind was at peace, something a less-enlightened person might describe as empty.

“You hail from Palestine, do you not?” Sanju broke the silence.

Ahmad registered the question. “Israel.”

“Is it not the same?” She continued.

He paused the video and turned his body to her. “No, it’s not the same. Palestine isn’t a country. I live in Israel.”

“How does one thing be called two things?” She pondered.

“I don’t know, it just is.” Mr. Shadid grew slightly annoyed. “Things change. Not always for the better.”

“What do you say?”

“You heard what I said.” He practically shouted. “My people’s home, Palestine, is destroyed, and it’s not coming back. Like it or not, I live in Israel.” He enunciated the last word.

There was a brief moment of awkward silence.

“Whichever name you wish to call it, I have heard that land is beautiful.” Sanju smiled. “History and culture and peoples mixing together. It is special.”

“Yeah.” Ahmad gathered himself and managed a smirk. “It is rather beautiful.” He put down his tablet altogether. “I’m sorry I yelled. I just get worked up.”

“I understand.” Mrs. Amin nodded politely. “I wish your people happiness.”

“Thank you.” He nodded in response. “I wish that too.”

### Surveillance Video - Entry 129: April 28th

In a moderately crowded common room, Abdul Jaharri and Ling Mei sat hunched over a table covered with several strewn pieces of lined paper. The miscellaneous white sheets were covered by various different words, many vigorously scribbled out.

“This one right here.” Abdul pointed to a word. “I know you know this one. Think about it.”

The young Chinese woman visibly searched her brain, and then found the answer she was looking for. “Duh.” Ling crossed out the word and wrote a similar one next to it.

After studying the word, the deep-voiced African man smiled and nodded. “Very good, Ling. You’re really picking this up.”

“Thank you.” She smiled in return.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you so interested in learning my language?”

“Well, it looks really good on my resume. Also, I’m thinking about doing a retreat somewhere in Africa.” She blushed. “I also think it is important to broaden my horizons. Learn about different cultures, you know?”

Abdul grinned appreciatively. “I do know.” He handed her a pencil. “How about ‘painting?’”

Ling returned enthusiastically to writing on the paper.

Video Log - Subject 6: Entry 76: April 28th

“The world could use a lot more young people like Ling. It would truly be a different planet.” Abdul Jaharri pondered.

Surveillance Video - Entry 183: May 17th

Later in the night, only a handful of the participants remained awake. With each person keeping to themselves, the only noise was an occasional yawn. Without warning, Ahmad and John burst out of one of the closed rooms, each with a hand behind their back.

“Guess what we have!” Ahmad teased.

“I’ll give you a hint.” Mr. Andrews followed. “You’re going to like it.”

Both men proudly brandished a bottle of vodka and rum from their hiding places.

“I totally forgot I smuggled these here.” Ahmad beamed.

“Sweet!” Ling quickly rose to her feet.

“Nice try youngin’.” Carl mused. “Even up here, you ain’t old enough to drink.”

“He’s right Ling, I couldn’t allow you to do that.” Abdul agreed.

The young woman’s shoulders fell in disappointment.

“Come.” Sanju motioned kindly to her. “We will do something else.”

Ling hesitantly followed along. “Like what?”

She led the Chinese girl across the floor and handed her a pair of needles and a ball of yarn identical to her own. "I teach you."

"I don't know." Ms. Mei hesitantly answered. "Isn't that kind of old fashioned?"

Mrs. Amin looked at her fondly. "Try." She began slowly using the sewing needles to cross two ropes of material as they too entered into a room.

"Now that the ladies are gone, let's break these babies open." Ahmad suggested deviously, simultaneously unscrewing the cap of his bottle.

"Doesn't your religion forbid alcohol?" Abdul questioned politely.

"Eh, I'm more of a causal practitioner." Mr. Shadid brushed off. "Besides, I donate enough. They can let me have this."

After gathering several glasses and filling them with newly opened alcohol, John raised his glass in front of him. "To this whole freaking crazy ass mission. Cheers."

"Cheers." The three other men clinked their glasses together and took a long gulp of their respective beverages.

Video Log - Subject 6: Entry 94: May 17th

"I must say...I feel quite good...gulp...at the moment." Abdul mumbled through his sentence.

Video Log - Subject 1: Entry 161: May 17th

"Damn...these foreigners can drink!" Carl laughed heavily. "I mean, they can't outdrink no Texan...but I'm impressed." He snorted.

Video Log - Subject 12: Entry 108: May 17th

"Yeah...hic...I probably wouldn't use these videos on television." John massaged his temple. "I mean you could...gulp...but at least not mine. Please?" He stared at the camera. "I'll take that as a 'yes.' I'll drink to that." The New Yorker raised his cup and finished the remainder of his drink in one swig.



## Surveillance Video - Entry 240: May 25th

The majority of the station's residents were huddled together into one incoherent mass, all clambering to catch a glimpse of the tablet's screen, playing a news report.

"... military plane carrying one pilot and two passengers crash-landed into Chinese borders." The reporter explained. "The Chinese government has yet to make a statement regarding the US airmen, whose whereabouts are currently unknown."

Not a single sound was uttered by any of the experiment's participants, as each one listened intently, not wanting to miss a word. The video continued on for several more minutes, showing blurry images and vague interviews, making it abundantly clear that no one understood what was truly transpiring.

"Damn." Carl muttered, capturing the sentiments of many of the group.

"Definitely not ideal." Ahmad agreed.

"What the hell?" John practically shouted, drawing many of the onlookers' gazes. "What a bunch of cowards. That's not how you handle anything. Idiots." He rambled.

The large, glistening eyes of the young Ling locked with the infuriated face of Mr. Andrews.

"What are they doing?" He directed his question at the Chinese woman. "The safety of those men are more important than any of their petty attempts to flex their muscles. China has no right to hold those men!"

Ling Mei's expression turned downward into a wavering frown.

"Don't yell at her!" Abdul interjected. "This has nothing to do with Ling."

"What do you mean nothing to do with her? It's her country isn't it?" John rhetorically questioned. "And her country is about to start an international incident over nothing."

Carl reached for his shoulder in comfort. "Hey man, I think that's a little--"

“Shut up.” Mr. Andrews cut in. “You of all people should be on my side. Her country is belittling ours. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Tears welled up in the corners of the woman’s eyes. She covered her face with her hands and turned to run back to the safety of her room.

“Ling!” Sanju yelled after her, stopping only to stare angrily at John before following her.

“John.” Abdul sternly addressed him.

After a few moments of thought, John sighed and began rubbing his forehead. “I know, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Shit.”

Mr. Andrews brushed off a few hesitant consolers and walked somberly back to the confines of his own room, leaving a stunned audience in his tracks.

Video Log - Subject 19: Entry 166: May 25th

Ahmad Shadid took a deep breath. “Tensions are a little high in here right now. People are cooling off.” He explained carefully. “I hope this passes soon. If not...” Ahmad searched for his next words. When he found them, he stared into the camera. “We’ll tear each other apart.”

Surveillance Video - Entry 241: May 26th

The common room was scarcely populated by a few occupants, as many were still holed up in their living quarters.

Without warning or cause, the room’s lights suddenly shut off all together, leaving everyone in the dark. After half a second, the video feed erupted into static and turned to black.

Video Log - Subject 1: Entry 202: May 26th

“Everything is fine.” Abdul reassured. “The power went out for a few minutes, but it came back pretty quick. Everyone was pretty scared for a little while there. But after the lights came back on, people

seemed a lot calmer. Even a little more...tolerable.” Mr. Jaharri scoffed. “Interesting.”

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 295: June 12th

A tired and visibly nervous Carl Johnson exited his room and strutted awkwardly over to where Sanju was sitting comfortably on a couch. He stood behind her for a moment, collecting his thoughts and wiping away the little sweat that had formed on his forehead inexplicably. Finally, Mr. Johnson moved to a position where Mrs. Amin could see him and locked eyes with her.

“Hello...Mrs. Amin, is it?” He stumbled.

“It is.” Sanju nodded.

“Hello...uh, I already said that, didn’t I?” Carl laughed nervously. “I was just wondering if you would teach me. About India I mean.” He corrected himself. “My sister is marrying an Indian man she met through work in about a month when we get back. It would be really cool if I could talk with him about his culture. At least a little bit.”

Sanju stared at him, studying him for a second, and then showed off a smile. “I would be happy to.”

“Great.” Mr. Johnson’s anxiety abated slightly.

“What would you like to know?”

“Nothing in particular.” Carl shrugged. “Everything, I suppose.”

Mrs. Amin beamed a toothy grin. “Okay. We will start simple.”

#### Video Log - Subject 1: Entry 234: June 12th

Carl sat in a chair in his quarters, arms folded. He rolled his eyes slightly. He shrugged.

“Got to show out for the family.”

#### Surveillance Video - Entry 329: June 26th

Amongst a rather lively gathering in the central living space, John and Ling sat next to each other on separate chairs. Ms. Mei was hard

at work with a nearly complete piece of knitting, and Mr. Andrews scrolled through stock market graphs on his tablet.

The New Yorker turned off his device and placed it on the ground. “We’re getting near the end.”

“Yeah, we are.” Ling absentmindedly agreed.

“Yeah.” John sighed, and then turned to the young lady. “Listen. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She retorted stone-faced, without looking at him.

“No seriously, that was wrong of me, and it’s been long overdue.” Mr. Andrews spoke genuinely. “I was upset, but that is no excuse. Despite my feelings, I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I’m not sure if this means anything, but I really am sorry.”

Ling halted her sewing and gratefully smiled at her companion. “Thank you.” She placed a hand on his forearm. “I’m young, but I know it takes a big person to admit that.”

“I don’t know about that.” John smirked. “It takes a bigger idiot to do what I did in the first place.”

Ms. Mei laughed politely.

“When we finally get home you should meet my nephew.” He suggested. “You two are similar. I think you’d hit it off.” John winked.

Ling chuckled honestly this time. “I don’t think we would.”

“Why?” Mr. Andrews narrowed his eyes. “Just because he isn’t Chinese, doesn’t mean he’s-”

“No, no.” She stopped him. “It’s because he’s not a girl.”

John opened his mouth, but quickly closed it. His cheeks turned a bright red. “I just thought...with everything...” He closed his mouth, embarrassed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Ling laughed. “Now you know.”

The New Yorker scoffed. “It’s crazy the things you learn just by talking to people.”

Ling smirked in agreement and then returned to her work.

Surveillance Video - Entry 336: June 28th

Although one could not tell, it was later in the occupants' newly designed days. A few participants remained awake, but several yawns ringing through the air made it obvious that everyone's bedtime was drawing near. As Ling finished the last few strokes with her needle, a well deserved smile crept onto her face and she held up her completed product to examine her work. After she was satisfied, she jumped from her seated position and raced over to a closed door. Knock. Knock. The young student attempted to keep her knock at a reasonable volume to achieve her objective, but still respect the others' sleep. After a few moments, a drowsy Sanju slowly opened the door, rubbing the sand out of her eyes.

"Ling?" She yawned.

"Hey Mrs. Amin, sorry to wake you." Ling apologized. "But we're leaving after tomorrow and I really wanted to give you something. I was worried I wouldn't be done in time. I've been working really hard and I just finished." She explained excitedly. "Here you go." Ms. Mei handed her a knitted blue and red scarf.

The older woman stared at the clothing article for half a second before understanding the gesture. "Thank you much, Ling." She smiled gratefully.

"No, thank you." The young Chinese woman bowed. "You taught me a wonderful skill, and even more than that, an important lesson."

A single tear appeared in the corner of Sanju's eye and she pulled Ling close and embraced her.

"It was my pleasure."

After each got their fill, they ended the hug.

"I'll let you get back to sleep now." Ling told her.

"Goodnight, Ling." Sanju responded. "I will sleep happy this night."

"Goodnight, Sanju. Thank you for everything." She expressed her gratitude one last time before departing from the doorstep and heading in the direction of her own room to retire for the night.

Surveillance Video - Entry 338: June 29th

The last night of the incredible journey had arrived, and many people were taking in their surroundings one final time and talking to new friends they may never see again. The large-bodied Abdul stood near the viewing area, conversing with Ahmad about returning home.

“It really will be wonderful to see my family again.” Mr. Jaharri fondly thought aloud.

“I just can’t wait to sleep in my own bed.” Ahmad chuckled.

“Excuse me.” Carl’s voice addressed behind the pair. “Would you mind if I had a moment with Mr. Jaharri?”

Ahmad turned to his companion who nodded appreciatively.

“Not at all.” Mr. Shadid smiled. “I’ll catch you later Abdul.”

“Of course.” He parted ways with his Middle Eastern friend with a hand shake. “What can I help you with Mr. Johnson?”

“Carl. Please.” The Texan requested politely. “I just...” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “I wanted to apologize for any disagreements we had in the past few months.” He paused. “For what it is worth, I respect you.”

“Thank you, Carl.” Abdul responded appreciatively. “You’re not too bad yourself.”

Mr. Johnson shrugged and stretched out his hand. “At least you’re not a ‘Commie.’”

Mr. Jaharri met him in a hand shake. “You really are a redneck, huh?”

The pair of men laughed in unison.

“Hey, I wear that with pride.” Carl replied jokingly as he backed away to return to the gathering of people.

Ahmad replaced the departing Texan and retook his place next to Abdul.

“What was that about?” He inquired.

“Nothing.” Mr. Jaharri answered. “Just the world becoming a little less broken.”

Ahmad furrowed his brow in confusion, but kept silent and joined his partner in staring out into the unsettling beauty of the endless darkness before them.

Video Log - Subject 1: Entry 287: June 29th

Carl sat wearing his prized cowboy hat. “God has to make at least a few of them correctly.” He smirked.

Video Log - Subject 6: Entry 196: June 29th

Abdul rested his interlocked fingers onto his stomach, leaned backward, and shrugged. “Who would’ve thought?”

Surveillance Video - Entry 340: June 30th

With the common room completely abandoned and all remaining possessions safely packed away in various luggage, the twenty men and women sat in padded chairs in the station’s cockpit, immobilized by their seat belts. They now once again adorned their bulky, white spacesuits, and although one could not tell through their thick layers, all were shifting nervously in place. Although anticipation of the jubilant welcomes that awaited them remained on their minds, the turbulent ride ahead pushed those thoughts aside for the time being.

“PREPARE FOR LAUNCH!” A familiar mechanical voice bellowed.

Lights all over the small room lit up in different colors as previously blank screens came to life with seemingly indecipherable numbers.

“LAUNCH IN TEN, NINE, EIGHT...” All eyes widened as they could feel the ignition of the ship’s thrusters.

“...SEVEN, SIX...” Audible gulps and gasps erupted from the participants’ mouths as they could feel the artificial gravity that they had enjoyed be turned off.

“...FIVE, FOUR...” The station’s invisible pilot guided the mechanical masterpiece in a rotation that allowed the passengers a view of their large, blue destination.

“...THREE, TWO, ONE...” Stomachs dropped and air escaped from lungs.

“...LIFTOFF!” The rockets came to life and propelled their bodies forward harshly.

The planet before them slowly but surely grew bigger and closer, and with each inch traveled, the participants' hearts swelled with more excitement.

Television Program: June 30th

Steam escaped from the bottom of the gigantic space station as it locked tightly into place to the platform where it had launched from mere months ago. A crowd of immense proportions had gathered behind a gate that kept them at a safe distance away from the aircraft's landing zone. Among them were several reporters coupled with their cameramen who stood anxiously awaiting the upcoming event.

After several minutes of waiting, the reinforced metal door slid open, and the crowd held its breath as not a single person climbed through its opening. Following a few more agonizing seconds, Ahmad Shadid, stripped of his helmet, walked through the doorway and sent his arms to the sky.

"We're home!" He cried exuberantly.

The crowd erupted into a deafening roar of clapping and yelling as the rest of the ships' occupants climbed out after Ahmad, wide smiles covering their faces. The captivated crew waved to the hundreds of onlookers and millions more watching from home, resulting in an even louder reception from the masses.

"This is Catherine Wiser with 'Channel Six.'" Announced a blonde-haired woman staring at the screen, sporting a microphone. "The arrival of the crew from the recently dubbed 'Ship of All Colors' after their three-month-long voyage has brought out quite an excited response from the onlookers you can see and hear behind me." Mrs. Wiser gestured all around her. "After the footage is analyzed thoroughly by experts, Edmund Gregory will give a report on the experiment's findings. But for now, the participants of this historic expedition are world-wide heroes. Back to you, Tom." She concluded with a toothy smile.

Television Program: July 4th



A catchy tune played in the background as the title sequence for a popular late-night talk show appeared on the screen. Exuberant clapping from the crowd slowly faded out as a well-dressed older gentleman sitting behind a desk came into view.

“Thank you, thank you.” He graciously replied. “As always, I’m David Hingham, and we’ve got a wonderful show for you planned tonight on this Fourth of July evening. We have with us several members of the team that just returned from Edmund Gregory’s ambitious trip to space. We contacted four, but one had a prior engagement. I suppose we’ll just have to settle for these three.”

The renewed clapping increased its volume as Abdul Jaharri, Ahmad Shadid, and John Andrews walked into view from behind backstage curtains and sat down on several comfortable-looking chairs.

“I’m sure these men need no introduction, so I will get right to the point.” Mr. Hingham prefaced. “So gentlemen, I will ask the question that we all have been wondering: how did it go up there?”

John chuckled and spoke first. “It really was incredible. You wouldn’t believe the view.”

“We all had a great time.” Ahmad continued. “I can’t speak for my colleagues, but I wouldn’t have changed it for the world.”

“I can attest to that.” Abdul smiled and nodded. “I truly believe I have made some good friends that I will not soon forget.”

“Wonderful.” The host commented. “What about the people? And the interactions you had? We are all curious how the experiment went.”

“We definitely had some trouble, especially at the beginning.” Mr. Andrews reminisced, drawing fond laughs from the other two. “But we aren’t allowed to say anything more than that. For more information, you’re just going to have to wait for Mr. Gregory’s address, which I have been told will be coming in the next few days.”

“Well, there you have it folks; sworn to secrecy. We’ll just have to wait.” Mr. Hingham exclaimed, tapping his fingers on the desk. “For

now, after the break, we are going to have some fun with our world-renowned guests here. Stick around.”

The four men on stage engaged in silent comradery as the sound of the excited crowd led the show into a commercial.

#### Television Program: July 8th

At the scheduled time, millions, possibly even billions of viewers watched as their television screens changed from whatever program they had previously been viewing. The new image was that of a familiar white-haired gentleman with an exceptionally unique green two-piece suit, standing behind a podium. Mr. Gregory tilted his head slightly and contorted his face into a warm smile.

“Ladies and gentleman.” He announced with a wave of his hands. “The moment has come. My hard working teams, headed by myself, have tirelessly combed through hundreds of hours of footage and analyzed every second of it. Before I explain our findings, I would first like to thank everyone involved in this wonderful project. For the men and women who worked so long and hard to make this possible, I would like to offer my everlasting gratitude. And of course, to the participants who so generously gave us their time in the name of science, I am forever indebted to you.” Edmund Gregory placed his palm against his chest. “Now that the pleasantries are done with, I will reward your intense following of my little experiment. Following the ‘Ship of All Colors’...” He chuckled to himself. “What a fitting name. That in itself will truly tell you something of its effect.” Mr. Gregory forced himself back onto his train of thought. “Through the three-month long journey, we observed many different interactions; some inclusive and magical, others unfortunate. However, following the first rotation of the station in which the participants were able to view our humble planet for themselves, the balance shifted undoubtedly towards a positive atmosphere. While there were several mishaps following this event, with more and more viewings, the frequency of these situations became fewer and farther between. Over the course of the expedition, we witnessed the growth of many incredible things.

The seeds of understanding, acceptance, and against all odds, even friendships. No matter the race, age, gender, religion, or orientation of our subjects, they grew to tolerate each other, and eventually, respect one another. Overall, our twenty participants, whom I am sure will not soon be forgotten by the people of earth, have given us a glimpse of a possible future. More detailed findings will be released in due time, as well as a hopefully entertaining documentary using real footage. For now, I can tell you that this experiment proved to be a celebration of humanity, as many, including myself, hoped. But this is just the beginning.” Mr. Gregory changed his buoyant tone to a more serious one and pointed directly into the camera. “It is up to you. All of you, to make this possible future a reality. We have proved here that it can be done in an aided, separated environment, but it will take a lot more to carve it into our scarred world. Beyond any shadow of a doubt, I believe that you, I, and everyone is capable of achieving this momentous feat. Prove me right.” Edmund Gregory dared as his image faded to black.

From the darkness, blue lines began to swim across the screen, interlocking and weaving in all directions until the outlines of the seven continents and corresponding land masses began to take shape. For a moment, these unconnected shapes hung in formless space until a unifying circle appeared from nothing, giving the masses a set background. After the completed planet floated and spun for a few seconds longer until coming to a halt, a single word emerged at the bottom of the screen: “Together.”

THE END