

**October 12, 2022. 4:14 PM.**

The first thing I want to say, above all else, is that I hate the homeless. Literally and figuratively. Everyone says that we should help the homeless, but I think that is a terrible idea. An absolute waste of time and money. Maybe that's a Problematic thought, maybe not. I don't even know anymore, but all I know is I think it's a bad idea.

Pretty much anything else you could possibly think of to do with resources would be a better use of resources than helping the homeless. Like, anything at all. Build a giant staircase into the heavens that goes nowhere. Buy every polar bear from every zoo in the world and put them in a giant arena and have them all fight to the death. Pretty much anything that isn't helping the homeless is a better idea than helping the homeless. The homeless are beyond help. The homeless are a lost cause. Everyone needs to stop worrying about them. Maybe we could have them all secretly killed.

I say this because at this moment, I am sitting in a parked car on the corner of NW 4<sup>th</sup> and Couch Street, watching a homeless woman take a giant soft-serve shit on the sidewalk while peeing and singing to herself. I don't know what she's singing. I can't tell. All I know is that, eons ago, in a time I can barely remember, I watched 2girls1cup.wmv and laughed at it, but now I don't want to laugh anymore.

“O-oh my!”

Flutterbutts appears in the passenger seat next to me. She seems horrified by what she's seeing. I can't say that I blame her. I'm only slightly less horrified myself, probably because I watched 2girls1cup.flv in order to prepare myself for this, although I hadn't known at the time that it was training. Everything in life is training. Everything in this world is connected. I take a sip of Monster™ Zero Ultra™ to steel myself for my trials ahead.

“You see?” I ask. The woman, meanwhile, pinches off a last steamy beef log and begins rubbing a newspaper along the inside of her crack. She is still singing. “Do you see the ultimate futility of your Marxist ideals? What role would you assign this person, where would she fit into the intricate clockwork of your ideal society?”

“I...I...I...” She can only stammer. Her long and sensuous pink mane flows around her graceful neck. She sits back on her hindquarters and wraps her wings about her as if to ward off the horrible sight, yet she can't look away. Tears well up in her eyes. I'm not going to lie, it's giving me about half a chub to see her like this, even as the homeless woman scrapes the remaining stank off of her rancid crack with a copy of *The Asian Reporter*.

The homeless woman tosses the newspaper aside and begins wandering aimlessly up and down

the street. Her pants are still down around her ankles, and still she sings, a wordless, atonal caterwauling that I eventually recognize as “Freebird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd. I'm surprised she knows that song. I'm surprised anyone knows that song. I'm surprised I know that song. All recorded copies of music designated Problematic have long since been purged from iTunes™, and there is no other legal way to obtain music.

“Ohmygahd! Thas fuggin disgusding!”

An inebriated voice howls from somewhere nearby. I turn my head around to see. On the other side of the street is a tall, thin, scraggly man of about my age. From the intoxicated tone I'd been expecting to see another homeless guy, but this guy clearly has money. You can tell because he's dressed like a homeless guy.

My iPhone™ beeps beside me. I reach down and examine the screen. Looks like the guy I'm supposed to pick up won't be needing my services after all. Slow day I guess. I switch the app off and return my attention to the scene unfolding before me.

\* *CRACK.* \* \* *SMASH.* \*

A glass bottle flies through the air, bonks off the homeless woman's head, and breaks into pieces on the ground. Instantly, the chorus to “Freebird” turns into a long, unbroken howl of confusion and pain. Not much different from when she was singing, really, but somehow there is a palpable change in her tone. I turn to see the thin scraggly guy shouting obscenities and waving his middle finger in the air.

“Shudthafugup, you stubid bitch!”

“Hey, what the fuck, did you just throw a bottle at her?”

The voice of a nearby pedestrian cuts through. As the woman collapses to the ground, holding her head in her hands and howling, various fluids once more spurting from various orifices, a small crowd begins to form. This situation looks like it could get ugly.

Meanwhile the guy, who dimly seems to realize that he might have overreacted a little, is swaying nervously from side to side, scratching his head as if in befuddlement at his own actions, as the pedestrians encircle the homeless woman. A few of them turn their attention to the guy, who would be walking quickly away right now if he had any common sense. Unfortunately he doesn't look as if he does.

Angry murmurs from the surrounding crowd begin to boil over into shouts and accusations. Several of the pedestrians, mostly obese women I notice, begin to turn their attention to the confused man across the street. I've got the windows rolled up, but I can make out a few words. “Privilege.” “OhmygodIcanteven.” “Problematic.”

“Holy crap, is that guy going to catch a beatdown?”

Rainbow Darsh appears in the back seat and peers over my shoulder.

“Yeah, probably,” I say, watching as several of the pedestrians begin to advance on the poor befuddled man. I start my engine.

I'm about to pull away, when a strange impulse seizes me. I roll down my window.

“Hey man, did you call for an Uber™?”

Several people turn their attention away from the guy, giving him a momentary reprieve from the mob justice about to be inflicted upon him. Our eyes lock. He stares drunkenly at me for a second, as if failing to understand what I meant. Then, suddenly, the lights click on and he stumbles quickly toward my vehicle.

“Hey! Get back here shitlord!”

One of the heavy harpies notices their quarry escaping, and makes a failed grab for the back of his shirt with a flabby claw. The rest of the crowd stands motionless, but I know the indecision will only last so long. I'm putting myself in a pretty dangerous situation here, really. This guy is a Fucking White Male, who has been deemed Problematic and sentenced to do penance. I'm a Fucking White Male too, and if the crowd decides I'm aiding and abetting there's not much I can do to save myself that doesn't involve vehicular homicide.

“Holy shit dude what are you even doing?”

Rainbow Darsh is snickering unhelpfully in the back seat. Flutterbutts is still shaking and rocking back and forth in the front seat, her wings wrapped around her. The poor dear looks pretty deliciously traumatized; I'd probably have more than a half chub right now if I didn't have more pressing things to worry about.

I flip off the lock on my doors just as the guy grabs the handle. He tumbles into the back seat and I slide the gearshift into Drive just as the door closes. A couple of tubby lasses seem to have figured out what's going on and are waddling towards us, but I maneuver deftly around them. Tires screech as I lurch around the corner, and just like that the danger is behind us.

The guy groans drunkenly from the back seat. Why am I even doing this? He's not a real fare; if he pukes then I won't be able to work again until it's cleaned, and good luck getting reimbursed.

“Hey man, if you're thinking about puking back there, don't.”

“Immalright,” the guy mumbles. “I'm sobrin up.”

“Yeah, whatever. Where am I taking you?”

“Tage me home.”

He doesn't elaborate.

“Where's home? I don't know where you live, dumbass.”

The guy gives me an address in the Pearl. As I thought, he's got money. Young, rich, drunk and stupid; figures. Well, whatever, it's not like I'm doing anything better today. Fortunately his place isn't far from here.

I drive a few blocks and pull up in front of a swanky postmodern apartment complex. One of those bulky, boxy designs that's mostly glass and metal, designed to look like it was cobbled together out of yard debris, where a studio the size of a closet probably rents for a month's worth of my income.

I glance in the mirror. The guy is splayed out on the backseat, his eyes half closed, breathing noisily through his mouth. Rainbow Darsh tries to nudge him awake with a hoof, but of course he doesn't feel anything.

“Hey!”

He opens his eyes.

“Here we are.”

It takes him a couple of seconds to figure out what I'm saying, but when he looks out the window and sees his apartment building he seems to put the pieces together.

“Okay, thangs alot buddy.”

He stumbles out of my car, fumbles in his pocket, turns and tosses some money and a business card through my half-open window.

“We shoul'hangout someday.”

He turns and stumbles up to the front door. It takes him a painfully long time to fish out his key fob thingie to let himself in. However, eventually he manages to get the door open and go inside. As soon as the door closes, my good deed is done for the day.

I turn my attention to what he threw in my car. I uncrumple the bill and see the stout face of Alexander Hamilton staring back up at me. Ten bucks. Wow, big spender.

I pick up the business card and examine it.

“Elroy R. Tennbox. Executive Coordinator.”

The address is on the other side of the river. Business is called “Splash.” Never heard of it. His title sounds like a makework job, but then again most of them are these days. Well, whatever. I toss the card in my glovebox, where receipts, business cards, and other things I'll never look at again go to be forgotten.

Briefly I consider hunting around for more fares, but I decide I've had enough excitement for the day. Besides, it's slow. I put the car back in Drive, and head off toward home. Elroy R. Tennbox. The name sticks in my head for some reason.

**January 9, 2023. 10:42 AM.**

“Tadaima!”

I stroll in through the front door, a bag of groceries in my arms. Rainbow Darsh is lazing on the couch. She raises her head in annoyance as I step inside.

“Jeez, will you pipe down with that weeaboo crap? The neighbors already think you're weird. And close the door.”

“Stop being tsundere, baby. You know you love it.”

I take her advice and close the door. I slide the bolt into place and set the bag of groceries on the floor. Rainbow flaps her wings and floats over to the bag, rummaging around inside.

“Doritos™, white bread, peanut butter, Smuckers Strawberry Fruit Preserves™, Mountain Dew™. Same as last week. Jeez, how are you even still alive?”

I shrug.

“It's the breakfast of champions. Want to help me put it away?”

The look on her face shows that she is not amused.

I whistle to myself as I put the groceries away. My commieblock apartment is barely large enough to have a kitchen, but there's an area in the corner with a tiny stove rescued from the previous century and a sink, and some shoddily-built cabinets nailed to the wall over an old fridge. I put the chips and the bread in the cabinets, and pull open the door to the fridge. A familiar, unpleasant aroma that I think may be related to some takeout that's been in there a while wafts out, encouraging me to quickly conclude my business there. I trade my new bottle of Mountain Dew™ for a half-empty cold one and shut the door.

I shuffle over towards the couch, expertly navigating my way around the empty pizza boxes and two liter bottles scattered around the floor. I throw some mindless moeblob anime onto the TV and grab my laptop off the coffee table.

My emails are about as exciting as they were yesterday. A local politician has personally reached out to me because she knows I care about the environment. Someone with piss-poor grammar wants to help make my penis larger. Dominoes™ wonders if they can tempt me with some mouth-watering cinna sticks.

Sadly, nobody seems interested in hiring the services of Tips Fedora, Private Dick. Can't say I'm surprised, but I usually check anyway. My PI business is nowhere near as successful as my transportation business. My transportation business, incidentally, is nowhere near as successful as my

primary business, which is mostly collecting neetbox and watching anime, but what the hell. I wonder if I should stop marketing myself as a “Private Dick;” it could be sending the wrong impression.

I stop scrolling for a second.

“Tennbox, Elroy.”

I read the name field of the message out loud. The subject header just says “Drinks.” Doesn't look like a work offer, but the name sounds familiar for some reason. I glance at the coffee table my unwashed feet are currently resting on and notice a crinkled ten dollar bill sticking out from underneath a plate. A dim memory slowly floats to the surface of my brain, an image of a drunk man about to be pummeled by a mob of corpulent roasties. I drove him home as I recall, about three months ago.

“Oh, yeah. That guy. Wonder what he wants?”

I skim the email. It's pretty straightforward, guy wants to have lunch today. Wants me to pick him up at work around one. I glance at the clock; I could probably manage that. Didn't really have anything else planned for today, at any rate. I wonder how he even remembers me. No idea how he found me; he gave me his card but I never told him my name and I never tried to contact him. I reach out and pick up the ten dollar bill.

“What is that?” asks Flutterbutts, materializing on the couch next to me.

“It's a portrait of Hamilton,” I say, holding the bill up to the light.

She squints at it curiously, and then wrinkles her nose in distaste.

“Money is the opiate of the capitalist bourgeoisie,” says Flutterbutts. “You shouldn't have accepted that.”

“I shouldn't do a lot of things,” I said, “And in any case, the money I make is what pays for the roof over your head.”

“You get this place for free,” calls out Rainbow Darsh from the sleeping nook.

“Nobody asked you,” I shout back.

**January 9, 2023. 1:18 PM.**

I glance at the address on the business card one more time and back at the numbers on the old brick building. This is definitely the place, although if it wasn't for the word “Splash” lettered on the glass of the door in some art-deco font I'd never have known there was even a business here. The building is an old industrial-looking brick warehouse, although I doubt there's been any wares housed in here for at least half a century. Faded white paint on the side of the wall advertises the name of some long-forgotten company that probably built this place God knows when. Light rain patters down,

running rivulets down the moss-stained bricks. I wonder what “Splash” does exactly? Probably a bunch of self-important hipster broads moving piles of imaginary money around; that's about all any business around here is these days.

I pull open the door and head inside. The interior lobby is painted bright blue, with unframed photos of bicycle parts printed on canvas hanging in a neat row along the wall. A couple of uncomfortable looking but apparently stylish chairs are arranged around a beat up old coffee table with some design magazines spread out on top. An unfriendly looking person with lime green hair whose gender is probably a touchy subject is sitting behind an ugly metal desk, staring at the screen of an iMac™ and purposely ignoring me.

“Hello?”

Xe looks up, visibly annoyed.

“Yes?”

“Hi, Tips Fedora here to see Elroy.”

Xir taps xens fingers against the desk, making an annoying drumming noise.

“Who?”

“Tips Fedora.”

“No, I mean the other name. Who is Elroy?”

“Elroy Tennbox.” I pull out the business card. “He works here. I'm meeting him for lunch.”

Xenu glances at the card and frowns disdainfully.

“Oh. You mean Samantha's husband. Yeah, I'll call him for you.”

Xerox™ quickly taps out some kind of internal communication and fires it off with the click of a mouse.

“He'll be out shortly.”

I nod pleasantly and rock back and forth on my heels, hands in the pockets of my trench coat. Xylophone glowers at me.

“You're welcome to take a seat.”

I smile and tip my fedora, and head off toward one of the uncomfortable looking chairs.

“What's that guy's problem?”

Rainbow Darsh materializes, floating angrily around the room and glowering at X the Eliminator. Obviously I can't answer her.

I thumb through one of the magazines, disinterestedly flipping through images from what apparently passes for an art exhibition these days. I'm trying to make sense out of a photograph of a man with nipple rings sexually harassing a toilet, when Elroy appears in the hallway.

“Tips!”

He addresses me like an old friend, even though this is only the second time in my life I've ever spoken to him. However, I accept the greeting pleasantly and stand up, tossing the art magazine back on the table.

“Hey there, Elroy. Long time no see.”

He nods, and turns to address the chupacabra sitting at the desk.

“Steph, we're stepping out for a bit.”

Xenocryst shoots him a rather unpleasant looking fake smile and says nothing. Elroy looks as if he's about to say something more, then apparently changes his mind and gestures to me.

“Shall we go?”

I shrug indifferently and follow him out onto the street. I can feel X gon' give it to ya glaring daggers into my back as we head outside.

**January 9, 2023. 1:31 PM.**

Rain drums softly against the roof of my Jeep™. The windshield wipers swish rhythmically back and forth. Smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of the stereo. “Songbird,” written and performed by Kenneth Bruce Gorelick, from the 1986 album *Duotones*. Designated Problematic in June of 2019 for reasons of Cultural Appropriation and removed from iTunes™. If Elroy R. Tennbox is upset at my playing contraband on my stereo he doesn't say anything. He sits in the passenger seat, glowering moodily out the window.

He hasn't said anything since we got in the car. I don't say anything either. I barely know this guy; I've got no reason to try to fill the air with pointless small talk. If he wants to talk, he can talk. If not, I'm no worse off than I would be if I were driving alone.

“You married, buddy?” he says suddenly.

I glance over and shoot him an irritated look. I don't mind driving him around or keeping him company if that's what he wants, but I'll be damned if I let anyone talk to me like a cabby when I'm not being paid.

“You know, I don't think we've been introduced,” I tell him. “My name's Tips Fedora. You can call me Tips, or you can call me Mr. Fedora; your choice. If you're looking for a ride and someone to unload your problems on, I'm probably cheaper than a shrink. Just let me know so I can flip the meter on.”

He glances back and seems to realize that he was being rude.



“Sorry. I wasn't trying to be a dick,” he says. “I've just got a lot on my mind these days. You want to get something to eat?”

“Sure. You got a place in mind, or are you good with one of my haunts?”

“Any place that serves booze.”

Somehow that doesn't surprise me.

**January 9, 2023. 2:17 PM.**

About an hour we're sitting at a table in a little lunch place I enjoy, scarfing down kalua pig and mac salad and drinking some sort of fancy craft beer. Elroy's had six of them; I've had one. The guy can really put them away, and after about fifteen minutes of listening to his woes it's pretty easy to figure out why. He's not a complicated man, just unhappy. Kind of a moody prick, morbid sense of humor, but he'd probably even out if the right woman ever came along. There's probably a million guys just like him walking around at any given moment.

Unfortunately for him, the right woman is probably not going to come along, or if she does it's a shame for him, because he's stuck with the wrong one. He never mentions his wife's name, but I remember La Creatura back at the office referring to her as Samantha. She sounds like a real piece of work; I take a moment to thank White American Jesus that I had the good sense to skip the dating game and settle down with a pair of nice equine hallucinations.

He talks a lot about Samantha. Well, to be honest, he talks pretty much exclusively about her, and none of it is pleasant. He gets louder and angrier the drunker he gets, but I doubt he'd raise his voice like this at home. It's pretty easy to see that Elroy R. Tennbox is an empty shell, a poor, bedraggled man on a leash whose only comfort in life is getting good and soused.

In spite of that, though, I find to my surprise that I like him, so I don't mind too much when he orders another round. The waitress learns quickly, and has a freshly opened bottle on the table for him almost as soon as his hand goes up in the air. She hands me another one as well, even though I didn't ask.

“Hey, I'm sorry to lay all this on you.” He looks down his thick black hipster glasses at me, his eyes clouded with alcoholic haze.

I shrug and take a sip of my beer.

“No trouble for me I guess,” I say. “Sorry to state the obvious, but if you hate this woman so much, why do you stay with her? Wouldn't it be easier to just leave?”

He smiles cynically.

“Money.” he says simply.

“That's it?”

“Yep.” He downs his entire beer in one long chug and sets the bottle down on the table. He's about to motion to the waitress for another one, but I catch her attention first and motion for the check instead.

“Do you think I'm pathetic?” he asks.

I shrug again.

“I've seen people stick it out for dumber reasons than that.”

“Like what?”

“Love, for one.”

That gets a cackle out of him. The waitress walks by and leaves the check. Elroy looks like he's about to call her back, but I interject first.

“Sorry, I'm a bit of a lightweight, and I've still got to drive. Besides, don't you need to be getting back?”

He blinks at me for a moment, his brain churning awkwardly for a moment until he eventually seems to process what I said.

“What, you mean Splash?” He laughs. “Naw, I don't do anything there. C'mon, let's go to Quarterland.”

**January 9, 2023. 8:40 PM.**

In the end, Elroy took the longest lunch I've ever seen. We hit Quarterland, and spent the afternoon playing Contra and Pac Man. Elroy insisted I order anything I want, so I reluctantly stuffed myself with a quantity of bacon cheddar fries that probably would have given a heart attack to a lesser man, and nursed a single beer. Meanwhile Elroy proceeded to down enough booze to drown a baby elephant. His bar tab had to be in the hundreds by the time we finally left. He wanted to go barhopping afterward, but the sky was already dark and I said I had to work, so I dropped him off at home and proceeded to flip on my phone app so as not to make a liar out of myself.

It's a slow night, so I spend most of the evening cruising around and listening to music. I'm probably wasting more in gas than I'm earning in fares, but I don't really care that much. It's been raining off and on all day, and right now it's raining just the right amount for maximum comfy. Smooth jazz on the stereo. “Cafe Amore”, written by Chet Catalo. Beautifully performed by Spyro Gyra on their 1980 album *Carnaval*. Designated problematic in December of 2021 for reasons of

Cultural Appropriation and removed from iTunes™.

Rain patters down on the roof. The windshield wipers swish rhythmically back and forth. Warm pools of artificial light reflect gently off of rain-soaked streets. Every now and then I see people darting in and out of bars and restaurants. Sometimes they get in my car and I drive them places. Some of them are drunk and talkative, like Elroy; some of them are like me, and don't say anything. Some of them ask me to turn off my pirated problematic music, most of them either don't notice or don't care.

The city is the same as it ever was. People talk about change, talk about progress, talk about how different everything has become, but from a bird's eye view nothing really changes. People are born, people die. In between they dart in and out of the rain, pretending that the places they go and the things they do are really, really important.

My phone hasn't beeped in a while, so I switch off the app and start heading for home. The Spyro Gyra album ends and I throw on *Neon at Night* by Blue Knights, released in 1994. As of yet this album has not been designated Problematic and is still available on iTunes™, although my copy of it is still technically illegal. My Jeep™ is old, old enough to where I can still enjoy music on revolving plastic discs via an antiquated device mounted in the dashboard, so I make liberal use of the privilege.

Rain patters on the roof. The windshield wipers swish. Rainy street after rainy street drifts by. Old Victorian houses retrofitted with blocky postmodern additions float past my windows, until eventually I cross 82<sup>nd</sup> and the scene changes to tacky dollar stores and big, ugly commieblock apartments.

The commieblocks are a fairly new addition to the city, and as long as you work (or pretend to, at least) you can lease one from the government for free or next to nothing. They were originally conceived by some previous mayor as a solution to public outcry over homelessness and high rents. Now, years later, rents are just as high and there's still homeless everywhere. The commieblocks are mostly occupied by directionless single men and a small handful of women\* too incompetent even to cut it as diversity hires. All things considered it was a solution that solved absolutely nothing, which from a political standpoint made it brilliant. Some of the homeless camps got cleared out or pushed further into the woods, low-income stiffs like yours truly got shitty apartments for free, and as soon as we did the public outcry mysteriously died down. Ambitionless males are usually easy to buy off.

I make a quick stop at Plaid Pantry™ and pick up a bag of Funyons™ and another two liter of Mountain Dew™. Back at the apartment, my imaginary pastel pony friends are waiting for me, and greet me warmly when I walk in the door. I check my email (still no PI work) and spend the rest of the evening watching anime.

**April 13, 2023. 11:48 PM.**

For another three months, my life stayed pretty much the same. Elroy R. Tennbox popped into it more frequently, and we got to be pretty good friends. We formed a habit of hitting a particular bar on Friday nights (a place I like to go, where the prices aren't too high and the kitchen serves something that isn't called "fusion food"), and Elroy always insists on picking up the tab. Sometimes I pick him up at work and we go for lunch. I've been to his house a few times and met his wife, who I find to be every bit as pleasant as Elroy made her out to be.

However, I haven't heard from him in a couple of weeks. I woke up early this morning, and took advantage of the pleasant weather to power-run about a hundred dollars worth of fares during morning and lunch rush. The PI business is as slow as ever, so I decide to knock off around one and spend the afternoon at home, playing old video games on an antiquated vacuum-tube television I keep in my sleeping nook.

Rainbow Darsh nudges a hoof into my arm and tells me that she's hungry, which I soon realize means that I'm hungry. I get up and head to the kitchen corner. I've got nothing left in the cabinets except two ramen packets and a box of Velveeta™ shells and cheese. I decide on the shells and cheese, and get to work boiling some water.

Suddenly, my phone beeps on the coffee table. I've been staring at electrons bouncing off of phosphorous for so long I'd almost forgotten I have one. I head over and pick it up. A crinkled ten dollar bill underneath it becomes dislodged and floats down to the floor.

There's a message on the screen. Sender is Tennbox, Elroy. Message just says "Come over. Quick."

I frown, and glance over at the pot on the stove. The water has started hissing but the surface is still. I shut off the stove and dump the water into the sink, then slip on my sandals, throw on my trench coat and fedora, and head out the door.

**April 14, 2023. 12:21 AM.**

When I turn the corner onto Elroy's block, he's standing outside his building waiting for me. He's pacing around a lot, and looks agitated. A cigarette glows as he takes a long, deep puff. I frown; I've never seen him smoke before. I notice he's got a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. I pull up and drop the locks.

"I'm going to need you to put that out," I tell him. He stares at me blankly, so I nod to the cigarette in his hand. He glances at it as if he'd forgotten he was holding it, and then absent mindedly tosses it aside.

He stashes his duffel bag in the back, then climbs inside the car and doesn't say a word. We drive a few blocks in silence.

"Mind telling me what this is all about?"

He looks at me, that blank expression back on his face again. He reeks of liquor, like he's been swimming in it.

"Get on I5 and go north," he says finally, slurring his words.

I shrug and do as he asks. We hit the 405 and cross the river, merge onto the interstate and keep going. Elroy is just staring blankly out the window. Other than his rather heavy breathing and the reek of alcohol coming off of him I might as well be alone in the car. Flutterbutts materializes in the backseat. I can hear her pacing around anxiously back there. She flaps her wings from time to time, drums her hooves against the window. She's agitated. That's not a good sign; it means I'm agitated too. There's something going on, probably something bad, but I get the impression I'm better off driving than asking questions for the time being.

I slide a plastic disc into my dash-mounted antique disc-revolver. *Enigma, MCMXC a.D.*, released appropriately in 1990. Designated Problematic and removed from iTunes™ in July of 2017, because of religious symbology in the cover art, as well as the title's use of the abbreviated Problematic term "Anno Domini." I own an original commercial pressing with all Problematic labeling and artwork intact, and I'm quite proud of it, however I keep it at home; this is a burned copy. Making copies of commercial revolving discs is of course a violation of Copyright Law, but if I get pulled over I'd rather lose a copy than the original.

Thinking about music soothes me a little and takes my mind off of speculation about the laws that the souse next to me has probably broken, and how much more serious they probably are than Copyright Infringement. Flutterbutts settles down and stretches out on the back seat, and I relax a little. However, I pop a couple of valerian capsules from the bottle in the center console to settle my nerves a little further.

We cross another bridge into Washington, and Elroy still hasn't said a word.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask.

Elroy had been nodding off a bit, and my voice jolts him awake.

"Vancouver," he says groggily.

"We're in Vancouver. Where specifically?"

He stares out the window for a second, then shakes his head.

“No,” he croaks out finally. “Canada.”

I open my mouth to speak, but the look on his face, momentarily illuminated by a passing streetlight, makes me close it again. I return my attention to the road, and keep driving. We go on in silence for a long while. The lights of the city gradually fade away until there's nothing but the faint moonlight and the white lines of the road whizzing by beneath us. In the backseat, I can hear Flutterbutts beginning to thrash around nervously again, and I swallow another capsule.

**April 14, 2023. 5:17 AM.**

The customs agent stared at our passports one more time, and then shone his light back into the cab. He shone the beam from Elroy to me and back to Elroy again.

“Your friend there looks intoxicated.”

“He is,” I say flatly. “That's why he isn't driving.”

The mountie narrows his eyes.

“Have you also been drinking, sir?”

I shake my head. The expression on his face doesn't change, and he holds the flashlight steady.

“No,” I say out loud. “You can test me if you want.”

He keeps the beam fixed on us for several seconds.

“Purpose of your visit?”

A thousand snarky responses come to mind, but I don't get the impression this guy has much of a sense of humor.

“Recreation,” I say flatly.

He glares suspiciously at me, fixes the beam on Elroy for a few seconds longer, and then returns our passports to us.

“Drive through,” he says, and raises the gate.

I glance in the mirror as we pull through. Flutterbutts is cowering in the back seat, her wings pulled up over her head.

“You can come out now,” I say, “He can't see you anyway.”

“What?”

Elroy looks at me with an expression of groggy confusion.

“Nothing.”

Elroy makes an atonal grunt and returns to staring out the window. He hasn't told me where to

go, but on instinct I stay on the freeway for a while, and take an exit for Vancouver International Airport. I roll to a stop at Departures.

“I’m assuming this is where you get off?”

He stares at the airport in silence. For a moment it looks like he’s about to start crying, then he reaches into the back seat. Flutterbutts springs up as he reaches for the duffel bag he stashed on the floor. He gets out of the car, then pauses in the door for a moment.

“Look,” he says, “I’m sorry about all of this. I can explain--”

I shake my head.

“I didn’t ask and I don’t want to know.”

He looks like he’s about to say something else, then changes his mind and nods. He fumbles in his jacket pocket for a moment, then holds out a crinkled envelope. I wave my hand.

“Not necessary,” I say.

“It’s for gas,” he says.

I stare at the bills for a moment, then look up at his face. The expression of desperation in his eyes eventually overrides my good judgement, and I accept the money. He laughs awkwardly and scratches the back of his head.

“Probably the biggest fare you’ve had in a while,” he says.

I smile.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Neither of us says anything more. He stands there for a moment or two, then nods tersely, slings his bag over his shoulder, and heads off into the terminal. I watch him go until he vanishes into the throng of people inside, then throw it in Drive and head back to the freeway.

**April 14, 2023. 10:38 AM.**

The trip home occupies the better part of the morning. Except for a quick drive-through stop at a Jack in the Box™ in Seattle, I white-knuckle it all the way through. By the time I pull into the lot of my commieblock, I’ve cycled through all the plastic discs in my binder and am back on Enigma again. I make a mental note to burn out a few more selections before I go to work again.

Flutterbutts flaps sleepily in the air next to me as I make the laborious climb to the third floor. We both simultaneously yawn. I feel like I could crawl into bed and sleep for the next week. However, I’m not even remotely surprised to find my front door standing wide open, and a pair of uniformed officers inside my apartment, sifting through my belongings.

“Are you Tips Fedora?”

The first officer, a tall, well-built man of about forty with a crew cut and a black mustache, is such a perfect stereotype of a cop that I can tell immediately he's going to be a giant pain in my ass for as long as he possibly can.

“If not then I'm in the wrong house,” I answer. The officer frowns slightly.

“My name is Officer Collins. This is officer Dayley. We'd like to ask you some questions.”

“Do you have a warrant?” I ask.

Officer Dayley, also tall and well-built, is a slightly younger black man with a shaved head and a pair of aviator shades. His mustache is a little better trimmed. He's currently standing in front of the shelves next to the windows, idly browsing the spines of plastic jewel cases.

“Shit, he's got Herbie Hancock in here,” he says to Officer Collins, who doesn't seem interested or impressed. “Cantaloupe Island. I love that song.”

He turns to me and smiles, flashing a brilliantly white set of teeth, and claps a friendly hand on my shoulder. A knot immediately forms in my stomach. Collins seems like a prick, but this guy is legitimately dangerous.

“Relax, kid. We ain't with Copyright Enforcement. We just want to ask you a few questions, that's all.”

I don't say anything. Dayley maintains a vice-like grip on my shoulder while Collins leans uncomfortably close.

“What's your relationship to Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson?”

I don't answer. Dayley squeezes my shoulder a bit.

“C'mon, son. Sooner we get this cleared up the sooner we can be out of your hair.”

I look from one to the other. Collins is a goony tough guy, just waiting for me to give him an excuse to hit me. Dayley's face is the friendly and charming mask of a sociopath.

“I want to see your warrant,” I say.

Dayley releases my shoulder, shakes his head and makes a clicking sound with his tongue. He turns back to the shelves and pulls out my original copy of Herbie Hancock's 1974 album *Dedication*, reading the song titles on the back, as Collins' fist goes flying into my stomach.

The wind goes out of me. White spots appear in the corners of my vision. With an angry howl, Rainbow Darsh comes flying out from the sleeping nook, her eyes bloodshot with rage and rabid slaver dripping from her muzzle. She charges full-speed into Officer Collins and goes right through him, careening headfirst into the wall on the other side with a loud crash and dropping to the floor with a pathetic plop. She stands up, bruised and dazed, blinking in confusion.



As I gasp for breath, Dayley slides the disc back into place on the shelf, and turns around to face me again.

“See, here's the thing, son,” he says, still smiling his pearlescent smile. “We've got a dead body on our hands, so we're in a bit of a hurry today. Officer Collins here, he forgot that warrant on top of his desk, didn't you, Officer Collins?”

Officer Collins gives a terse nod and smiles unpleasantly.

“Yep. Left it right on my desk.”

Officer Dayley clicks his tongue again and wags a finger.

“Now that was just a rookie mistake there, Officer Collins.” He turns back to me, still grinning. “So, here's how this can go down. If you still want to see that warrant, you can come on down to the station with us and we'd be happy to show it to you. Still, that seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to over a silly little bit of protocol. But if you wouldn't mind just overlooking Officer Collins' tiny little clerical error and answering a few questions for us, we can be out of your hair in a jiffy and we can all just get on with our day.”

I look up at him and say nothing. He clicks his tongue and turns back to my shelf once more. Officer Collins' fist comes sailing into my face.

“Mm-*mmm*, take a look at this, Officer Collins. Kid's got *Breezin'* by George Benson. He sure does have some quality stuff in here.”

The world goes dim.

**April 16, 2023. 9:15 AM.**

I lay on my back on the cold, hard jail cell mattress, thinking about Chuck Mangione's 1977 album *Feels So Good*. The title track is probably the most famous song in Mangione's entire catalog. The album, as well as the bulk of Mangione's work, was designated Problematic in August of 2012, and *Feels So Good* was one of the first prominent albums to be removed from iTunes™.

Although the official reason given was Cultural Appropriation, the highly publicized controversy was the result of Mangione's persistent vocal support of exiled filmmaker Mike Judge, creator of the television series *King of the Hill*, which had been designated Highly Problematic and removed from iTunes™ and Amazon-Netflix™ earlier that year. Subsequently, Best Buy™, the last retailer of physical music discs, pulled all remaining copies of the album from its shelves, shortly before the company was bought out and dissolved by Apple™ in 2013. Though I have been able to track down digital files of all tracks from the album and assemble them in their proper order, along

with high-resolution images of the cover art and inner liner sleeve, a physical copy of this recording has remained an elusive holy grail for me for a number of years.

Rainbow Darsh paces angrily in the corner, frothing dangerously at the mouth and snarling at unseen things on the other side of the cell bars. Flutterbutts, who despite being terrified of police and authority figures of all stripes decided to join me on my lonely stay, cowers in the corner, whistling the title track's iconic melody line. The sound soothes me, and I find myself wishing I could drift off to sleep again, but unfortunately I've gotten about all the sleep I'm likely to get at this point. However much longer I've got in here, I'm going to have to spend it wide awake.

I haven't heard a word from Collins or Dayley since they dropped me in here. I have no way of knowing how long I've been locked up, but it feels like it's been about two or three days. I also have no idea what's going to happen, nobody's told me a thing, but I figure at an absolute minimum they'll need to keep me on ice until the bruises on my face clear up.

I have a pretty good idea what happened. As I suspected, Elroy was running from trouble the other night. However, it wasn't until the two police goons brought me down to the station and knocked me around that I figured out just how bad that trouble is. Turns out Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson (I'd always had a feeling that Elroy's wife would have a hyphenated last name, and that neither one of them would be Tennbox) had been beaten to a bloody pulp sometime during the night of April 13. Prime suspect, of course, was the husband, MIA since the same night.

Canadian mounted police had recorded his passport being used to cross the border early on the morning of April 14. Video surveillance footage at the border station showed him riding in a blue Jeep™ sport utility vehicle, registered to Tips Fedora. Portland cops were waiting for me when I got home, naturally.

From what I can tell I'm being held as a non-cooperative person of interest, probably a suspect as well. Like I said I haven't heard a word from Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum since they put me in here, which probably means they don't have much. I didn't give them anything when they questioned me and I don't plan on giving them anything when they question me again, so that probably won't change. They'll hold me as long as they legally can or until I crack, whichever comes first. Meanwhile, I've got a bed, a toilet, and a pair of imaginary flying ponies willing to whistle my favorite jazz tunes. They're going to find out I'm not such an easy guy to sweat.

To my surprise, I suddenly hear the door open at the end of the hall. The cells in here are all empty except for mine, so whoever it is must be here for me. Tenpenny and Pulaski probably got tired of waiting and decided to kick poor little White Carl around some more; good. If I can get them to put some fresh bruises on me I might come out of this with leverage.

The guard, a weaselly little rookie cop about my age who tries entirely too hard to act tough, makes a big production out of cuffing me and leading me to the interrogation room. When he opens the door, instead of the goon squad I was expecting, I see a tall, slender woman in a suit. She's about a decade older than me, and if it wasn't for her androgynous purple-tinged crew cut she'd probably be what men more interested in three-dimensional women than I am would call a "milf." She's definitely not a cop, but her clothes look a little too expensive for a public defender. I'm not quite sure what to make of her. She gestures for me to sit down across the table from her, and shoos the little pipsqueak out of the room after he removes my handcuffs.

"How are you holding up, Mr. Fedora?"

I stare suspiciously at her and don't answer. She sighs heavily and opens a briefcase.

"I'm not with the police, so you can let your guard down. Believe me, it's in your interest to be as open with me as possible. My name is Janet Callahan-McDougal, and I'm an attorney for the Vel Johnson family. I've been hired to represent you."

Vel Johnson. One of the late Mrs. Elroy R. Tennbox's many appended names, if I'm not mistaken. I'm even more suspicious than ever. She seems to have been expecting that, and continues without pause.

"Looks like you didn't say anything to them, so that's good..." She skims through several pages of notes and reports, then puts them away and closes her briefcase. "I'll have you out of here within the hour, but you're not out of the woods yet."

Rainbow Darsh darts angrily from side to side, making faces at her.

"I don't trust her," whispers Flutterbutts, hovering close to my ear.

Neither do I, actually, but right now she's the best chance I've got.

The lawyer looks me directly in the eye and smiles thinly.

"Don't worry too much, though," she says. "They're after your friend, not you. Unfortunately, Portland PD is also under a lot of pressure to wrap this up quickly, before the media catch wind of it, so they might try to pin it on you."

Rainbow Darsh screams, a stream of horrendous obscenities flying out of her mouth as her bloodshot eyes nearly bulge out of her skull. I've never seen her this worked up before. Flutterbutts is cowering in the corner, her wings wrapped protectively around her body. Despite all this, I maintain a calm facade.

"Do they have any evidence?"

She raises an eyebrow at me.

"Not unless you give them any. Or there's something you haven't told me. *Is* there anything

you haven't told me?"

"Technically yes, but only because I haven't really told you anything yet."

She smiles thinly again.

"Just sit tight and keep your mouth shut for now," she says. "I have a feeling this is all going to blow over in a couple of days."

She examines the bruises on my face for a second, then reaches into her briefcase again.

"While we're at it, let's get a few pictures of these."

**April 16, 2023. 10:02 AM.**

Good as her word, she has me back out on the street within the hour. As I pass through the station lobby, Collins gives me an impotent, angry spiel about not getting any funny ideas, because blah blah blah he's got eyes on me. Dayley is just staring daggers, standing sullenly in the corner with his arms crossed, his pearly smile finally gone. Good; someone higher up put a muzzle on those two, that must mean I've got some powerful friends. Now the only thing I have to worry about is why exactly it's worth their trouble to help me.

I came here in the back of a police car, so I catch the train home. It's never been my preferred mode of transportation. On one side of me is a man with tattoos on his face and gage piercings in his ears large enough to toss a grapefruit through. On the other side is a pregnant Mexican girl who looks about fifteen and smells like bourbon and laundry detergent. Nearby, a deranged homeless man is walking up and down the length of the train car, urinating into his pants and babbling while the rest of the passengers ignore him like he's another figment of my imagination.

"Do you see the injustice inherent in your bourgeois system?" whispers Flutterbutts into my ear.

"No, but I'm starting to remember why I bought a car," I whisper back to her.

At the Gateway transit center I exit the train and board a bus, filled with an almost identical sampling of the dregs of humanity, which takes me close enough to my commieblock to walk the rest of the way.

When I finally close the door to my apartment and bolt it behind me, a wave of relief washes over me. My apartment is tiny and cramped, smells like old garbage and mildew, and is probably made of shittier concrete than the last place I slept, but home is home. When I turn around and see the men standing inside waiting for me, Rainbow Darsh immediately makes the most ungodly banshee wail I have ever heard come out of her, and thrashes her head against the wall until imaginary blood squirts out of her skull.

**April 16, 2023. 01:12 PM.**

“Whassup.”

Three vibrant youths of an urban background are standing in my living room, each one an anachronism from a different era. The one in the center is wearing a pristine white suit, with an equally pristine white fur coat slung across his shoulders, the sleeves hanging limply at his sides. Gold jewelry glitters from his fingers, ears, and nearly any other body part that could possibly contain jewelry. He leans with both hands on a fine mahogany cane tipped with a gilded carving of a duck's head. Atop his own head, cocked at an angle, sits a wide-brimmed hat, fire-engine red with a long feather sticking out of the band. To his left is a large rotund fellow dressed in a heavy dark blue denim jacket and baggy black jeans, with a red bandana around his head and a scowl on his face. In the back, going through my music shelf, is a lanky guy clad in a bright multicolored tracksuit, with a thick gold chain around his neck, an impressively maintained flat top and round sunglasses.

“Can I help you gentlemen?”

The large scowling one cracks his knuckles. The pimp in the mink coat smiles, and begins to walk a slow circle around me, tapping his cane pointedly on the carpet with every step.

“So this what a honkey project look like then?”

I hold still, saying nothing while Rainbow Darsh whizzes angrily around his head, making goofy faces at him behind his back. I crack a satisfied smile when a drop of blood from her earlier head wound drops down and makes a bright red spot on his coat. Pity he'll never know its there.

The pimp makes a full circuit of the room and stops, holding his face uncomfortably close to mine and smiling again.

“I grew up in a shittier place than this,” he says. “Got out though. I got all kinds of shit now. What you make in a month, white boy?”

I don't answer. He smiles.

“I can guess. You a cheap ass motherfucker, I can tell. Know what I make in a month? I don't even count it no more, that's what I make in a month. You cheap ass motherfucker.”

“Your father must be proud.”

Biggie Smalls cracks his knuckles again. Rudy Ray Moore stops smiling.

“You know who I am, motherfucker?” he asks.

I know who he is. Even if I hadn't already known it would be hard not to; he was on the cover of Portland Monthly Magazine™ last month. I don't say anything though.

“Answer him, bitch.” Fat Joe steps forward. Silky Johnson holds up a hand.

“Your name is Tyrone Air Jordan,” I say flatly. “Former street alias Smoov Macadamia. A former pimp turned legitimate businessman who recently became the CEO of Nike™ Inc. You also control most of the drug traffic between here and Salem.”

I turn and address the large, intimidating fellow.

“Your associate there is Daquan Highfade-Jackson, better known by his rap alias Bigg Piney, an artist recently signed to your Smoov Grooves record label. The Fresh Prince pawing through my record collection over there is Ray Ray McRibb, his manager.”

Tyrone grins broadly and claps his hands.

“White boy ain't so dumb,” he exclaims. “Except for one thing: I control *everything* between here and *California*.”

“Some Medford boys might disagree with you on that; in fact I heard you lost a few trucks the other week.”

He scowls at that.

“Also, could you tell your friend over there to be careful with that, please?”

Ray Ray McRibb has taken down my copy of *As We Speak* by David Sanborn, released in 1982 and currently available on iTunes™, albeit with a disclaimer stating that it has been flagged for cultural review. He opens the jewel case holds the disc up to the sunlight.

“Ray Ray, you be careful with the man's music now, you hear?” Tyrone calls over his shoulder. Ray Ray grins and nods an affirmative, and then goes back to examining the disc.

“That better?” says Tyrone. I don't answer. He grins again. “Now, you probably wondering why a busy man such as myself would even bother paying a visit to a cheap ass motherfucker like you.”

I shrug.

“I'm assuming it has something to do with Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson.”

“Ain't you just sharp as a tack.”

“Look,” I say, “I don't know how you're mixed up in this exactly, but I didn't say anything to Collins or Dayley and I'm not going to say anything to you.”

“Collins? Dayley? Who the fuck are they?” He turns to Bigg Piney and shrugs. “Think I keep track of every little pig around this dump?”

He leans menacingly close, his smile gone.

“Look, faggot. I ain't here for information. I don't give a fuck what you think you know or what you told the cops. I came here to tell you that whatever you think this is, it ain't.”

“Well, I appreciate you clearing that up.”

Bigg Piney moves remarkably quickly for such a big guy, and before I know what's happening his fist collides with my face. I take several steps backward. The room is spinning. Out of the corner of one eye I see Rainbow Darsh, spinning drunkenly around in the air. I can hear Flutterbutts sobbing in the corner.

“Thanks,” I say, leaning against the wall to steady myself. “It's been a few hours since I've been hit in the face, I was starting to miss it.”

“We can arrange a nice trip down memory lane for you, if you want,” says Tyrone. He grins broadly again, but there's no longer even a pretense of mirth in it. “Now here's the fuckin' deal, white boy. We know you drove that little bitch to Canada. We know the two of you was friends. You don't need to worry about him no more, because we gonna find him. From now on, you just stay out of it. I came here to tell you that from here on out, you ain't involved in this. You forget that, you gonna be in a whole fuckin' world of hurt.”

Bigg Piney socks me in the face one more time for good measure, and the next thing I know I'm lying on the floor looking up at the two of them standing over me. Ray Ray approaches from behind, holding my David Sanborn album, as well as my copy of *Sun Goddess* by Ramsey Lewis, released in 1974 and currently available on iTunes™.

“Scuse me, Macadamia, but I do believe that ownership of these discs is a violation of applicable copyright laws.”

Tyrone Air Jordan grins broadly and shakes his head.

“You better confiscate those, so we can make sure they get turned over to the proper authorities.” He motions with a hand, and the three of them step over my prostrate form.

“Cheap ass motherfucker,” I hear Tyrone say as they head out the door.

I lie on my back, staring at the ceiling as their laughter recedes down the hall. Flutterbutts is inconsolable, crying soft warm tears that drip onto my face and blubbering about the plight of the proletariat. Rainbow Darsh appears overhead, flapping her wings and hovering in the air. Her face mirrors my indignation. I smile, point my finger like a gun, and aim it at the ceiling.

“Bang.”

She smiles.

**April 16, 2023. 6:14 PM.**

I spend the rest of the day popping Tylenol and playing Castlevania. The bruising around my

eye, which had actually been going down for the last couple of days, is swollen up again and will probably remain that way for a while. Later in the evening I get tired of listening to my own thoughts, and head out to drive fares for a couple of hours.

Rain drums softly against the roof of my Jeep™. Smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of my speakers. “Bahia” by Claudio Celso, from the 1998 album *Brazilian Jazz*. Previously available on iTunes™, removed in August of 2020 without explanation. Suspected licensing complications.

It's a fairly average night. I pick up a couple of girls around my age at a chic apartment building on SE Division. If they notice the condition of my face they don't say anything. I drop them off at a bar downtown, and head around the block to pick up a rowdy bunch of middle-aged women and drop them off down the street. I drive up and down and all over, zigzagging back and forth across the river, south into Lake Oswego, out to Beaverton and back downtown again. People get in and out of my car, most of them varying degrees of insufferable. Some of them want to talk, most of them don't. I prefer the ones that don't.

A little later I end up at another bar downtown and the same two girls from before get in, both of them falling down drunk. If they remember me they don't say anything. One of them plugs her phone into my dash without asking and I have to listen to some pop idol caterwauling over a stuttering drum machine. By the time I drop them off I'm pretty happy to be rid of them.

I switch off my app and head home. I cross 82<sup>nd</sup> and the scene changes from hipster blocks into commieblocks. I run through the drive through at Taco Bell™ on the way. Back at home, the poners are waiting for me, and we watch bootlegged episodes of the Twilight Zone while I eat my meal.

I skim my email. The politician who has been emphatically trying to reach me is concerned that I might not have gotten her last email, but she wants me to know that for the next 24 hours she will personally match any contribution I'm willing to give her. The guy who wants to enlarge my genitalia has a limited time offer he thinks I'd be interested in.

I'm about to turn in for the night when something catches my eye. Someone saw the ad for my PI business, wants to hire me. It throws me off guard. I've channeled so much effort into pretending to be a PI that it never occurred to me what I might do if someone actually tried to give me a job.

I open the email and read through it. I'm immediately suspicious, especially in light of everything that's happened recently. The job is in Medford, he wants me to drive out there tomorrow morning. Pay is suspiciously high. Client is an obviously made up name. If I show up, seems like a pretty good bet I'll come home with some fresh bruises. If I come home at all.

“What do you think?” I ask Rainbow Darsh.

She looks sullenly over at me. Her eyes have that crazed bloodshot look again; I don't think I've



heard her speak more than a few words in days. When she's around she mostly floats in the corner, grinding her teeth and muttering. I'm a little worried, I've been wrapped up in my own affairs lately, I might be neglecting my hallucinations a bit. I should try to spend more time with them.

“Do it,” she says. “What's the worst thing that could possibly happen?”

“Whoever sent this message kills me and dissolves my corpse in acid.”

She shrugs.

Meanwhile, Flutterbutts is reading my computer screen.

“Oh, no,” she says. “You can't take this job. It's far too much money.”

“Well, then we're in luck, because I seriously doubt I'm going to get paid.”

**April 17, 2023. 10:53 AM.**

I roll to a stop outside a mansion I immediately recognize. Address is on N Oregon St. in Jacksonville, just outside Medford. The Nunan House, inspiration for the haunted mansion from the 1992 puzzle adventure *The 7<sup>th</sup> Guest*, published by Virgin Interactive™. If I'd known this was the place I was going I'd have brought my camera along. A quick photo on my phone is the best I can do, but I know it won't do the place justice. My mood brightens immediately; if I'm going to be murdered, I can't think of a better place to do it.

Neighborhood looks like it's gone to shit, but nothing about that surprises me. This was probably a swanky area at one point in the distant past, but nobody with money wants to live around here anymore. Except for this guy, apparently.

The extensive grounds are ringed by a tall, unfriendly looking iron fence, overgrown with vines and a rather poorly maintained hedge behind it. Against the backdrop of an overcast sky, the place looks every bit the haunted mansion. Whoever lives here is either a fan of the game or else he doesn't want visitors. There's an intercom set into one of the gateposts, and a tinny voice answers when I press the button.

“Yes?”

I clear my throat.

“Tips Fedora here. I have an appointment with Santos L. Halper.”

“An appointment with who?”

The voice sounds annoyed, and my pockets immediately begin to fill with spaghetti. I'd been so preoccupied with the notion that this was a trap I hadn't even considered the far greater likelihood that someone is just screwing with me.

“Uh...Santos L. Halper?”

“There's no one here by that name.”

Well, it looks like I took a four hour drive for nothing. Live and learn I suppose. I'm about to turn around and leave, when the tinny voice comes through the speaker again.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Uh, Tips Fedora.”

There is a rather longish pause, and suddenly I hear a loud click as the gate swings open.

The interior grounds are pretty poorly maintained. The grass is tall and choked with weeds; a few trees and some rusty lawn furniture are about all there is to the front yard. The paint on the house is chipping, and the floorboards on the porch creak ominously as I approach the front door and ring the bell.

A surly-looking man of about 50 answers the door. He's got a shaved head and a scraggly white mustache, pretty strong-looking arms for a guy his age too. He looks like the kind of guy who's been in combat before.

“Are you Santos L. Halper?” I ask. The guy gives me a bemused look.

“Library,” he says, and points toward a door.

I step into a dusty, cheerless room, lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves. Thick curtains are pulled tight over the windows. An old, thin, tired-looking man sits behind a desk in the corner.

“Sit down,” he says, pointing to a chair nearby. I comply.

“Are *you* Santos L. Halper?” I ask. He rolls his eyes.

“Sorry about the subterfuge,” he says. “My name is Reginald Vel Johnson.”

That name again. Vel Johnson.

“You're the guy who got me out of jail yesterday.”

He nods.

“I am.”

“I'm assuming this is the part where I find out why?”

“I bailed you out because I want to hire you.”

Surprise probably shows on my face.

“This is an actual job then?”

“Yes, the email I sent you is accurate. Sorry about the false name, but I worried you might not come if I told you my real one. I want you to find Elroy Tennbox for me. I'm willing to pay you \$10,488 if you can track him down. Cash; no invoices or receipts. This is a strictly off the books type of job, so the sudden spike of income shouldn't affect your...living situation.”

I don't answer.

“Is the amount not to your liking?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“The money's fine. More than fine. What I want to know is, what are you going to do with him when I find him for you?”

He smiles.

“Is that what you're worried about?”

“It makes sense that I would. He killed your daughter, after all.”

His expression darkens.

“Did he? I'm afraid I don't know anything about that.”

I might have crossed a line there, but at this point I've got nothing to lose if I keep going.

“That's what the police think. They're looking for him too. Some gangsters in Portland are also after him, for some reason.”

“Seems like all the more reason you should want to find him first. He's your friend, isn't he?”

I nod but don't say anything else. He sighs.

“I haven't spoken to my daughter in years,” he says. “I was deeply saddened when I learned that she was dead, but I'm afraid I wasn't surprised. Did you know her?”

“Only through Elroy.”

“Then you might already know that she led something of a fast life, and had connections with some rather unsavory people. As I said, her death saddens me; however it doesn't surprise me. I always found Elroy to be a rather decent man, and I don't believe that he killed her. I want to help him, if I can.”

I look him over steadily. He doesn't look like he's lying, but I can't figure out what to make of him. He's a thin, scraggly guy; looks like the kind of guy who's had an unhappy life and doesn't expect it to get much better at this point. His clothes are a lot like his house: expensive looking but not well cared for. Nothing in his demeanor makes me mistrust him, but there's still something bothering me.

“Why me?” I ask. “I'm not saying I won't take your money, but I can't imagine I'm actually worth ten grand to you as a private eye.”

He shakes his head and chuckles a little.

“No, you're certainly not. No offense to you personally, of course. You're not a private eye, you're just a kid playing make believe. That's okay, that's all most people are anymore. I want to hire you because you were the last person to see Elroy. You drove him across the border, and may know where he was headed and how to reach him. I'm paying you generously because I can afford to and

because I want to encourage you to handle the matter quietly.”

I look him over some more and decide I probably haven't got much to lose.

“What the hell, I'll take your money. Congratulations, you've just hired a ten thousand dollar fake detective.”

He smiles.

“Wonderful.”

We shake hands, and he offers me a drink. I politely decline, and an hour later I'm back on the road, thinking about the deal I just made and wondering if I'll have time to enjoy the money before Tyrone finds out and kills me.

**April 17, 2023. 5:18 PM.**

“I really don't think you should have accepted that money.”

Flutterbutts lectures me from next to me on the sofa, while I nod absent-mindedly, scrolling through chat logs and forum posts. The Darkweb is a large and bustling community these days, practically a separate internet in its own right, since pretty much anything not owned or licensed by Alphabet-Apple™ has had to go underground by necessity. The black market operates pretty much exclusively here, and the forum I'm on is a veritable who's-who of the Northwest underworld. If I'm going to get a clue as to where Elroy might have gone and how he got there, this is going to be the way to go about it.

Of course, I don't really have a whole lot to go on. If he'd smuggled himself out of the country illegally there's a couple of major players in the area who handle that sort of thing, and I could probably get a general direction by making a few inquiries to the right people. Unfortunately though, he'd slipped out legally before the police were on to him; that means he could be anywhere.

I sigh and close my laptop. Who the hell am I kidding? I don't have the slightest idea how to go about finding someone who's left the country. Keeping up on local underworld gossip isn't quite the same thing as actual detective work, I'm beginning to realize. Maybe I should just call Reginald Vel Johnson and tell him I have no idea what the fuck I'm even doing.

“...and that is why the people must rise up, and claim the Workers' utopia that is theirs by right.”

Flutterbutts concludes her lecture and looks at me expectantly. Ordinarily I'd banter back and forth with her about this, but today I'm just not in the mood. Instead I give her an affectionate scratch behind the ears and haul myself up off of the couch.

“I'm going out for a bit.”

She looks at me curiously, a concerned look in her eyes, but she nods and lays down on the couch. I grab my keys, throw on my trench coat and fedora, and slip my sandals on my feet. Rainbow Darsh comes flying out of the sleeping nook and follows me out the door.

**April 17, 2023. 6:04 PM.**

I park on the street a couple blocks away from Elroy's building and swipe my neetbux card in the parking meter. It's raining a little but not too badly, so I don't mind the short walk down to his building. The locks in this building, including the front door and the doors to all the units, are operated by RFID chips embedded in key fobs. Elroy gave me one a couple of months ago so I could let myself in and out, and his neighbors are probably used to seeing me around. If any of them know we're friends and follow the news I might get stopped by somebody, but that's a risk I'm just going to have to take.

I take the elevator to the top floor. I'm expecting the apartment to be blocked off with crime scene tape, but the door looks the same as usual.

“Wasn't somebody murdered here?” Rainbow Darsh asks as she materializes and examines the door.

“That's what I thought...”

I decide it's probably not a good idea to stand around in the hallway talking to invisible ponies, so I let myself in with the key fob. The apartment has clearly been tossed by somebody, but it doesn't look like a crime scene. In the living room, furniture has been knocked over and moved aside. Drawers and cabinets are all hanging open, their contents tossed rudely onto the floor. I'm guessing the police have already been through here and probably took anything of interest with them, but I'd still like to see for myself.

I go through each of the rooms. Their apartment is huge. Elroy had never gone into much detail about his financial situation, but I got the distinct impression that their money was mostly his wife's. From the beginning I guessed that his “Executive Coordinator” title was fairly meaningless; Samantha, on the other hand, was a VP. They both worked at the same company, Splash, and I have an inkling that he probably got the job because of her. Considering where her father lives, I'm guessing she didn't exactly come from humble beginnings, either. Their marriage was always a recipe for disaster.

Speaking of disaster, though, other than the shambles the place is in I don't see any evidence that anything tragic took place here. Even if the police had cleaned up the crime scene I'd expect there

to still be something left over; white tape outline on the floor, maybe a bloodstained rug or something.

“Are you sure it happened here?”

Rainbow Darsh is floating next to me, staring expectantly as if she's figured something out and is waiting for me to. Frowning, I take out my phone and enter “Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson murder” into a Google™ search.

Hmm, this is interesting. The police didn't tell me anything about the specifics of the murder, they just knocked me around, and I've been so preoccupied since I got out that it hadn't really occurred to me to look into it myself. I'd more or less assumed that Samantha had been killed at home, but it turns out the murder didn't even happen here; she'd been killed at a motel on SE Powell. They don't say which one exactly, though.

It's enough to convince me the place could use a more thorough search. Apparently the two of them slept in separate bedrooms. I've been through Elroy's already; he at least had the sense to take most of his personal effects with him (or the cops got whatever he left) and the room is basically empty except for a few discarded articles of clothing. Samantha's room, on the other hand, is more interesting.

There's a laptop sitting on the nightstand. I open the back of it to see if I can remove the hard drive, but it looks like someone else beat me to the punch there. Pity. However, I manage to find something I'm fairly certain the investigators missed, something that might prove more valuable than whatever's on the laptop.

On a hunch I examine a heavy antique wardrobe. The doors are hanging open and all the interior contents have been pulled out and tossed around the room, but apparently nobody thought to look behind it. I do, and my reward is a little black notebook wedged in between the wardrobe and the wall.

I dig it out and skim through the pages. Looks like a diary, and there's entries going back as far as 2020. The last entry was made on the day she died. Jackpot. The cops are going to be sorry they missed this; if you're living in the digital age and want to record anything secret, you can't beat good old fashioned pen and paper. On a hunch I pull the wardrobe all the way out and fish around. Sure enough, another notebook, this one completely full of entries dating from early 2017 up until the time the first one starts. Looks like Elroy's wife was a compulsive journal keeper.

I sift around some more but don't find any others. I'm sure she's got more but they could be anywhere in this place; it's probably about time to make like a tree and get out of here anyway. I tuck the two journals into the pocket of my trench coat and head out the front door.

**April 17, 2023. 10:01 PM.**

Samantha's journals end up being pretty fascinating reading. They're about as dense as *The Silmarillion* and only slightly better written than a Harry Potter™ novel, but the information inside is more than worth the time it takes to slog my way through them.

The notebooks are more like confessionals than journals, or at least they would be if Samantha seemed to be in any way ashamed of herself. She'd been married before, I learn, in fact she was married when she met Elroy. She had an established pattern of falling in love until she managed to land the object of her affection, and then she would get bored and start looking around for the next one, and screwing every stranger she bumped into in between.

She describes her many debaucheries in nauseating detail. Nearly every entry is an exhaustively detailed account of trips to various bars and nightclubs and live music venues, of drinks imbibed and illicit substances consumed, of random encounters with random strangers and the various things that went into and came out of her body as a result. It's enough to convince a guy to swear off 3DPD and stick to anime waifus for the rest of his life, if he hasn't had the sense to do that already.

None of this is news, of course; Elroy had already told me more about his wife's bawdy exploits than I had any interest in ever knowing. I suspect if I'd found any of her earlier journals it would have just been more of the same. Either she thought she was being clever at hiding it or she didn't care, but in any case Elroy knew and if it bothered him, it didn't bother him enough to leave her, let alone kill her.

The more I read, the easier it is to put the pieces together. It wasn't that complex a puzzle in the first place; it really just confirms what I'd already suspected. Samantha was a rich nymphomaniac, Elroy was a directionless Fucking White Male like me. However, unlike me, he'd for some reason enrolled in college, where he apparently majored in Electronic Music Production or something similarly ridiculous. She'd been married when they met, but she convinced him that it was nearly over.

They fell madly in love, something they apparently both believed for a while, and married almost as soon as she was divorced from her first husband. After college, she'd been given a titular role as VP in a startup company her friend was involved in called Splash (despite having read through two journals covering about six years of her life I'm still no closer to finding out what her company does or precisely what anyone's role in it is), and managed to snag a do-nothing job for her husband as well. As soon as they were settled into their new life, she predictably lost interest in him and began screwing around again.

Elroy is mentioned only briefly (and seldom positively) after this, but I can figure out the rest of

it from having known him. I don't really blame him for doing what he did. I can't say I would have done the same thing, but I can understand why a guy in his position would. He knew she was cheating, but he stuck around anyway. Maybe in the beginning he told himself it was because he loved her, but in the end it was all about money, plain and simple, and by the time I met him he was beyond any delusion about it. As long as he was married to Samantha, he could drift on a near-limitless supply of cash and drown his troubles in as much free booze as his slowly pickling liver could handle. And as long as he stayed out of her way, she didn't mind him continuing to sponge. Again, I don't necessarily blame him. Without her money he'd probably be living on neetbux in a commieblock, same as me.

It seems Reginald had long since given up on trying to steer his daughter's life back onto the straight and narrow, but apparently the one concession she'd been forced to make to his stodgy traditionalism was an agreement to see the marriage through. If she got divorced again, she was cut off, and although she devotes many a precious page of her notebooks to complaining about the unfairness of it all, she never seems upset enough to reject his support and strike off on her own. So they stuck together; a marriage of convenience made in heaven.

There might be a motive for murder in here somewhere, I suppose. Elroy might have had some sort of inheritance coming to him if she was out of the way, but somehow I doubt it. Marriage laws have changed a lot since the old days, and generally in cases where the wife has the money, property transference doesn't happen unless the husband is specifically designated as the heir. The impression I get is that the ride on the gravy train was only going to last as long as the marriage did, so if anything it was in his interest to keep her alive. Besides, even a souse like Elroy would have had the sense to realize he'd be the most likely suspect if his rich wife suddenly turned up dead. A crime of passion seems a little more plausible, although it doesn't seem like there was much she could have done at this point that would shock him enough to warrant such an extreme measure.

No, the more I look at this, the less I believe that Elroy was involved in Samantha's death. Still though, if not him, then who?

A couple of things in here jump out at me. First off, I notice that she refers to all the beaus in her life by their initials: CS for the first husband, KC for the guy she cheated with, ET for Elroy (whom she cheated with after KC got boring), and so forth. The initials SM and BP appear briefly in an entry from about six months ago. I suppose it could be a coincidence, but considering the passage's many references to "big black veiny cocks," this seems like it could be the missing link that connects Smoov Macadamia and his crew to the case.

Second, she repeatedly references something called "The Sunset." The way she describes it, it sounds like she's talking about a location rather than an actual sunset. A quick Google™ search



confirms my suspicion: there is a place on SE Powell called The Sunset Motel.

I close my laptop. Flutterbutts has snuggled up next to me and I put arm around her, absent mindedly running my fingers through her non-existent mane. I have a nagging feeling I might be digging up something big, something it might be better to just leave alone.

“Your bruise is swelling up.”

I look down and see Flutterbutts eyeing my face with concern. The places where Tyrone and his boyz worked me over begin to ache the second I remember it happened. Rainbow Darsh materializes, hovering in the air next to the couch.

“Are you going to let those <troubled urban youth> get away with that?” she demands.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask. She just floats there, scowling and grinding her teeth.

“M-maybe you should just leave it alone,” says Flutterbutts. I can feel her trembling; she's getting agitated. “You haven't taken any of that filthy bourgeois money yet. Why don't we just call this off while we can?”

I think about Elroy, that look of desperation on his face when he got into my car that night. I think about those two cops. I hear Tyrone's laughter echoing in my head.

**April 18, 2023. 11:31 AM.**

Over Flutterbutts' objections I get up early the next morning and drive out to SE Powell. The Sunset Motel is located on my side of 82<sup>nd</sup> ave. It doesn't look like the kind of place where people stay for very long. I park at an Asian grocery across the street and head in closer on foot.

The motel looks like it's still open, and the crime scene tape blatantly covering the door to one of the rooms doesn't seem to have hurt business much. I head to the little office at the far corner where a neon “Vacancy” sign glows in the window. A little bell rings when I pull the door open, and a cat scurries out of the way as I step inside.

The lobby looks about how I'd expect: a couple of 40 year old couches covered in cat hair and some tacky, water-damaged commercial art prints hanging on the walls. At the front desk sits a man of about my age and probably three times my girth, wearing an enormous black T-shirt and a rather tasteful fedora. A laptop sits open on the counter in front of him, and I immediately notice that he is watching the 2017 anime series *Kobayashi-san Chi no Meidoragon*, designated Problematic for reasons of Cultural Appropriation and Inappropriate Portrayal of Females within two weeks of its US debut and removed from Amazon-Netflix™.

“Need a room?” he asks gruffly, taking an onion ring from a box next to the laptop and dunking

it into a vat of ranch nearby.

“Actually, I’m trying to find someone,” I say. “Name is Samantha. I’ve been trying to get hold of her for the last few days, but she hasn’t been answering her phone. She stays here a lot, I was wondering if you’d seen her.”

The guy gives me a long, dull look, as if he’s wondering whether or not to take me seriously. Then, he shrugs indifferently and points a pudgy finger at the window, toward the door with the yellow crime scene tape.

“You just missed her,” he says dryly.

I look out the window at where he’s pointing and feign shock.

“Wait a minute, do you mean...I’d read in the news there was a murder here, but I never would have thought...”

Apparently I’m not a very good actor. The guy rolls his eyes and gives me a disgusted look.

“Listen, faggot. You’re like the fourth person to come down here today trying to get into the murder room. I’ll tell you what I tell everyone else: it’s a crime scene. They have it taped off. Nobody can go in there until they’re done investigating. Not even me.”

I shoot him a glare.

“What are you accusing me of? I was just looking for a friend.”

He rolls his eyes again.

“Yeah, well, you’re not the first ‘friend’ of Samantha’s to come around looking for her recently. And in any case, she won’t be seeing any more ‘friends’ here, not now, not ever. Do you want a room or not? Because if not, I’m going to have to ask you to kindly get the fuck out of here. I’m trying to watch this.”

“Is this how you talk to customers? Maybe I should have a chat with the manager.”

“I am the manager.”

“The owner then.”

“The owner’s my Dad. He’s 71 years old and fucking senile; he doesn’t even know what year it is. I’m as high up on the chain of command as you’re going to get. Now, do you want a room or do you want to get the fuck out of here?”

I can see my current approach isn’t working, and decide to try a different angle. I gesture to the laptop screen.

“Which girl do you like?”

He looks at me for a second like he thinks I’m asking about something else, then he glances abruptly at the laptop.

“They're dragons.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Ilulu,” he says after a moment. “Kanna, too.”

Rainbow Darsh materializes next to me.

“Oh god, here we go,” she groans.

I nod approvingly.

“Kanna is pretty damn kawaii.”

“Kanna is kawaii as fuck.”

“Fucking lolicons, the both of you,” Darsh mumbles.

I ignore her and tip my fedora. He tips his fedora. Several seconds of awkward silence follows.

“That a Goorin Brothers?”

“Stetson.”

I give a low whistle.

“A man of culture, I see. Motel business must be pretty good.”

He shrugs.

“I do all right.”

He tips his fedora again. I tip mine. Rainbow Darsh rolls her eyes, and vanishes.

“I really do just want to take a quick look at that room,” I admit finally. “I mean, how often do you get to see a real murder scene? Just let me in and out real quick. Five minutes, I swear.”

He sighs.

“Look,” he says. “To tell you the truth, I really don't fucking care all that much, and you seem like an okay guy. I can't let you in there, though; it's a crime scene. The cops were pretty clear on that, I'm pretty sure I could get fined or charged with something. Just come back in a couple of days, when they have it all cleaned up.”

I'm about to try and see if I can work a little more charm on him, when suddenly I hear the little bell ring and turn my head to see a familiar pair of figures entering the lobby.

“Hey, there, if it isn't our old friend Tips Fedora,” says Officer Dayley.

He places himself squarely in front of me, and Officer Collins stands to the side, trapping me in the corner between the wall and the front desk.

“Something I can do for you officers?” I ask.

Collins scowls.

“What are you doing here?” he demands rudely.

I shrug.

“Didn't know I needed your permission to come to a motel,”

“Don't get cute.”

Collins gives me his best angry cop glare. Dayley leans uncomfortably close and puts a vice grip on my shoulder.

“Any particular reason you chose this place?” asks Dayley. “Seems like an awfully big coincidence. Almost like you're returning to the scene of the crime, so to speak.”

“Am I under arrest?”

Dayley chuckles. Collins scowls.

“Naw, you ain't under arrest, Mr. Fedora. Unless you've got something you want to confess to.”

“I'm good.”

The two of them stand there, staring me down. I don't blink. After a few seconds Dayley lets go of my shoulder and moves casually out of my path.

“We'll let you be on your way, then,” he says. As I push on the door, he calls out. “We'll be seeing you again, Mr. Fedora.”

**April 18, 2023. 6:08 PM.**

The motel had been my only lead, and it doesn't look like I'll be getting anywhere near it without risking more than it's probably worth. Without anything better to do, I proceeded to spend the rest of the day driving fares and thinking. I've been turning the case over and over in my head for hours, but I keep going in circles. Eventually I shut off the app and head home.

I plop down on the couch and grab my laptop. Rainbow Darsh has been floating around my head, giving me shit about *Kobayashi-san Chi no Meidoragon* all day, so I put it on the TV to annoy her. I skim through my emails for the day. Most of it is the usual stuff, then suddenly I notice a strange one. The username is a long string of random characters, the domain I recognize as an anonymous email service popular on the Dark Web. Subject line is blank.

I open the message. It isn't signed, but I know instantly who it's from.

*Tips*, it reads. *Thanks for the other night. I'm sorry about all this, you deserve an explanation.*

He goes on to explain how he'd gotten an anonymous text message from a blocked number the night I drove him to Vancouver. The message informed him that his wife had been murdered, and he was going to be framed for it. Any belief that it might be a prank was dispelled by a series of gory photographs attached to the message. He included the images in the email in case I didn't believe him. He'd naturally been drunk off his ass when he got the message, but he'd had enough presence of mind

to pack a duffel bag and call me. The rest of the story I knew.

He ends the message by telling me he's in China, and he should be safe there because they don't have extradition treaties and blah blah blah; he seems a lot more confident about his situation than I am. He asks me not to look for him and to delete the message as soon as I've read it. Another apology, this time for any trouble I might have had with the police on his account. The bruises on my face throb momentarily when I read that, but in the end I decide not to hold it against him; all things considered he's probably been having a rougher couple of days than I have.

As per his instructions, I delete the message, although I'm sure if the cops were interested enough to bug my inbox they probably have a copy already. At least he had the sense to use an untraceable account and to not sign his name. The images I save to an encrypted container on my hard drive.

The pictures are pretty nasty, and they don't look fake. The woman is clearly Samantha, but whoever did this really did a number on her. The room is a cheap motel, and I can pretty easily surmise at this point that it's the same room that was taped off at the Sunset earlier today. I zoom in close on the images, going over the details in the background with a fine toothed comb, but I don't find anything terribly interesting. On the nightstand is a pack of Marlboro Mild™, and according to Elroy Samantha didn't smoke, so I can assume that my suspect probably smokes this brand. Other than that, it's just a bunch of shots of a motel bed with a bloody mess on it. Not much, but it's something to go on, I guess.

Later that night my phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize, and when I pick up, Reginald Vel Johnson asks me for a status report on the case. I tell him I'm looking into it, but something in my gut tells me not to mention the email from Elroy. A couple hours later it rings again, a different number that I also don't recognize. When I answer, I get about ten seconds of heavy breathing followed by a click.

**April 20, 2023. 3:19 PM.**

The last two days have been uneventful. I spent one of them driving, the other one at home wasting time on the internet and pretending to investigate the case. I haven't heard from Reginald since the other night when he called.

I've got a few tabs open that I'm periodically cycling through, while Flutterbutts nuzzles her head in my lap and Rainbow Darsh floats restlessly around the room. One tab is an up to the minute local news feed, which I've scripted to filter articles related to the Samantha Hartwell-Vel Johnson

murder. The tab icon blinks, indicating that it's got an update for me. When I read the headline, I'm so stunned that my little ponies(TM) suddenly vanish and the computer screen captures my full attention.

Elroy R. Tennbox, whom the papers repeatedly mention as the prime suspect in the case, had been tracked by international investigators to a hotel room in Hong Kong. After a brief standoff with local police, in which a plainly inebriated Tennbox had claimed to have a hostage in the room, police had broken down the door to discover him alone, and dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Part of me had been afraid of an outcome like this the whole time, I realize; anticipating it even.

A powerful wave of sadness hits me all of a sudden, almost hard enough to knock me unconscious. I hadn't known Elroy that long or that well, but he'd been a friend. I don't have too many of those, not counting incorporeal ones at least, and I'd liked him. Flutterbutts materializes and nuzzles her head against my chest, but it feels like a hollow reaction somehow, almost disrespectful, and she immediately vanishes again as soon as I realize it. Then, just like that, the wave subsides, and that familiar feeling of emotional detachment returns, albeit with a little more emptiness than before.

In about an hour, I get a phone call from Vel Johnson's lawyer, informing me that the case has been closed and I'm no longer considered a person of interest. I'd been expecting about as much. I thank her for her efforts on my behalf, and she disconnects.

Not long afterwards, I get a knock on the door. I'm half expecting to see Tyrone and his friends waiting with baseball bats when I open it, but it turns out to only be a solitary white guy in an expensive suit carrying a briefcase full of money. Pity; I was in the mood for a fight, and the more hopeless the better. He hands me the briefcase, and tells me it's from Reginald as "payment for services rendered." I tell him that I haven't rendered any services and I haven't earned payment for anything, but he won't take no for an answer. Finally I take pity on him, and let him leave the briefcase with me so he can go home to his wife and kids.

I open it up, and just as I suspected, the case is full of neatly banded stacks of hundred dollar bills, totaling to \$11,000 even. Since I've got nothing better to do, I call up Reginald and get his depressing butler-assistant instead. After bandying words pointlessly with him for about ten minutes, I finally convince him to put the man himself on the phone, and proceed to have an equally pointless conversation where I try to convince Reginald that I didn't do any actual work and I don't want his money. Not surprisingly, he won't hear of it, and after we exchange some empty condolences he hangs up, leaving me eleven grand richer and even angrier than I was before I called.

I pace around my apartment, filled with pointless rage at anything and everything. I just got handed the biggest paycheck of my life, but frankly I don't even want it. I didn't earn it. I couldn't help Elroy, I couldn't help Reginald, I couldn't do anything. I feel like a chump. Worse than a chump, even;

I feel like a charity case. Like I just got handed the world's biggest participation trophy.

Rainbow Darsh floats aimlessly about the room, bucking her imaginary hooves at the walls and snorting. Flutterbutts knows to stay out of our way when we're like this, but I can see her huddled in the corner, sniffing every now and then. I need to get out of here.

Fuck it. I open briefcase and grab one of the stacks of hundreds, then stash the case under my bed. I throw on my coat and hat and stuff the money into one of the inside pockets, and head out the door.

**April 21, 2023. 12:11 PM.**

I roll out of bed groggy and disoriented. My head feels like a watermelon after a Gallagher show. It hurts to open my eyes, but it hurts just as much when I close them again. It's pretty clear that I won't be getting back to sleep any time soon, but I don't want to move or get out of bed. Eventually dehydration drags me out, and I manage to stumble over to the kitchen sink. I turn on the tap and guzzle the stream directly out of the spout until I have to breathe, then I fill the nearest cup to the brim and chug it all in one gulp.

I feel like I got hit by a train. I have no idea how Elroy managed to do this to himself every night. I've still got an economy-sized jug of Tylenol tablets in the bathroom, so I down a couple and chug another glass of water.

On the kitchen counter next to the stove is a big five liter box of Peter Vella Chardonnay™. A picture of Mr. Vella is plastered on the front of the box, sitting in his vineyard in Tuscany or wherever, holding up a glass of his shitty wine and smiling like it's the classiest thing he's ever tasted. I'll be perfectly honest; I probably couldn't taste the difference between a world-class chardonnay and a jug of Kool Aid mixed with vodka, but even I know a world-class con when I see one. I remember this smug cocksucker smiling at me from the shelf at the Wal Mart™, as if daring me to try his chardonnay and tell him that it wasn't the best thing I'd ever tasted. Five whole liters of the greatest wine ever made, and it could be all mine in exchange for twelve measly dollars.

Fuck you, Peter Vella™. I'm never trusting you again.

Rainbow Darsh materializes and bucks Peter right in his stupid face, and it would have been immensely satisfying to see him go flying across the room, but naturally he stayed right where he was, smiling that irritating smile, frozen in time for all eternity in his probably non-existent Tuscan villa, holding up his dumb little glass of god-awful chardonnay. I sigh, grab a cup, and twist the spigot. Hair of the dog, I guess.

The wine is just as shitty as I remember it being, but it turns out the mantra about the dog is true enough. Between the wine and the Tylenol the hangover downgrades from a catastrophic train wreck to the kind that just irritates you because it's holding up traffic, and eventually I feel like I can function again. I look down at my cup and see that it's still about half full, but the prospect of downing any more of this swill suddenly disgusts me, so I dump the rest of it down the drain, open the refrigerator, and swap the box for a two liter of Mountain Dew™.