

Second Hand (Full)

by Todd Maupin

6:45. Jeff was early. Public transportation had been surprisingly merciful and expedient for a Friday evening. No trains had broken down, and those running were not single tracking. This meant that single people such as Jeff were not encumbered in their Friday evening plans or the commute home. Of course, the others, those non-singles, could also have enjoyed pleasant journeys, but maybe they preferred a deterrence from the city to rescue them, or at least stave off another weekend in domesticity. Whatever the reason, a fleeting smile from Karma, dumb luck, or even numb luck, Jeff was early. Fifteen minutes was an almost perfect span of time for him to get his bearings, but not enough time to sink into the depths of overanalysis of how tonight would go. He repeated to himself not to dwell on anything that had happened so far, or what he might have done better. He should instead feel affirmed that he had chosen well and be optimistic about where tonight could lead. After connecting online, he and Monique had been talking for almost 2 weeks, and the imminent outing was to be their first actual meeting.

They were about to transition from virtual interaction to something real, or at least as real as the concept of dating is. Why does one person respond to another on some app? Can it be more than height, tacos or who has dogs? Jeff had noticed Monique's photos and read her brief bio, but was still hesitant, even after looking at her photos a few times. Then one day, he saw her in a new light and was compelled to click "like" on her profile and initiate the connection. He had clicked but would they click? After a socially acceptable period of time, she responded. Soon enough, their communication had become fluid and regular. When Jeff suggested a meeting for the following Friday, Monique was enthusiastic and asked for a phone conversation to break the ice and firm up the details. Her voice was soothing yet lively, and their fluid textual rapport even conveyed vocally. He found her wit and enthusiasm charming and she seemed

to have her proverbial shift together. Although 'shift' was a polite but overly effervescent term.

6:50. Monique still had time. Her Uber driver was driving conservatively in a liberal city, but even at a moderate speed, 7pm was within range. In spite of herself, she was feeling jittery. She had suffered through many first dates, and most of those had not led to a second. Usually, there was no need to feel pressure other than hoping the other person was not crazy. Monique had always felt that she owed it to the other person just to go, have a good time, and see what happens. It was not entirely fair to Jeff that she thought of tonight as a hurdle to be overcome, but life was not always fair, as she had come to realize more as an adult, especially recently. Life could be a beach, or it could come at you in waves.

Roll Tide, as they say in Alabama. Rather than ebbing, thankfully, Monique's interaction with Jeff had also been a flowing one. Over the course of almost two weeks of chatting and a very pleasant phone call just a few nights ago, Jeff had proven to be personable, a good communicator, with a fun sense of humor. Admittedly, even with other concerns in her life right now, Monique felt slightly more than ambivalent about Jeff, and wanted tonight to go smoothly. Had Monique's sister been aware of tonight, she would have bombarded Monique with questions. Fortunately, Pamela was away on a trip, and not around to interfere, but even in the best of scenarios, Monique did not tell anyone about her prospective partners until at least after a few dates.

6:55. Well, in five more non-nervous ticks, it would have been... The second hand calmly rounded the 12 to cap Jeff's wait at only five minutes remaining. His anticipation was growing, but Jeff still felt calm. Jeff decided to enter the restaurant and give the maitre'd his name. The Tilted Pheasant would not have been his first choice, but he was relieved, if not surprised, that they could honor his request for a table on just a few days notice. Entering, Jeff greeted the

maitre'd and announced his arrival. He was informed that his table was ready for him and his guest to be seated whenever the latter had arrived. Because Monique had described herself as punctiliously punctual, Jeff expected that she would appear within the remaining few minutes and elected to wait at the door rather than bother her with a text message to tell her that he was inside.

6:59. Monique completed the Uber transaction on her phone and exited the Kia SomethingorOther right in front of the Tilted Pheasant. She had never been, nor had Jeff, but he had been the recipient of a “you have to try this place” or something like that. As they would be the innocent victims of a recommendation given to him, he would be absolved from blame if it shaped up to be a terrible experience. Frankly, if not honestly, they both knew that the venue for a first date was essentially meaningless, it was not one of the boxes to check. With so many boxes to check as it was, thankfully it was still early autumn and not the 1920s so there was no need for a coat or hat check on top of those.

7:00. Luckily, Jeff was not checking the time on his phone or even his archaic watch when he recognized the Monique from her photos advancing through the revolving door. Calming his nerves, Jeff smiled warmly as he approached to greet her, and he was pleased that she returned his smile with a genuine but understandably nervous beaming of her own. The trepidation that both attributed as the initial “this person looks like who I hoped he/she would look” moment had passed. The unspoken questions lingered: Will I have fun with this person? Will this be a positive experience? A standard bit of awkwardness followed before Jeff announced the arrival of his complete party to the maitre'd who led them to their table.

They sat, and toggled their attention between the menus and each other. After having ordered and with a drink in their clutches, by the time their food arrived, they had shed their initial anxiousness and were feeling much better acquainted.

“I noticed when our server asked for our IDs that your name is spelled ‘Geoff,’ not the more typical spelling,” Monique observed just before taking a sip of prosecco.

“Good eye, yes, I have to constantly correct people in correspondence so I decided to go with ‘Jeff’ on the app. Thankfully, they are pronounced the same, even in French,” Geoff remarked, eyeing his IPA.

“And with your spelling, you are more likely to be an art gallery owner than someone working in tech support, which I suppose is the better option,” Monique shrugged.

“What about Monique? It is a lovely name but rare, I think, in the United States. What was your parents’ inspiration? Were you named for a relative from overseas?”

“No. Actually, my given name was Monica, but I changed it in the early 2000s, partially due to Bill Clinton, but mostly friends,” she admitted, but clarified further, seeing Geoff’s inquisitive gaze. “Friends, the show. The Courteney Cox character.”

Geoff would have been worried that Monique sounds more like a name for a stripper than he would have been concerned about a name once synonymous with must-see tv, or even some sitcom. Wisely, as he weighed these considerations, he adhered to his filter before speaking and said, “Does anyone still call you Monica? If that is what you prefer... I don’t think anyone cares about Friends anymore, except for maybe Matthew Perry. And that Clinton is an afterthought by now.”

“My sister still calls me Monica, and I do prefer it.” Monique smiled. Point for Geoff.

“Okay, Monica it is. If you are contemplating changing it back, you could always do a Bing! Search on Monica and surely you would see that Monica Bing would be low in the results,” Geoff chuckled.

Monica groaned before she smugly retorted, “That is a very nerdy joke, Jeff. Are you sure you don't truly work in tech support?” Geoff's point from seconds ago flickered, then wavered, but remained.

“Wait, did you just pronounce my name as ‘Jeff’ just then?” Geoff raised an eyebrow, while Monica snickered. “For what it's worth, you are not at all like the Monica character, not even the first season when she was fun, and not too shrill.”

“Geoff, now I am confused. Was that a compliment, an insult or just nostalgia for 90s tv shows?”

“Definitely not an insult. How are your tossed salad and scrambled eggs, by the way?”

Around the time that their entrees had mostly vanished, Geoff and Monica were truly enjoying themselves, and this could only partially be owed to the alcohol. They had touched upon all of the topics: career, origins, relatives, hobbies, hobbits, likes, dislikes, musical tastes, movies, and favorite ice cream flavor.

Geoff, a.k.a. Rocky Road revealed that he is not very spontaneous. “It's my ENTJ. I like to have a solid idea of how I am spending my day.”

Mint Chocolate Chip Monica wondered, “So, as an ENFP, if I asked you to do something after dinner, you would not? Are you that steadfast once you make plans?”

Geoff thought for a moment. “Oh, no, think of me more as steadslow. I would gladly go somewhere else with you. I mean that I like to plan

out my days to maximize the time, but I am usually willing to accommodate changes. Left to my own devices, I am not very spontaneous.”

“I see, I can appreciate wanting to have control over life when possible. Life throws us curves, and it is up to us to straighten it out. It's settled, let's finish up here and then we can be spontaneous,” Monica stated, reaching for her water glass, having realized that her prosecco supply had dried up.

“All right. What did you have in mind? Spontaneity keeps us young, and I'll give you points for that. But it is not like we are keeping score, are we?” Jeff laughed, while Monica flushed and looked at her napkin. How many points did Geoff have? Three? Four?

After deciding generously on five points, she expressed her idea. “When my Uber pulled up, I noticed a second hand store across the street. Let's go check it out. Those places sometimes have some bizarre stuff on the racks and it could be fun.”

Geoff was intrigued but did not want to appear too eager. Should he ask for some concessions? That thought and free association led him to think about the aroma of roasted peanuts at Rogers Centre. “Interesting idea. I saw that store too. It is open 24 hours. Why does a place like that need to be open all night?” The server brought the check, which Geoff paid, accepting Monica's offer to leave the tip.

As they exited the Tilted Pheasant, Monica allotted another point to Geoff for holding the door for her, as well as a point for Ravenclaw. Just because. Geoff had accepted her suggestion more easily than she expected. Dare she press her luck so soon? “Okay, here is a wild idea. Let's each choose outfits for the other to buy and wear to a bar for a drink. No matter what happens, it will be an adventure and give us a memorable story to tell.”

“This is turning out to be some first date! Have you ever done something like this before?” Geoff was curious, but Monica detected a twinkle in his eye that indicated he was not asking suspiciously.

“I have bought clothes from second hand stores, previously, and I have been on dates, but never have I merged the two. It could be something fun and interactive to keep things lively. Not that I am bored, but you know, post-meal and alcohol.”

“Okay, I'm in. But, some rules, please. Nothing offensive or inappropriate for a night out. I mean, no sweatpants, t-shirts, etc. And can we set a price limit?”

“Those are all fair guidelines. Okay, I just got paid, so let's say \$30. That is the going rate for a gift exchange and this will be more fun. Neither of us will be stuck with a calendar or some inane self-help book.”

“Does anyone write non-inane self-help books?” Geoff smirked, but the moment he spoke, he secretly hoped that Monica was not the type to consult those texts. She was not, and made a mental note that if things went well, she should not regift a self-help book to Geoff.

Their entry into the second hand store was triggered by the top of the door brushing against some old keys hanging from the ceiling. An ingenious and low-tech security system that does not require visits to the veterinarian, walks in the rain at 4am or locking up one's slippers during the day. Their intrusion into the store was met by a sidelong glance from the surly clerk at the counter who had been enjoying the dearth of customers. To her credit, she did look up from her phone to begrudgingly acknowledge Geoff and Monica before returning to her perusal of Reddit or something even more scandalous like the Bleacher Report.

Before splitting up to carry out their missions, they reviewed the aforementioned criteria and addressed some lingering concerns. “Monica, do you think it is wise to wear something from here without washing them first? I don't even want to think about who might have worn these clothes before and where they may have been...”

“Geoff, it's not 2020 anymore, and look at that sign on the wall,” Monica rolled her eyes, gesturing towards a sign bearing the neatly printed promise, “All items have been washed and pressed before being prepared for resale, ;-) “

“Ugh, 2020, a distance and distant memory. But that sign has a winky face on it! That negates everything else.”

“Please. Read up on your emojis. It is a self-aware winky face. They know what customers are thinking and are only reassuring them that the clothes they sell are clean. Don't make me explain meta to you. It would be like diagramming binary in a zero-sum game.”

Who is this woman? Geoff appreciated the analogy, even if he was not in complete agreement with the logic it was defending or the analogy's inherent logic. “Okay. We are being spontaneous so I will not hold us back. But... anything that smells like Funkytown or has some nasty stains on it is off-limits. Deal?”

Monica was smirking again, but was secretly impressed by Geoff's willingness to go along with her suggestion, and with his logical concessions. It had almost been too easy. She had anticipated that he would need more convincing. “That is reasonable, and actually a very good idea. Also, no undergarments. Your idea does not stink.”

“Ha. Okay. Let's meet back here in 5 minutes with our gallows outfits.” Geoff and Monica gave each other an obligatory scan from top to bottom, something that happens on all first dates, but

politeness dictates it be done with absolute discretion, rather than the full-frontal, bare bones, without remorse stare down witnessed here. For the express purpose of sizing only, of course.

8:10. The night's attempt at a ritual of courtship reconvened with each handing the other the selected articles of clothing. After a quick overlay size assessment, each retreated to their respective gender specific-changing rooms, at opposite sides of the main showroom in classic middle school dance formation.

8:16. Monica, the first to return the rendezvous point, had barely begun to check herself out in one of the standing mirrors, when Geoff appeared in his dark zoot suit, sans fedora. "Wow, Monica, you look amazing in that dress!"

Monica's face flashed a quick blush, followed by a not as quick to fade eye roll as she turned towards Geoff in her outfit that respectable climatologists would describe as a slutty prom dress. "Thanks. It's a wonder I can breathe so easily in such a tight squeeze. Is this fulfilling some kind of weird fantasy for you?"

"Well, yes, of course. And did you have a thing for the Cherry Poppin' Daddies?" Geoff asked, looking at his own reflection and smoothing out his zoot jacket.

"No, I liked the other band instead," Monica replied, and anticipating Geoff's next statement. "And no, they were not the same as Big Bad Voodoo Daddy! Anyhow, you carry that suit very well, I thought the navy blue would match up well with your salmon tie." Geoff panicked momentarily thinking he had mistakenly grabbed the tie with the salmon on it that he had bought in Seattle, instead of the pink one he had selected and was actually wearing that night.

"I thought this was black," Geoff stated dejectedly.

“No, it is navy blue. Granted, it is a dark navy blue, but not black.”

The clerk greeted them with what could only charitably be identified as abject neutrality when they handed her the price tags they had removed from their new but used attire. Graciously leaving her phone unattended on the counter, the clerk rang up Monica and Geoff's respective items. She even looked receptive when Monica asked her if they could have extra shopping bags for them to store their clothes from earlier behind the counter. “We want to head over to a bar and we'll be back in a few hours at most. Can we leave our other clothes here with you, please?” The response was a barely perceived shrug which they decided to elaborate as an affirmation. Having placed their bags on the counter with the hopes that the clerk would attend to them, they left the store, jingling the keys once again.

“We should have asked that clerk if she could recommend a good bar nearby,” Geoff remarked, scanning the street in both directions for signs of life.

“Are you kidding? I think we were one half request from being murdered by her, or maybe becoming the object of some Wiccan curse. The next block over is kind of a hot spot, so I am sure there must be something,” Monica reasoned, looking towards the perceived destination.

Sure enough, they stumbled upon The Fragile Crescent, one of those classically eclectically named pubs that exist all over Portland, and even in other cities, like this one. There was a boot scraper door mat anchored down outside the humble glass entrance, upon which was reflected the majestic skyline of a city where no one wore boots. Before entering, Monica and Geoff turned and smiled at each other and their costumes. “I like our outfits. Shall we call this Clothes Encounters of the Second Kind?” Geoff asked, offering Monica a zoot suited arm.

She gave him a blank stare, which, to her credit, was better than being aghast. "You can ignore that last comment," Geoff prompted.

"I'm trying.... Anyhow, yes, we do match up pretty well. Let's go in," Monica finally replied, accepting Geoff's arm as he opened the door with his other, second hand. This was a multitasking Geoff, capable of opening the door and analyzing Monica's statement about matching up. Did she mean that more than our outfits? His brain interrogated itself.

The bar was oddly quiet for being so crowded. They would be able to speak normally without shouting. Monica could almost hear herself think. What kind of date am I? Telling him we match up well. I need to keep him in the dark about my thoughts and feelings. Dating 101, among other things. He has the vest but I need to play the cards closer to mine.

They found a vacant table and claimed ownership which the chirpy server did not dispute. Geoff, after scanning the drink menu, ordered what he deemed would be a manly but exotic sounding drink, based on the name. "I will have the Flaming Chuck Norris." Handing the server his drink menu, he could have sworn that Bobby stifled a laugh. Geoff mentally berated himself with a face palm. Why not order a beer? Or even — not wanting to give Monica the wrong impression — the other drink he had been contemplating but had decided against, the Two Second Hand Job?

Monica, after considering the intriguing but questionable mixed drink, the Rickety Night Stand, played it safer, ordering a Manhattan, a selection that appeared to have met the approval of Bobby, who was a Wildcat at heart.

Bobby, trouper that he was, State Trooper that he would never be, asked for their IDs before scuttling off to fetch their drinks. As Geoff

stored his wallet in his zoot jacket pocket rather than his pants pocket, he discovered a business card. "This is curious. A business card that is not much of one. It has today's date, an address and just this weird phrase. Look," he said, displaying the card for Monica to see as well.

"Wolves only get hurt. What does it mean?" Monica asked sheepishly. "And that address is not all that far from here but I don't know what is there, or even on that street. Do you?" Monica looked inquisitively at Geoff, who countered her with a puzzled gaze of his own.

"No idea. Not even a phone number, a website, or a poundsign. But it looks freshly printed, on uncoated Paul Allen paper stock, and using Copperplate Gothic font, if I am not mistaken."

Monica looked at Geoff in amazed, but amused bewilderment. "Huh, that's a little psycho. Why do you know so much about business cards? And do those specifications mean anything?"

"Before the digital age, I used to work at a print house. I became somewhat adept at recognizing this stuff. And, no, not really, this is just a faceless American business template."

"I see. In 1982, you worked at a print house. Then you attended grade school and eventually the Internet was invented. Do you miss it? The lonely life of analogging out in the Pacific Northwest, cutting wise with the other lumberjacks?"

"Funny. I am a bit skeptical about technology at times, but no, I embrace it, for the most part. Don't you ever miss the simpler times before everyone had a mobile phone, and our social networks were tangible?"

“Eh. It's some extra drama sometimes, and lowers my opinion of humanity constantly, but I adapt and use technology as it best suits me. Otherwise, Geoff, we get left behind, and wolves only get hurt, right?”

Bearing a tray with both drinks, Bobby sauntered up to their table. He placed Monica's Manhattan in front of her, and with a sly grin, a pinkish teal monstrosity in front of Geoff. “Enjoy your drinks, folks,” he said, sneering. To his credit, he managed to do so politely, before he bowed and scooted away.

“That is some drink, Geoff. What is in a Flaming Chuck Norris, pray tell?” Monica asked, eyeing the pastel liquid with interest.

“I don't know, actually. The description only said, ‘Hella fresh, you handsome devil.’ I should have known, but Chuck Norris! He exudes tough.” Geoff retrieved his concoction with dismay. “Cin cin!” He offered, moving to clink his glass with Monica's.

“Prost!” Monica accepted, tapping her Manhattan against Geoff's emasculation liquified. “I almost pulled back,” she admitted. “I was not sure if I wanted my Manhattan to touch that thing.”

“Heh, well we're not in Kansas anymore. Okay, so we have this cryptic business card for something happening today, and it is kind of close by. Ms. Spontaneity, what is our next move?”

“Well, my next move is to visit the little girls' room. This outfit you chose for me is not the most hospitably comfortable, and walking here has not helped that. I'll be back shortly.” Geoff stood up as Monica departed. As she walked to the ladies' room, Monica mentally awarded Geoff another point for that display of chivalry, before downgrading to a half a point. What if he was just standing up to get a better view of her walking away? This flattering thought made her smile a little so she reverted back to a full point.

Geoff had barely touched his Pokemon looking drink when Monica returned a few minutes later. Again, he stood while she took her seat, and started to say something to her, when she put her hand up politely to stop him. "Please, just a second. Hand me that business card you found in your jacket. I found the same card in my dress. I had been thinking it was an itchy tag that I forgot to remove before cramming myself into this thing"

"How did that card manage to stay inside that dress?" Geoff wondered.

"You would be amazed at what manages to stay inside a dress." Monica smiled knowingly.

Monica passed the card she had found to Geoff who set about comparing them exhaustively, as though a jeweler, forensics specialist or some gnome might. He raised both cards to the light, rotated them clockwise, then counter clockwise, he flapped them close to his ear, separately, together, then separately again. Finally he placed them both face up on the table and gave Monica his full attention. "They're the same."

"Was all of that really necessary? They looked pretty similar to me." Monica sounded rightfully skeptical.

"Not at all. I decided they were the same at first glance. I just wanted to see how long you would indulge me and let me continue. You were very patient. Props to you."

"I knew it! Jerk! Geork!" Monica exclaimed, slapping Geoff's zoot armor playfully, while never ceasing to smile. "Okay. This means that your suit and my dress have a connection. Astounding that we each chose them, don't you think?"

Geoff dared to take a sip of his Pepto Abysmal while he thought for a moment. "Maybe. Or they could have both come from some costume house? Mass liquidation from another store? Movie studio wardrobe? The answer could very well be at this mysterious location. Shall we violate the dating phone rule and take a look?"

Monica sipped her Manhattan. Even though she had teased Geoff about being technologically lagging, she prided herself on being Luddite light, always electing to ruminate on a question or thought before looking it up. To be fair, she had used the time that had elapsed during C.S.I. Geoff to ponder the mystery. "All right, Let's see what we can find. But, I promise not to check my email, social media, texts, etc, if you won't?"

Geoff nodded. "Done. Good call, and no calls. I agree that we should stay in the moment as much as possible."

They reached for their phones. After a few minutes of thumb dexterity and indexing, they placed their devices on the table and compared notes and findings. Both had encountered fruitless results. Searching for the address in Google and Apple maps yielding nothing save for confirming that it was a viable location. Even though they could ascertain that the address was in a business district nearby, they could find anything listed there, or incorporated, only a placeholder website. "Coming soon!"

"And the phrase about the wolves? I found nothing for that exact phrase, not even using most of the words," Monica relented. "I rue the data that Google will begin to sell about me."

"Nor I. Although some of the related images that Google found were interesting, to put it kindly."

“So, we have an intriguing message, and an address, and today's date. Let's assume the message is the code words to enter? You know how these exclusive clubs are.”

Geoff laughed. “I don't actually, my life is not a movie or some series. Seriously.” He adjusted his zoot jacket. “Well, normally it isn't. What do you say, Ms. ENFP, should we pursue this to the end? This address is within walking distance and it's a nice night.” He checked his watch. “It's only 10pm.”

10:00. It was.

They flagged down Bobby and settled up on their drinks with Monica paying this time. “Even though he did not tip me against ordering this Amazing Technicolor Drinkcoat, let me leave the tip for him,” Geoff offered. Pushing in their chairs, they headed for the exit.

As they emerged into the evening air, they were relieved that it was still balmy for October. The boot scraper door mat showed no signs of having been used, rendering the necessity of its existence even more muddled, albeit less muddied.

“What is our plan when we reach this address? Do we just act like we belong, show them the card and they let us in?” Geoff pondered aloud.

“Maybe. I may be the spontaneous one but this is a little beyond ordering a pizza on a weeknight. The next step is just another ingredient to this memorable story we are writing and living right now.”

“Yes, I'm with you, we are crafting our origin story, adding layers of subtext. World building.”

“Geoff, this is not a Marvel movie, or some other Disney universe, even if I am dressed like the red light district episode of High School Musical. Not to reveal my cards and violate all rules of dating, but I will admit that I am really enjoying myself tonight,”

Geoff smiled. “Thank you for sharing that. I am having a great time with you as well, Monica. Seriously. But, I have never watched High School Musical. I prefer my red light district to be somewhat older,” he added.

Monica raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? A lot of time in Amsterdam?”

“No, nothing like that. You know what I mean. I have painted myself into a corner, haven't I?”

“Oh yes. You are worse off than Schrodinger's cat, but I am enjoying the squirming. No worries, I knew what you meant. You do not strike me as that type, even while wearing a zoot suit.”

They continued along unabated and without baiting each other too incessantly until they arrived at the address in question. The door was as nondescript as the business card. Apart from the number, it was an unmarked door. A dingy buzzer was present next to the locked door, as well as a not so dingy closed circuit camera mounted on the wall above their heads.

“Would you like to do the honors?” Geoff asked, gesturing towards the buzzer. The camera above whirred as it shifted position and refocused.

“Okay, thank you. Since they are watching us already, it is good that they will see you being polite and chivalrous. Unless this is some type of secret jayhole organization that will think you are weak. In any case, pushing people's buttons is one of my strengths, as my sister tells me often. Usually while she is pushing mine.”

Using her ring finger not for its carrying function but for a function it carried, Monica pushed the buzzer. There was no audible Aldrin: one small buzz for man... Monica and Geoff exchanged a look, each wondered if she should try again. As Monica started to learn towards the buzzer again, the intercom came to life.

"Yes? State your business." The voice was neither friendly, nor menacing. It was very monotone and economist.

Geoff cleared his throat. "Um, we're here for..." Monica pointed at the business card in his hand. "... wolves only get hurt?" he concluded, pronouncing it more like an interrobang, but not overly accentuating the interrogative.

The voice on the intercom reacted, this time much more animated, like an economist on cable news. "Welcome! Please come in and join the others!" There was a buzz, the door clicked, and Geoff, much or absolutely nothing like Aldrin decades before him, while not being the first man, with the first hand or even the second hand to make lunar history, nevertheless opened a door to take the next first step into his own adventure.

Behind the exterior door, they followed a short hallway that opened up into a vast open space that comprised the entire building, two stories, floor to ceiling. Entering this main room, Monica and Geoff were immediately approached and greeted by a man and woman who could have been fraternal twins, with names that were instantly forgotten. They addressed Monica and Geoff as Tomlinson and Brewster. "We're so glad you made it! We have all been excited to meet you!. We are over the moon! We will get started in a bit, so just mingle, have some punch and enjoy yourselves." The forgettable possible twins were absorbed back into the crowd, leaving Monica and Geoff to reflect on what seemed to be a relative low gravitas interaction.

“So far, so good. Those two think we are supposed to be here, or at least that we look enough like people who belong.” Monica's voice expressed relief, but her heart was beating a little faster than normal.

“What if they find out we are not Brewster and Tomlinson? Then the gemini twins might not be so excited about us being in their space.” Geoff was not quite so at ease, and his heart was also overclocked.

“Aren't you curious to see what this is all about it? We're here, we might as well stay, right?”

Geoff looked around uneasily. “I guess so. No, you're right. We should follow it through. But if this starts to get weird, I mean, David Lynch weird more than Coen brothers weird, we leave. Okay?”

Monica nodded as she scanned the room and the crowd. The ambiance was strange, with a very industrial, trendy Chipotle type decor, indicating that this building had not been designed specifically for gatherings, or it had been renovated to appear as though it had not. There was a low hum of music that was discernible but with an uneasy balanced volume that both eluded any determination of the actual type or genre or music. This element also blended with the general hum of conversations effectively enough to drown out people's words unless one was engaged with them directly. And the people, the guests? Anyone seeking to champion the melting pot of cultures in the United States would have approved. Guests from the entire spectrum of demographics were represented, and they were dressed in every style imaginable; it would have been impossible to feel over or under dressed. “Let's try to figure what this is all about,” Monica decided and grabbed Geoff's hand and pulled him along with her to a join one of the many groups engaged in discussion.

A few conversations and multiple introductions later, twenty minutes had passed, and they were still in the dark, albeit in a dimly lit room, about the purpose of the evening's event. They had narrowly avoided being caught and identified as intruders, having learned quickly that Monica was in fact Tomlinson, while Geoff was Brewster. They discovered this because everyone they met already knew them as these identities. Everyone. All of the new acquaintances were friendly and the conversations tended so much towards the superficial that nothing but generic information was shared. Oftentimes, a directed question by either Geoff or Monica resulted in an abrupt change of subject or the interlocutors hastily excusing themselves by way of some banal and feeble reason.

Targeted mingling having succeeded only in drawing them closer to the refreshments table, Monica and Geoff opted to imbibe. The only beverage selection was punch, which appeared to be non-alcoholic, and tasted like a mixture of Kombucha and Sunny Delight. "What do you think? It is all still a mystery to me," Monica whispered, sipping her punch.

"An enigma. The only constant I have noticed is that everyone awkwardly avoids mention of their past beyond a few years. People will say they live here, or live there, or they came in from out of town. But if you ask how long they have lived here, anything about their job, or where they are from, it is clam up chowder. And this punch.... as intricate as this whole thing portends to be, you'd think they could do better than this!" Geoff grimaced.

"Yes, it is making me uneasy. The vibe here, not so much the beverage choice. Although I would rather have water than this, or even that Pink Carnation Instant Breakfast you ordered," Monica laughed, nudging Geoff playfully. It was a hollow laugh, however, and Geoff recognized that Monica was now nervous too.

“Ten more minutes and we’ll go. Deal?” Geoff proposed. Monica responded with a toast of punch. “Cin-cin,” Geoff clinked. It was a plastic clink, as disingenuous as their projected confidence. After another sip, both discarded their cups.

11:16. Nine minutes had passed. They had endured a few more non-revelatory conversations. Geoff grasped Monica’s arm lightly and pulled her towards him and the exit. “Let’s go.”

And suddenly, there was a hushed silence. The music ceased and the crowd became muted in shifts, as part of a gradual process, like the Wave being executed at a stadium but in reverse. A podium with a microphone had materialized on a slightly raised platform in a centralized spot in the room. A very bedraggled and unassuming fellow emerged from the crowd and arrived at the microphone. Although he had the rapt attention of everyone already, he tapped on the microphone a few times to seal the deal.

“Thank you all for coming! First, just some administrative business to keep OSHA and the Fire Marshall happy, even if they might disprove of everything else we do. The restrooms are down that corridor to the left, and the emergency exits are there, there, and there,” he gestured wildly like a flight attendant on a turbulent flight. “Thank you to our organizing committee, who did a great job putting this all together - as they always do! Mary Lynn, Thomas, Rodrigo, Zara, Enzo, Marta, Deon, where are you?” He gazed around the room, as did the eyes of the spectators until those five waved back at him. Geoff recognized at least two of them as those they had “met” earlier, and squeezed Monica’s arm, which he was still holding. She nodded.

As the applause for the organizers faded, the emcee continued. “I hope everyone found parking. We will validate, just pick up a ticket near the restrooms, and grab a survey form while you are there. Has everyone been enjoying the punch like I have? Good. You can find

our caterer Altered Bistro on Yelp, so take a moment to give them a good rating if you have a moment. We can all agree that our organizers did a fantastic job - let's give them a second hand." He started another round of applause, that was imitated by the masses, while the seven aforementioned committee members waved again. "However, if you have any ideas for the next gathering, follow up on the private page with your suggestions. The committee always welcomes new members and this could be you."

The emcee droned on for a bit longer, talking about the growing number of memberships, how new chapters were sprouting all over the country, timelines for paying dues, and registering to become a club officer or nominating others. Geoff caught Monica's attention again. "I still don't have the slightest idea what we have stumbled upon. Do you?"

"No, it is so generic. This could be anything, or nothing. But everyone is here for a reason. They have to be. Anyway, I am still a bit perturbed. Let's go." This time it was Monica tugging on Geoff's arm as she started towards the exit.

At that moment, either the emcee had raised his voice, or its volume was amplified digitally. "Okay, let's get started."

The crowd divided like the Red Sea, but there would be no parting for Monica and Geoff. They were grabbed from behind, and held in a tight grip.

The emcee resumed, and for Monica and Geoff, the tonal shift was evident, the tension was tangible, and their night of bonding was now subject to a Bond villain type monologue. "By now, some of you have met our Brewster and Tomlinson for tonight. Kudos to our selection committee who never fails to impress. I know I always say this, but these two may be our best subjects yet." Another round of applause, that had sinister overtones. Monica and Geoff never would

have thought that sinister clapping could be possible, but there it was... like the reaction to a mistake of the union address.

The emcee looked directly at the captives. "Welcome, Monica and Geoff. Yes, that's right, we know who you are, and we know how you came to be here. We let you in, and now we call the shots. Although, arguably, we have been in control this entire time. Am I right, everyone?" There were some approving nods and instances of "mm-hmm" in the crowd, as well as some sinister, yet encouraging laughs. The emcee proceeded, "Now for the rules. I will explain the rules to you once, only once, so pay attention. Luckily for you, the rules are simple. All you have to do is show up at Suite D in the convention center at 8am. That's it. This is not so difficult, is it?"

He paused, as though challenging anyone to respond to his rhetorical question. No one bit so he resumed his rhetoric. "This is not Omaha, but naturally, there are still some stakes. If the both of you are not at Suite D at 8am, we will kill Geoff's mother, and Monica, we will kill your sister. How about those for some well done stakes?" Again, appreciatively sinister laughter.

"This is a bluff. My mother lives in Texarkana!" Geoff blurted out, surprising himself, but not too much, as it was a softer blurt.

"You're from Texarkana, really?" Monica could not help herself, and snorted, in spite of herself.

"No, my mom moved there a few years ago for the climate and the cost of living."

"Good, and my sister does live with me, but she is backpacking around South America right now. If I recall her itinerary, she should be in Peru, on her pilgrimage to Macchu Picchu and photo opportunities with tigers. How does she afford these trips? She is a barista, FFS!"

Geoff was inquisitive. "Did you actually just say 'FFS?'"

"I sometimes use internet acronyms when I am really nervous. LOL."

"Okay.... anyhow, I don't think they have tigers in Macchu Picchu. In fact..."

Geoff was interrupted by the emcee, who was still smiling, not visibly perturbed and no less disheveled than before. "If you two are quite finished, and I do hate to interrupt because you are the stars here, but I am sensing some disbelief. Allow me to alleviate that." He motioned with his hand and the lights, which were already dim, dimmed some more. On one of the walls, a large screen, which had been indiscernible before, became visible. On the screen appeared live streaming imagery, according to the live ticking clock in the upper right. On display were two women, one older, the other younger. Both were gagged, at gunpoint, and holding that day's edition of the USA Today. The camera zoomed in on the faces of both women, then onto the newspapers to emphasize that it was the edition from that morning.

"I assume that is your mother."

"Yes, and your sister, I expect. Also, that is not the international edition of USA Today."

The emcee, visibly amused, cleared his throat. "If I may continue with some more stipulations for your mission. Do not talk to anyone about this. Let me be absolutely clear. No one. No friends, no family, no police. You two are in this alone. If you try to involve, anyone else, we will find out. Believe me. We will find out. And these women will be killed. We will be tracking you and your whereabouts. We will not interfere, but we will also not help you, nor will we intervene if you encounter any trouble along the way, so please do

your best, for the sake of these two ladies, to evade any unwanted attention." The screen went blank, and blended back into the wall as the lights reverted to their prior luminosity. "To help you make it through the night, we will give you each \$200. Think of it as passing GO. Now, you may go."

The tormenters who had been clutching Monica and Geoff from behind released their grips and disappeared, materializing back into the crowd, as seamlessly as they had come. The crowd also seemed to lose interest and the hum of conversations and the unremarkable music combined for a reprise. The emcee approached. None the more impressive up close, if anything, his wrinkled clothes were accentuated and the split ends within his unkempt hair flopped around as he explained some loose ends. "We have credited both of your accounts with \$200. I'm sure you do not need any additional proof of that. I promise you that both of those starlets you just saw on screen are perfectly fine, healthy and safe right now and will remain so until just after 8am. As it stands now, you two have plenty of time, but I advise you not to be complacent. I would offer to answer the questions which you no doubt have, but the likelihood that I respond is almost zero."

"Why are you tormenting us? Who are you people?" Monica seethed, appearing so much on the verge of a lunge that Geoff held her arm.

The emcee remained impassive. "I must compliment you both for the inspired choice of outfits for tonight. These are far more stylish ensembles than I would have imagined you could have found in that store."

"You set us up from the start! You knew that we would follow those cards here." Geoff was starting a fact, not asking a question. Again the emcee was unruffled. His blank and vapid smile returned. He performed a slight bow/nod and then turned away, and after a few steps he was lost in the crowded field like any Shoeless Joe.

“Okay, let's go. Whether this is real or not, I need to think, and I cannot do it inside here with this tame rave going on.” Monica pulled herself loose from Geoff who was still holding her arm, grabbed his, and tugged him towards the exit.

11:53. The extremely faint background noises of the city aside, Monica and Geoff were surrounded by a silence that was only disturbed by the whirring camera over their heads.

“Let's at least walk to the next block. I don't like that camera clocking our every move, and probably recording what we say.” Geoff started off to the left and Monica quickly fell into step with him.

As soon as they had turned the corner and were certainly beyond the vantage point of the peeping and whirring camera, they stopped again. Monica looked back in the direction of the Wolves before speaking. “Okay, the convention center is across town. Making it there — in theory — should not be that difficult, but we cannot walk there. Also, I want my actual clothes back. I cannot think properly wearing a dress this tight for so long.”

“So short, you mean? And honestly, that dress has been making it difficult for me to think too.” Geoff ventured, hoping that some flattering levity could calm them both.

“Really? With all that is going on, and what we have just been told?!” Monica was nonplussed but smiled, as she added, “But thank you.”

“Sorry. When was the last time you heard from your sister? I normally talk to my mom every weekend, and last time, she was safely ensconced in Arkansas, as per usual. Although, she sometimes ventures into Texas for shopping...”

Monica truncated Geoff's dissertation on his mother's Texarkana metro mobility. "My sister has been gone for a few weeks now. Occasionally, she sends me a message on WhatsApp or I see that she has updated her Instagram with some exotic photos. As far as I knew, she was fine. Pamela has always been able to take care of herself, even if by only barely surpassing the necessary financial threshold to do so. She usually pays me rent before I ask her a third time. Now I have to save her again, when she cannot even save money from one week to the next."

"So, these people acted quickly and efficiently. We did not even know each other before two weeks ago. And we did not even finalize on tonight until a couple of days ago."

"Right. I never could have thought it would come to this, not even our second hand foray. How could they possibly know if we seek out the police for help?"

"They seem very well-informed and even better connected. How else could they know to refer to you as Monica and not Monique?"

"I assume that it was one of the things that Pamela told them at some point of her abduction. We should have asked if they knew how to spell 'Geoff.'"

"Touché. Even so, this shows they are thorough. Let's keep thinking about a way to circumvent but for now, I vote we keep this to ourselves."

"Secretive and despicable organizations are new to me, but I wonder if they all serve punch at their gatherings and validate parking, or is this one was an outlier?"

“It was not very good punch. Lousy punch for bad people, I suppose. Let's try our best not to cross them.”

“Deal. We'll abide by the rules they gave us from the start, and try to get through this ourselves, unless an opportunity presents itself. Now, let's get back to the second hand store. As much as you may be enjoying this dress, just standing here, I am starting to get cold. In addition to being annoying, sequins do not generate much heat.”

Geoff grinned. “Sequins are wearable glitter. I have never taken a shine to glitter.” Monica's glare was good-natured. Geoff promptly removed his zoot jacket, and put it over Monica's bare shoulders. “Since you are cold, this might help.”

“Thank you, Geoff. Even though navy blue and Sacramento green do not really match, I appreciate the gesture.” Two points for Geoff.

“Sacramento green? You just made that up!”

“I did not. Check Pinterest. You'll see.” Not even pinned to the ground with a knee in his back would Geoff have a Pinterest account. He decided to take Monica at her word, and leave the color commentary for Jeff Van Gundy.

They returned to the second hand store in relative silence, each absorbed in her or his own thoughts. With his hand on the door, Geoff paused. “Remember what we said about it being weird that this store was open all night? Now, I am just thankful that it is.”

“Yes, it is still an odd but convenient store. So to speak.”

They found that the clerk from a few hours earlier had been replaced by a more attentive but equally unobtrusive male counterpart. “Hi. We left some clothes behind the counter with your colleague earlier,” Monica explained.

The clerk's eyes lit up as he looked past Monica at Geoff's attire. "You're the ones who bought the navy blue zoot suit! I had been eyeing that when it came in, but then I had bills to pay. You know?" He retrieved the bags from behind the counter and handed them to Monica, who shot Geoff a victorious glance that would have been navy blue on the glance color spectrum if there were such a thing. "Here you go. I am sure that I do not have to explain our no refund policy to you. The Sacramento green looks great on you, by the way." Monica gave another smug look to Geoff, who made a mental note to award Monica a point on Pinterest. Or a like, however that nonsense worked. Monica confirmed the contents of the bags, handed one to Geoff, along with his zoot jacket and they hurried off to the dressing rooms.

00:32. They reassembled wearing their earlier attire, which returned a slight sense of normalcy to a far from normal night. Monica pulled Geoff aside, to where she hoped was beyond earshot of the clerk. "I was thinking. He was familiar with your suit. Maybe he knows who brought it in and when. It could be important to know."

Geoff shook his head. "Remember what they told us about involving anyone else. Besides, the card was in your dress too. He is not going to know or recall the history of both the suit and the dress." Geoff thought for a second, looked around the store for other customers, and then turned back to Monica. "Well, maybe he would, but we have to tread carefully."

Geoff looked in the direction of The Tilted Pheasant, which he could not see through the storefront windows, but he knew it was just across the street. That stupid restaurant. If they had not gone there, Monica would not have had the idea to come to this store. Had they met anywhere else in this city, the night might have gone differently. If she had suggested that they talk a walk together, he would have

followed her. Even though a part of him knew that he was not the catalyst in all of this, he felt guilty for bringing her to that restaurant. It was not a chain restaurant but it had its place in the sinister chain of events that had followed.

“Trust me, and just follow my lead,” Monica said, heading to the counter. “Those clothes we bought tonight, we really like them. Do you know if you get similar items like those often? We might come back if you think the people who sold you those will bring in more of the same.” Monica's question seemed earnest. Geoff was impressed and stayed back, hovering around a display of jackets, pretending to peruse them.

The clerk less so. “Listen, we have people coming in here, constantly at all hours of the day and night and people working around the clock. As long as the clothes are not full of holes or moths, we do not ask questions. I have been admiring that suit on the rack but I could not tell you how long it has been here.”

“I understand. Thank you anyway. We'll just look around a bit, maybe there are some we missed.” Monica shrugged as she rejoined Geoff, who pulled her off to the side and into another aisle.

“While you were talking, I looked at a few of those jackets, and look what I found in the pockets.” Geoff showed Monica multiple copies of the same *Wolves only get hurt* business card they had found earlier. “This card was in all of the pockets.”

They were in an aisle containing mainly women's pants, and some tops. Monica checked the pockets and tags of a few them and found business cards in each article of clothing. “I bet if we continue searching we will find these same cards all over the store.”

"They did not leave it up to chance that we would choose the clothing that we did. They set us up to find those cards, no matter what."

"Maybe we can find out from the clerk if anyone else has been in here tonight? Someone had to plant all of these cards. The staff here is not the most attentive but they would have to notice someone messing with every single piece of clothing in the store! Wouldn't they?"

"Let me ask him this time. It will seem less suspicious," Geoff reasoned. They returned to the front of the store and Geoff approached the counter. "Say, have many people been in here tonight? I think I lost my phone somewhere. It may not be here but someone may have found it."

The clerk looked skeptical and responded cryptically. "It's called a changeover. The movie goes on, and nobody in the audience has any idea."

"Umm, yes, well..." Geoff started before the clerk cut him off.

"Look, I just started my shift at 11pm, and it has been a slow night. In fact, Meg on the previous shift had a slight emergency, a family matter," he rolled his eyes "and the store had to close down for a few hours until I could come in. I am not quoting Dante's Inferno when I say that I am not even supposed to be here today."

"Clerks," Monica sighed as she tugged Geoff away from the counter yet again. "It seems that this store closed abruptly at about the same time that we bought our clothes and left."

"Exactly. They eliminated the chance of anyone else showing up at that address like we did. This was meant to appear like a chance discovery, but it was meant for us, and only us all along."

“I think the abducting of my sister and your mother clinches that theory more than these cards, Geoff.”

“And there is that too, of course. There's no use in speculating, but I expect that we would have been guided or directed to that address in some way tonight. No matter what we did. Maybe, by Bobby, or someone else at that bar, or anywhere we would have gone, after the restaurant.”

“Or maybe even at The Tilted Pheasant, if our date was not going well and it looked like we would part ways sooner than later. It's too much of a leap to expect that you would come with me to this store. That I would ask you to go here, I mean.”

“Right, it was not a typical date, by any means. Whatever. There was no way we were not going to end up at that address tonight. As you said, no point in speculating further with lives at stake. We need to be at the convention center by 8am.”

“Agreed. This thing was so carefully orchestrated that I believe they will follow through on the threat. Let's see. We can take an Uber to the convention center but I don't think we can get in this late. And it seems silly, compared to what my sister and your mom are going through, but I don't think it would be safe for us to hang around down there overnight.”

“They said they would be watching us, monitoring us, and I don't doubt it, but let's try to keep them at bay and guessing a little. We could pay cash for a taxi, or the metro is still running, take it back to my house, and then we can drive from there to the convention center.”

“Normally, I would give you grief about being paranoid, and I reserve the right to do so, but staying off the grid is probably best,”

Monica admitted. She was glad to have Geoff as an ally, and was reasonably sure that he was not the Unabomber. They caught that guy, right?

“Or we can go to your house and take your car. I just think its best if we don't use trackable apps,” Geoff added. He realized that “trackable apps” was a redundant phrase, but it was late and he was tired.

“Your survivalist print shop business card practicalities are proving useful.” Monica hoped she sounded sincere. She was, sort of. She loved apps, and was always installing new ones. She hated the idea of being tracked though and decided she would ask Siri later which apps were trackable.

“If only I would have known better than to invite you to that restaurant. Don't get me wrong, you were great company and still are, but I can't help but feel like the dominos started to fall from there, Monica.”

“Geoff, don't beat yourself up over this. You could not have known that I would lead us to over here to buy clothes.”

“Look, as you pointed out just a few minutes ago, my mom and your sister had to have been taken long before we sat down for dinner. We cannot waste time regretting actions when neither one of us has been in control of this situation from the start.”

“True. Although, and not to be competitive, but I will claim that I am slightly more at fault than you are, Geoff,” Monica added with a laugh, that felt forced. Geoff laughed as well, more to humor her than humor himself.

“Well, if they are watching us right now, they will think that we are not very rattled. Anyone following along will think that we are not

taking this very seriously.” Geoff grew serious as he gazed around the store.

“Sorry, Geoff. No, you're right. Call it a combination of being tired, alcohol and adrenaline, but I just have the feeling that everything will work out okay. And I feel safe with you. I know we will get through this.”

“We do work well together. Okay, let's get out of here and go catch the metro. It only runs for another hour. We can figure out whose car we will take along the way.”

01:01. As they headed to the metro, being dressed more sensibly, if more plainly, they were better prepared for a night that was cooling off as morning approached. The nearest metro stop, used by Geoff in what seemed a lifetime ago but was only a few hours earlier, was just a few blocks away. They walked briskly though the mostly deserted streets. The few people they encountered paid them little interest but both Monica and Geoff, had they compared mental notes, would have claimed that absolutely everyone else they saw that night knew exactly who they were and what their intentions were.

The digital marquee indicated that the next train would not pass for another fifteen minutes. The extra time was more a blessing than a hindrance, as Monica assumed that her seldom used metro card was likely nearly or completely devoid of value. Geoff had replenished his card earlier in the evening, just to avoid a situation much like this one. Geoff stood guard while Monica rummaged through her purse in front of the self-service Intellicard kiosk. Being so seldom used, the metro card had been demoted to the nether regions of a seemingly bottomless purse. This type of frantic searching is ill-advised in the early hours of the morning and bound to attract unwanted attention at a metro stop.

The inevitable unwanted attention took shape in the form of another man and woman, both younger and with the look of having experienced an even wilder night or life than Monica and Geoff. Monica had just unearthed a Hollywood Video card and was unaware of anything happening in the universe that was exterior to the lining of her Coach. The playbook in Geoff's brain came to life as he noted the harried couple's approach and made an internal invocation that they continue past. His groan when he realized that his desire had been denied was apparently not internalized enough, as Monica paused and looked towards him. Any further need to ask the cause for his groan dissipated as she saw the couple, and she knew. Geoff shifted his stance, attempting to place himself between the couple and Monica.

"Hullo folks, how are you tonight?" The young man spoke first. His voice was slightly raspy with an accent that was not local. He smiled as the woman came to stand next to him.

"Could you help us out, please? We have had one zinger of a night." The young woman, also with a raspy lilt to her voice, sighed, placing a hand on the man's shoulder, with her other arm hanging limp at her side. Something was off about her. Her baggy clothing seemed ill-fitting as though she had not mastered the subtle art of dressing herself. She was making an effort to appear friendly but Geoff sensed something disconcerting about her, and the young man, too, for that matter. Monica apparently sensed it too, as she tugged lightly at Geoff's sleeve.

Geoff was able to speak a few words before being cut off. "We're actually in kind of a hurry..."

"Oh, did you lose your metro card? We have an extra one. We'll even stay here while you charge it to make sure that it works for you." They both spoke, in sort of a hive mentality that was a raspy

overlapping combination that was not easily assigned to the individual. They both stepped closer.

“Really, it's okay, I just found my card, so we'll be able to manage, but thank you.” Monica reassured them, blazoning a card quickly as the placating proof.

“Yes, thank you. Have a nice night!” Geoff added, turning away, hoping the other couple would do the same. His hopes of an effective polite dismissal were quickly dashed of course.

“Listen, well, could we still ask for your help? We're passing through and our car broke down a few blocks from here. We called about a tow truck but they will only accept cash this time of night, and we are a little short. Could you spare a few dollars, please?” This time, it was the man who did most of the talking and rasping.

Monica and Geoff stole a quick glimpse at one another and their eyes confirmed the shared thought. This was obviously a scam, but they could not jeopardize missing this train. Geoff nodded and turned back to the couple who had sidled even nearer.

“Okay, let me see what I have,” he said, reaching for his wallet, while not taking his eyes off of the couple. Maintaining visual contact on them proved challenging due to their swaying and constant shifting of weight.

“Thank you so much, brother!” The young man seemed genuinely appreciative as Geoff fished out a five dollar bill. Once he had emancipated Abraham Lincoln, he returned his wallet to his pocket. He passed the bill to the man as the woman hovered even closer.

“We really appreciate this! You are really saving us.” She put her hand on Geoff's shoulder and stumbled while attempting an awkward hug, made more challenging by her paralyzed arm. She fell

into Geoff but the young man immediately pulled her back, minimizing the collision. From Monica's point of view, it seemed more as though the young man had pulled her back only after giving her a shove in the first place.

"You have to forgive Sophie. With her arm, her balance is not the best. Thank you for the help. Enjoy the rest of your night." He steadied Sophie, who now appeared quite stable, and they continued on past Monica, Geoff, and the Intellicard vestibule.

"Okay, let's put some value on your card because we need to head down to the platform. We only have 6 minutes." Geoff was scrutinizing the couple as they slinked away.

"I didn't actually find my card yet. What I waved in front of them was my Saint Louis Bread Company rewards card. I probably lost my metro card. I'll just buy another one."

"You know they only have those in St. Louis. Everywhere else they are called Panera."

"Geoff, the card still works, and besides..." Monica could not finish her explanation because the shifty couple had rematerialized. The silent approach was merely an extension of the overall unnerving experience that swirled around them.

"We're so very sorry. We had no idea, really. Please don't tell them!" Sophie thrust Geoff's wallet into his hand. "Everything is in there. I did not take anything out. As soon as I saw that, we turned around." She pointed at the *Wolves only get hurt* card that Geoff had stashed in his wallet.

"We really didn't know!" The young man appeared sincere for the first time, and Sophie nodded, with her head as well as her torso.

“We'll even give you the 5 dollars back if you want?” Sophie was gesturing with her hands as she talked, which produced an odd effect, given that her limp arm was revealed to be a fake third appendage, with her first and second hand busily gesturing.

“Really, it's okay, but we are in an actual hurry,” Monica said firmly, turning her undivided attention to the Intellicard machine as she set about purchasing a new card. Geoff was left to deal with the apologetic couple and their extra sticky hands. Having assessed that they could move along with \$5 and no additional ire, the couple departed in a maneuver that was best described as a nervous shimmy.

“Okay, got it, and I put \$10 on it. No doubt, I will lose it before I use all of that but that should be enough for tonight.” Monica returned everything to her purse, save for the newly minted metro card.

With three minutes to spare, they crossed the turnstile and descended to the platform. There were only a few others standing off in the distance, and those individuals were either engrossed in their phones, each other, or were wobbly people of substances.

01:17. Monica and Geoff had easily secured a seat on a nearly empty train. Geoff's stop was near the end of the time, creating a lull which offered some time to decompress, even while the underground travel promised to make their ears pop.

“When that couple started in on us, I didn't think we were going to make this train. Who knows what grim Gwyneth Paltrow movie fate would have befallen us if we had to wait for the next one?” Geoff mused, even while not truly wanting to think about it.

“I only saw the Polish one. But yes, if they had not looked immediately at your wallet they had pillaged, then blind chance that we would catch this train.”

“Do you mean fat chance?”

“No. In any case, they were legitimately terrified when they saw that card. They knew what we are up against. If we had more time, I would have liked to pick their brains - such that they were - to find out some more about this group who is holding Pamela and your mom.”

“It's probably good that we were in a rush. It is probably against the rules to ask them anything. Their reaction was troubling enough. So, we will be near my place soon enough. Are you okay with just taking my car over to the convention center?”

“Yes, that's fine. As I said, I feel safe with you, Geoff, and even if I didn't, your psychopathic tendencies would have to be backburnered for tonight. No offense.” Monica put her hand on Geoff's and smiled.

“Wait. No offense because you just hinted that I might be a psychopath, or is it that I should not take offense that my being a psychopath is not a priority?” Geoff was actually amused, but not in a psychopathic way.

“Thanks for understanding,” Monica said, smirking. “Do you have coffee at your place? We're going to need a boost.”

“I can make us some espresso. I am super tired, but I know if I go to sleep now, I won't wake up in time to keep our appointment at the convention, which would conflict with the likelihood of Pamela and my mom ever waking up again in the future.”

“You could actually fall asleep? I'm so keyed up and wired that, at this point, I don't even know if I could sleep tomorrow night.”

“Eh, I can always sleep. It runs in the family. My dad once fell asleep standing up on a battleship.”

“E2, Geoff's dad. That's impressive. Anyhow, awake or not, I am going to be sunk without some caffeine.”

The train jostled and rumbled along as Monica and Geoff sat, struggling to stay awake, and only tethered to consciousness by the indistinct announcement of each abrupt stop: 103rd Street, Science Park, Lake, Belmont, Crenshaw, North Quincy, Bryn Mawr, Halstead, Lenox, Sandy Springs, Florence, Ashmont, Warren Street, and finally Geoff's stop, Bowdoin. “You have to sit through all of these stops each time you go into the city?” Monica asked when Geoff finally motioned to her that their time had come to exit the train.

“It's not so bad. It saves me from driving in the city and fighting with parking. It's not often that I need to have my car for life-threatening adventures on a Friday night.”

“Fair enough. I must admit that my Friday nights are not usually so lively, or deadly,” Monica said, pausing. “That was probably in poor taste. Sorry, Geoff.”

“No worries, I think we've long since crossed whatever acceptable line there ever was for taste at this point. Let's keep moving.” Geoff led the way, navigating Monica through the levels of thankfully still illuminated platforms to reach the turnstile and exit best serving their needs. As they emerged above ground, there was very little activity, just a few cars on the roundabout, and not many windows still lit within the upper floors of the structures of Copley Market or Quincy Manor that loomed overhead. Some trucks were busy with overnight deliveries, using businesses' recessed loading docks to replenish goods that, even in a recession, they hoped to sell in a few hours.

01:58. Having passed through countless times, Geoff was of course, in his element and comfortably familiar with yet another resurfacing in Bowdoin. Monica had moved to the city long ago, but it had been many years, if ever, since she had ventured that far away from downtown on the NCTA's Gold line. "Just a moment, please, Geoff, to get my bearings, okay?"

"Yes, certainly. My house is just a 5 minute walk from here. Take your time."

"Thank you," Monica smiled and squeezed Geoff's arm as she looked around, ingesting the surroundings. It was a calm night, and all seemed perfectly ordinary, presenting a difficult reconciliation with the unsettling developments of just a few hours earlier. Monica was generally not the superstitious type, but where in the world was Karma, San Diego? Even living in this city, Monica considered herself to be a reasonably good person and did not believe that she deserved this. Not to mention, Geoff, or the two women. Bowdoin seemed so peaceful, looking up, she could even see some stars; she could only hope that the night was looking up a well. Even with her twinges of guilt that she could not shake, the outlook now seemed tinged more towards being rosy. And yet, Monica, while simultaneously acknowledging the absurdity, felt that her recognition of Bowdoin's sudden tranquil calmness effectively jinxed her and Geoff. She came to this realization as soon as she saw the wheelchair tip over. Its foreboding capsizing was as spectacular as it was jarring. Although Monica remained upright and steady on her own feet, and recognized that her guilt based on complacency was an irrational notion, she could not shake the feeling that this latest setback was her fault.

Geoff heard the crash slightly before he saw its origin. He quickly spotted the source: an elderly man was sprawled awkwardly on the bricks while two elderly women were hunched over next to him. In all truthfulness, they were always somewhat hunched over, but this

time it was in contemplation of how to return the fellow and his chair to full, upright and locked positions. One of the women looked in the direction of Monica and Geoff. "Help! Could you help us? We need more help? Could you give us a second hand over here please?"

Knowing that this could become another delay they could not afford but could not in good conscience ignore, Monica and Geoff shared a look that was not a magnanimous one. It was fortunate that actions speak louder than words. The reciprocal unspoken grim determination each saw in the other required no words, and probably not an eye roll, but, at 2am, an eye roll can be cathartic.

2:02. Or even at 2:02.

Monica led the way, with Geoff as the caboose. Both elderly women were now standing and demonstrated visceral gratitude for the assistance in arrival. The man, while forlorn, remained mostly impassive. He did not appear interested in comforting words as much as a return to a more comfortable position. The shorter woman - they were both short but one was less tall than the other - spoke first. "Oh, thank you, we're so relieved that you are out tonight too, I don't think we could have managed to sit Peter back up on our own."

The less short woman concurred. "Peter is extremely heavy. It's all we can do to scoot him from one chair to another, and he has no interest in helping." Geoff and Monica studied the sitting situation. During the upheaval, Peter had become dislodged from his chair and, sprawled in an almost fetal position, all of him, including his two feet, was a few feet removed from it.

Assessing Peter's plight, Monica had an initial suggestion for Geoff. "He is practically in a sitting position. If we slide the chair over to

him, I think we could scoop him up, then tilt the chair upright. What do you think?"

"Good call. Does he have any sensitive areas, brittle bones, anything we should be careful not to touch or spots to avoid putting pressure?" Geoff asked, turning towards the shorter woman, but ostensibly also towards the taller woman who was still shorter than him, and Monica, for that matter.

"He has had a hip replacement and his kneecap is made of limestone, but you needn't worry about hurting him," the less short woman replied.

"Limestone. Hipsters. That would explain the sedimentary lifestyle," Monica remarked as a slight smirk formed on her face.

"Don't you mean sedentary?" Geoff was also amused, even though he was generally respectful of his elders. Yet, on a night when his mother had been kidnapped, he felt like he should have some wiggle room.

"Geoff, you are so set in your ways. Let's do this and help these ladies." It warmed Monica's heart that Geoff could also find the humor in this situation on a night like they were having. She acknowledged that this probably meant that both their hearts were black and shriveled, but that was beside the point. Humor that could be taken as offensive to others was the best defense mechanism.

The operation transpired much as Monica had hoped. Sliding the chair produced a cringe-inducing scrape that was mercifully brief. Binding Peter to the chair was easy enough, but the lifting required much more extra leverage, force and inertia than expected. Monica speculated that the hip and knee prosthetics were more likely made of titanium, adamantium or vibranium, and she marveled at the

sheer weight of that man. Still, they managed to raise the limestone cowboy and his chair to acceptable stability.

“Thank you so much!” The taller woman exclaimed appreciatively. It was probably the taller woman. During the arduous but uplifting gesture, the women had shifted positions on an uneven brick surface, causing Geoff to lose his grasp on their comparative heights.

“Our pleasure, ma'am. We're glad we were able to help.” Geoff was still catching his breath.

“If you had not come along, we may have had to wait until morning, or flag down one of those delivery trucks,” probably the less tall short woman added.

“What are you doing out so late, if you don't mind my asking?” Monica inquired.

The women exchanged a tall-short-tall-short glance, and the taller one answered in short order. “We took Peter into the city for therapy, then we decided to stay over for dinner, and then we took the wrong train, and now I think we're lost.”

The shorter one interjected, “No, you chose the wrong train. I told you that it was the other one. Even Peter agreed with me. Right, Peter?” Silent acquiescence from Peter.

“Maybe we can help? Where are you trying to go?” Geoff offered. Monica certainly deferred to his metro expertise.

“We had dinner at Trinity Mills and then we needed to take the train back to Pioneer Square, but somehow we got switched around,” the presumed taller woman admitted. Geoff nodded in sympathy. The

NCTA was not renowned for its intuitive charms, or even its convenience.

“Having to locate all of the wheelchair accessible ramps and entrances may have flustered us a bit,” the conceivably shorter woman agreed.

Monica admired the shorter woman's politically correct terminology even at this early hour, but did not comment. She had also ceased trying to determine which woman was taller, or shorter. This would have been akin to identifying Muller-Lyer lines in an Ames room, as drawn by Escher.

Geoff was not about to make similar allusions, or illusions. “This is Bowdoin, on the Gold line. Pioneer Square is on the Vermillion line, and you'll have to transfer back onto the Vermillion at Earlington Heights. Unless you mean the Pioneer Square Circle stop which is on the Cyan line?” Geoff felt like a professor who was teaching the wrong class.

The women of variable height both appeared perplexed. Even amidst this riveting conversation, Peter had apparently fallen asleep.

“We live in Centennial and my son-in-law usually takes Peter to his therapy sessions. Teddy took his family to Mount Rushmore this week so we decided we could take Peter to therapy ourselves. We drove to Pioneer Square, parked, and took the train.”

“Or Pioneer Square Circle,” the other woman lamented.

“Do you remember any landmarks or the names of some of the other stops?” Geoff tried to visualize the NCTA as he prompted the mercurially vertical women. “Forest Hill, Market East, Francisville, Powell Street, Galvez, Franklin, Stonestown... do any of these sound familiar?”

Monica retrieved her phone from her purse. Off the top of her head, or even on either side, those names meant nothing to her; she had not bothered to store a database of public transportation knowledge. However, there was a vast network of computers linked together that might be able to provide some information. From their also interchangeable lower centers of gravity, the older women were pensive.

The less short women who Geoff had named Irene in his head seemed confident in her answer. "I remember Farmdale so it must have been Pioneer Square." She straightened her posture in satisfaction. "Yes, it had to be Pioneer Square Circle where we parked."

"Ma'am, Farmdale was not one of the choices," Monica recalled, looking up from her phone. She felt like a frustrated teaching aide to a professor teaching the wrong class.

The woman who was the non-Irene in Geoff's head, and probably shorter piped up. "It would be so much easier if we could just get someone to drive us back to where we left our car." While a statement, not a question, it was certainly loaded questionably.

"Mark, can I have a word, please?" Monica pulled Geoff aside, noting that the elderly women now seemed perplexed in a non-logical sense. She guided an also confused Geoff several yards away from the elderly trio.

"Why did you call me Mark?" Geoff, not being a parent, had not forgotten how to whisper.

"Geoff, look at this. I did some checking on my phone while Ethel was deep in thought. I'm skeptical of these people. There is no parking at neither Pioneer Square, nor Pioneer Square Circle. This

has to be a distraction by the organization to delay us and keep us from making it to the convention center.”

“Zounds, that's devious! Playing on our sympathies and our sense of goodwill, or just a test to see if we would help them or not?”

“Zounds? Maybe I should call you Ethel.”

“I'm trying to cut back on my swearing. Criminy! Okay, so these people don't really need our help, and they seemingly never did. So we move on, but I don't particularly want them following us to my house.”

“Geoff, honestly, they probably already know where you live and where I live. Finding your mom in Texarkana was probably not that much of a trick but locating my sister in the jungles of South America implies some resources.”

“Is everything okay over there?” One of the women called over. Whether it was Irene or Ethel, Geoff and Monica could not be sure, especially since they did not know the other's naming convention.

“All right, we'll just leave them to fend for themselves. Whether he needed our help or not, we lifted Peter back into his chair, so no faceless organization can accuse us of not being good Samaritans. Follow my lead, Jenny.” Geoff winked at Monica and headed back to the elderly trio.

“Folks, Jenny just reminded me that all of us have missed the last train back into the city, so there is no way you can make it back to Pioneer Square tonight. Circle. There is an all night diner just around the corner, or you can use that blue call box to connect with this area's taxi company. I'm afraid that those are your only options.”

"You live so close, Mark. Are you sure you could not drive us to where we left our car? It cannot be good for Peter to stay out all night," Geoff's Irene gazed at him knowingly.

"No, he cannot, and Peter will be fine. Only wolves get hurt," Monica was firm and gave Geoff a slight shove to start him walking. Likely the only person among the five who did not know where Geoff lived put her at a disadvantage to leading him away from that situation.

"Thank you, Monica and Geoff," a male voice called out behind them. Even though they did not look back, they were sure that it was Peter who spoke.

"Well, that was quite the episode," Monica surmised, after a block of distance separated them from the ne'er-do-welderly trio.

"I'm glad you did that checking on your phone. I'm sure they would not have let us go easily. Nice line about Peter and the wolves, by the way! That was a prime action movie quip right there."

"Thanks, I was a little bit proud of that one," Monica admitted. "Unlike the couple at the card kiosk, those people were deliberately out to delay us, and only for sick and twisted entertainment value."

"Right. Psychological torment. This does not make any of it easier to swallow. I don't feel as much as a scumbag about making fun of them now though."

"Ha, yes, well, that can be something for Irene and Ethel to report back to the mothership," Monica reasoned. She was still walking more quickly than the normally would, and slowed her pace.

Geoff must have had the same thought, and adjusted his walk accordingly. "All right, my house is just ahead, on the left."

As a result of the recent interaction, Geoff approached his house with extra vigilance. Externally, as far as he could tell, everything appeared to be as he had left it the evening prior. His car was still parked where he had left it, no headlights were smashed and all four tires were blissfully inflated. The door was still locked, no lights were on, and if his doormat had been moved, he could not say. While he had no need for a boot scraper, he realized that a scraper similar in size to the one at The Fragile Crescent would have fit nicely on his stoop. If he remembered the next day, he might check prices. He turned his key cautiously in the lock and opened the door slowly. Nothing. Despite the disturbing night he was living, his home showed no signs of having been disturbed. He flipped the switch to give light to the entryway and held the door so that Monica could enter.

Monica had standards and ethics. Among these were not going to the home of someone she had just met. Reasoning that she had known Geoff for several hours at this point, coupled with the fact that both had a loved one kidnapped, she opted to reconcile her values with the extenuating circumstances that had driven her to this. She was relieved to see that Geoff had ferns in his entryway; no one who possessed ferns was likely to be a psychopath. A sociopath, maybe.

Geoff closed the door behind them, and slid the deadbolt into place. He placed his keys on the endtable near the ferns. He hated those ferns, but they were a gift from his mother so he had kept them, and had kept them alive.

02:48. "How about some coffee while we decide our next steps?" Geoff would have certainly preferred something stronger and more alcoholic but they needed to remain alert and lucid.

“Yes, please. That sounds great to me, thank you.” Monica would have certainly preferred something stronger and more alcoholic but she was in a strange guy's house at...

02:49.

“Could I use your restroom, Geoff?”

“Yes, of course. Third door on the right, just down that Monty Hall.” Minus two points for Geoff. “It's kind of a mess. Obviously I was not expecting any guests.”

“Don't worry about it, Geoff. And let's make a deal,” - one point restored - “that we won't let any of this extra madness tonight taint our first impressions of the other, okay?” Monica squeeze Geoff's shoulder before she went off in search of his bathroom.

The bathroom was remarkably clean and tidy. Monica mused that Geoff must have another bathroom that he uses far more often instead. She splashed some water on her face as a bit of pre-gaming before the caffeine she had been promised would take effect.

Geoff was thankful to have a normal and mundane task to occupy him on what had become an unbelievable night. Beans, coffee grinder, filter, water... all perfectly uneventful while a woman he had just met was in his bathroom, and his mother and that woman's sister were being held captive. It felt quaint, being able to decide that he felt like brewing from the Kama Sumatra coffee beans. Not the Death Wish beans, obviously.

The coffee was percolating when Monica returned. She smiled at him sleepily. Could this be considered a successful date? Was it even still a date? The turn that the night's events had taken was not at all fun and whimsical, but each was still enjoying the company of the other. This in and of itself was a minor miracle, putting each of them

one miracle closer to canonization, provided dating achievements were considered. Geoff judged the coffee's progress and ascertained that he still had a few minutes. After making sure that Monica was situated at this kitchen table, he excused himself to visit the restroom.

During his absence, Monica contemplated the kitchen decor and wondered if Geoff was using a different bathroom than she had used, and if that other bathroom was messy. The intermittent drip of the coffee was soothing, probably in the same way as that meditational waterfall noise that Pamela insisted helped her sleep. She also used the time to select from the two coffee cups that had placed on the table. While predisposed to choosing the Van Gogh Starry Night cup, she had upon closer examination determined that its worn usage indicated it was probably Geoff's favorite. Thus, she had slid the other cup in front of her, in anticipation of filling the Golden Gate Bridge with coffee.

Geoff timed his return impeccably as confirmed by the coffee maker's pleasing beep. In the interest of simplicity, Monica invited Geoff to prepare her cup just as he would his own, and the resulting dash of skim milk with a green packet was remarkably close to her actual predilection.

03:21. Monica and Geoff were both halfway finished with their second cups, or to be more optimistic, halfway started. They were starting to feel a bit rejuvenated. While the exhaustion was still prevailing, the coffee had given them a reprieve, much like using toothpaste to fill holes in the walls of an apartment. It would have to do for now.

"It should take about 30 minutes to drive from here to the convention center, but we should allow more time in case they create more obstacles for us."

"I was thinking the same thing. They will not make it too easy for us." Monica agreed, just before there was a knock at the door. No, she told herself, I cannot be blamed for whatever this is.

"Son of a..." Geoff scooted back his chair and took a few steps towards his front door. "It's probably those old people. I'll use the chain." He reached the door and peered through the peephole. Monica had followed him and when he looked back at her, the expression on Geoff's face was unsettled. "Huh" was his assessment.

"Don't open it," Monica cautioned.

"It's the police, Monica."

"Maybe they are impostors. Ask for ID or credentials."

Geoff set the chain and opened the door as much as was feasible. "Can I help you?" he asked.

On some level, it was comforting that the two police officers at the door were wearing uniforms befitting the Bowdoin jurisdiction. Their uniforms also seemed to fit. The officer nearest to the door spoke first. "Sir, I am Officer Reece, and this is Officer Grayson. Are you Geoff Hayes?"

"Officers, it is very late, and I apologize for asking but can I please see some identification?"

"Yes, of course, sir. Completely understandable." Reece and Grayson put their credentials up to the door for Geoff to examine them. Monica who had remained out of view peered around to scrutinize the identification as well. "Ma'am," Reece acknowledged politely when he saw her. Detecting false police credentials was beyond the purview of both Monica and Geoff and neither was exactly certain what might indicate fraud. They exchanged a glance / shrug; the

names matched what the officers had said, and everything was spelled correctly. What more was there? Geoff raised his eyebrows at Monica, who nodded.

“Just a moment, I will remove the chain, and open the door, okay?” Geoff announced, and the officers nodded, putting their credentials away.

Geoff closed the door, removed the chain and reopened the door. The officers had not moved. Monica knew that this was the moment of truth, and prepared for the assault. She was relieved when Reece pulled out a notebook.

“We're sorry to bother you folks this late at night, but, sir, is this your Subaru here parked out front?” He gestured towards Geoff's car. Grayson stepped aside, so that Geoff, just in case he were not sure, would have an unobstructed view of his own vehicle.

“Yes, that is my Impreza. Is there a problem?” Every fiber of Geoff's being wanted him to tag his question with an “Officer,” but he resisted. He was not a conformist.

“An Impreza was clocked traveling at high speed on I-44 tonight. State troopers gave chase, but had to yield to our jurisdiction, because they could never get close enough to the vehicle to pull it over before it took the exit for Bowdoin. They believe that the suspect entered this community, and possibly your neighborhood. Your vehicle matches the description. Were you out driving earlier tonight, sir?” It was Grayson who spoke this time.

“No, I have not driven the car all night. I was in the city but we took the metro,” Geoff assured them, feeling hopeful that this misunderstanding could be cleared up quickly.

The officers exchanged a look. They seemed reluctant to believe Geoff so readily. Perhaps, they wanted it to be true. Not everyone wants to find the smoking gun, but no one wants to miss the smoking gun. Even when their own guns were cold and holstered.

Geoff tried again. "I was out for most of the night. Was someone driving my car?"

"Wait! I have my receipt from buying a new Intellicard downtown earlier. Hold on!" Monica was pleased that she could contribute and perhaps even help. She rushed off to fetch her purse.

The officers remained stone faced, providing no indication if there would be a good cop - bad cop dynamic. Geoff had a revelation as well, that he had a receipt from adding value to his card earlier that evening. Using some foresight, he announced his intention to the officers. "I may have a receipt as well. Can I check my wallet in my pocket, please?"

"Yes, sir, go ahead. Thank you for asking," Reece affirmed.

As Geoff was reaching for his wallet, Monica returned and was triumphantly bearing a receipt. She passed it to Reece, who examined it, then nodded and passed it to Grayson. The latter scanned it and looked somewhat dejected as he passed it back to Reece, who returned it to Monica. Geoff then produced his own receipt which made the same rounds and seemed to bring about the same degree of disappointment on Grayson's face.

Reece and Grayson retreated a few steps back to discuss the situation. Monica and Geoff ventured to exchange a glance, but there was no need to exchange pennies for thoughts. Both sensed a connection to the mysterious punch-serving organization.

Grayson stepped back up, while Reece remained behind. Maybe it was time for bad cop? Fortunately, it did not shake out that way. "Okay, sir, given that you have those receipts and the car is cold, we believe your story."

"Oh, good!" Geoff replied, instantly regretting any possible implication that he was too grateful for this outcome.

"The suspect was traveling so fast that they were not able to get a fix on the plates. They only knew that it was a white Impreza, like this one, and because of reciprocity agreements in place between jurisdictions, they passed the case to us. I'm afraid we only have second hand information to go by," Reece elaborated, his tone betraying palpable annoyance at the half-baked hot potato passed off to them by the state troopers. This had apparently not been the first time they had been down this road, even if it may have been the first time for Reece and Grayson to grace Geoff's street with their law enforcing presence.

Grayson signed, and added, "Besides, you live here, so you were not evading police by coming to this neighborhood. Even if that had been you driving on I-44, you would have just been driving home."

At this logic, Monica raised an eyebrow, which neither Reece nor Grayson noticed, as both had turned to leave. She thought for a moment that if these cops were on the level, perhaps she and Geoff could confide in them? "Geoff, wolves," she hissed in a very faint whisper.

Geoff shook his head, not daring to say anything, he mouthed a "no."

A dozen feet away from them, Reece stopped, and turned around. "You folks enjoy the rest of your night. We apologize for the inconvenience." He and Grayson continued on to the police cruiser. There was no spectacular Starsky and Hutch over the hood wheels

squealing departure. Both officers opened the car doors calmly and then the cruiser drove away.

03:56.

Geoff closed and bolted the door, rejoining Monica and their coffee in the kitchen. "What do you make of that? That could not have been a coincidence. How do those cops fit into everything?" He asked her as he sat and took a sip.

"I don't think they are part of the organization, but the visit was certainly connected. Those two seemed genuinely annoyed about being dumped on by the state troopers. They must be some overarching flatfoots."

"My cup is cold. Can I reheat yours too?" He collected both cups and placed them in the microwave. As it came to life, he continued his ruminations. "I agree, either the state troopers truly spotted a car that was conveniently similar to mine or the organization created the whole scenario over the police bands just to shake us up."

"Police bands have never been the same since Sting went solo. So, I guess the plan was to keep us occupied, rattle us, and hope we did something stupid?"

"Every breath you take and every move you make. Every bond you break, every step you take, I'll be watching you," Geoff recited, finishing just as the microwave finished. Its beep, while expected, startled them both.

Geoff's return of the now too hot cups to the table transpired as part of an animated comical pantomime in which he moved jerkily, wincing at the excess heat, as though walking on hot coals, but instead holding those coals in his hands. He poured more coffee from the caraffe to negate the microwave's infernal wrath. He sat,

rubbing his hands, for a moment before speaking again. "Maybe they were hoping we did ask those cops for help, or that I would get cited and or detained. It's really hard to say."

"It could have been as simple as taking away your car as an option for us to reach the convention center. What will they try next?"

"We might be best served to find somewhere in proximity of the convention center as a safer place to spend the remaining time. I have seen enough home invasion movies to know that things can go south quickly."

"Good thinking. They're not as likely to send in the straw dogs to some place like Denny's, or Waffle House, as they would be if we stayed here."

"All right, we'll finish our coffee, freshen up again and then make our way over there."

4:04. HTTP 404, 404 Not Found, 404, Page Not Found, or Server Not Found.

4:21. They realized that the clock on the microwave was in error, that it was actually 4:21 on the dashboard when Geoff started his Impreza. The wee hours of Friday night had been succeeded by the wee hours of Saturday morning. With almost no traffic, before dawn on a Saturday in October is an excellent time to run errands. One's options are fairly limited, even without a mission to rescue your sister or mother from a diabolical organization, but if you can find somewhere that is open and respectable, it probably would not be very crowded.

Geoff and Monica had decided it was best to avoid I-44 or I-17, and any possible repercussions that the scofflaw doppelgänger vehicle could cause for them, if state troopers were still looking for their

white Subaru whale. The currently nonexistent traffic on surface roads made driving the more direct but typically congested route through the city a viable option. Driving on these streets allowed them to see parts of the city that logistics often denied them; the sights and sites that they viewed anew energized them and chipped away at some of the resentment that the bustle of a sprawling metropolitan area often creates for its inhabitants. Geoff concentrated on navigation, while Monica subjected him to selections from the iTunes music stored on her phone. The juxtaposition of upbeat music and city driving reinvigorated them slightly as the effects of the coffee started to wane.

Geoff knew the city well, having spent entire Saturdays exploring throughout his 14 years as a resident. He pointed out points of interest that he had discovered over the years, or interesting facts about the various landmarks. Naturally, Monica knew some of this already, but appreciated Geoff's efforts at keeping her engaged and involved in the experience. For his part, Geoff was thankful for the accompanying soundtrack Monica was offering, and that it did not contain country music.

"Did you know that the Sterick Building was first used as a warehouse to store grain? It was not until the tornado of 1958 that ravaged part of downtown that they converted it to an office building," Geoff narrated as they passed.

"Huh, I knew about the tornado but just assumed it was always an office building."

"Employees still claim that there are traces of grain in the HVAC system."

"That sounds less than safe to breathe. Hopefully, the asbestos and lead counteract it."

“For sure, and think of the celiac ceiling vents.”

“That's not funny, Geoff. Okay, it sort of is, but probably because I am super tired and I do like wheat.”

04:57. The drive through the city had proceeded smoothly. They did not get lost. Geoff's Impreza did not run out of gas. No flat tires. They were not pulled over by police, carjacked by vigilantes, or subjected to an unwanted squeegee cleaning. Almost nothing worth mentioning, although Geoff had felt it worth describing a few other highlights that they passed along the way. He told Monica about the history of the Riverplace Tower, that it had originally been built as part of a competition between a local architect and a rival architect in the Dutch sister city. By the time the Tower was finished, the local architect's Dutch counterpart liked it so much that he built the replica windmill on the top of the Tower. Monica also found it fascinating that One Monument Square was actually a shell of a building built around another older building that still existed within it. The construction process for the structure was similar to that used by those companies who promise customers a new bathroom by just covering up the older bathtub with something new.

With the convention center in view and a few hours separating them from 8am, Monica and Geoff had a decision to make. They discarded the thought of standing at the entrance to the convention center, exposed to elements of the weather, and whether or not the organization would send another wave at them. Sitting in Geoff's car for the same length of time was only a marginal upgrade. As they had postulated earlier, lingering in one of the nearby all-night diners was the best option, on a very relative scale. Rather than turn to enter the convention center garage, Geoff continued on ahead, towards where he recalled a row of restaurants.

05:06. Geoff's swapped the key fob to his second hand to give it another squeeze as he opened the door for Monica to enter Perkins.

Satisfied with the Subaru's locked chirp, he followed her inside. Neither of them was particularly hungry or even thrilled about consuming more coffee but they planned to stretch out the experience and leave a big tip. Aside from more old people and farmers, who were probably busy with the harvest or something having to do with livestock or crops, they were not anticipating much of a crowd this early on a Saturday. And they were correct. The hostess, Emily, as her name tag identified her in name and title, stifled a yawn, before leading them to a booth, naturally in a booth right next to a group of four that was talking and munching loudly. Emily was graciously nonchalant when Geoff asked if they could sit a few booths apart from that group for more privacy. A few minutes after they had been seated, they were allotted two menus and some ice water by a young man bereft of a name tag but who assuredly was affiliated with Perkins.

Monica asked for coffee for both as an attempt to stave off their server for several minutes. Not knowing what else to call him, they decided to refer to him privately as *Perkins* just to alleviate the use of pronouns and ambiguity. Perkins demonstrated reluctant attention towards his only other customers, the noisy group of four. This act of customer disservice created a tendency for him to hover around Monica and Geoff at intervals. They finally decided to order some food in hopes that his realization that they were not merely vagabonds or graduate students occupying a booth would cause him to disappear.

To amuse themselves and make ordering more entertaining, for themselves at least, they had decided to order by reading the exact description of the entree as written in the menu rather than uttering their titles as written. The price of keeping themselves awake would cost Perkins some torment. Monica started, "Yes, could I please have a traditional favorite of two basted eggs, grilled ham and rich hollandaise, served with my choice of hash browns, breakfast potatoes or tots and a choice of fruit or Mammoth Muffin?"

“Yes, all right. I think we can do that. Would you like our Classic Eggs Benedict meal then?” Perkins asked helpfully.

“If that makes it easier, then, yes, please. I will have that, thank you.” Monica's smirk was easily visible to Geoff as she handed her menu to Perkins, who turned to Geoff expectantly.

“I would like two eggs served with a choice of hash browns, breakfast potatoes, tots or fruit and a choice of three buttermilk pancakes, a Mammoth Muffin, buttered toast or two biscuits, please,” Geoff recited.

“Hmm, you can get all that in our Twice as Nice Combo. How does that sound?” Perkins inquired helpfully.

“Well, okay. I guess that could work,” Geoff tried to sound mildly disappointed as he offered his menu to Perkins, who arranged the two menus into as proper a stack as their stickiness would allow before he hurried off.

Monica and Geoff succumbed to laughing as soon as Perkins had disappeared around the corner and was presumed out of earshot. However, the boisterous group of four likely would have prevented even the yawning Emily from hearing them.

“He did not ask either one of us what our choices were, as far as potatoes or fruit.”

“Perkins is a pro. He'll surprise us with exactly what we want. You'll see.”

Monica looked over her shoulder at their rowdy fellow customers. “What do you suppose their story is? Maybe they have been out all

night? Just passing through on their way to somewhere more interesting?"

Geoff studied them for a moment. "They could be on their way to somewhere less interesting. I don't imagine they are also waiting for the convention center to open so they can collect abducted relatives."

"Probably not." Monica leaned in closer, and lowered her voice. "We're so close to the convention center? Could they be part of the organization sent to keep tabs on us?"

"Maybe, but I don't think so. They have barely looked over here the entire time we have been sitting."

"Could it be that they are just that good? Maybe they are one of many teams sent to stake out all of the establishments in the immediate vicinity of the convention center."

"And you accused me of watching too many movies, Monica! Maybe the organization is done messing with us and we'll just go over there at 8, collect your sister, my mom, and go home. And that'll be that."

"It seems too easy. As much effort as it took to organize this, and then they would just coast. I don't know, Geoff. I expect more."

Monica fell silent as Perkins approached with some food. This proved to be a false alarm as he continued past them to the table of four. "One of them was probably still hungry and ordered an Egg McGuffin," Geoff remarked.

Monica sipped some of her coffee. "You may have a point. They could be just annoying regular people. Also, your coffee was much better than this."

“Thanks, I take my home brewing very seriously. Okay, you're right that we should not be complacent. I'm sure the organization has been watching us and still is somehow. Not a special secret camera on Perkins' name tag, but somehow.”

“Maybe the card itself is a clue. *Only wolves get hurt*. We have not exactly been daring and rocking the boat. As much as I hate to admit it, we have been much closer to sheep than wolves tonight, Geoff.”

“This close to sheep but never sleeping. The squeaky wheel gets the turmoil. I don't know, maybe... However, that would be impressive forethought for a cryptic business card to leave in some clothing.”

They alternated trips to the restrooms to wash the lingering menu viscosity from their hands. Geoff had just taken a seat upon returning from his shift when Perkins reappeared with their food order. This, of course, would have been the worst possible time for the rambunctious group of four to leave, and they seized this opportunity. As they filed out and mobbed past him, Perkins was forced to weave and dodge under the weight of the huge and cumbersome tray. Even though the tray was an oval shape and not ovular, the gestated meals were delivered to the table without incident. Monica and Geoff discovered that the choices they had neglected to refine were decided for them in the most diplomatic manner. Each had a small amount of each variety of potato, fruit, other bread items, and half of a Mammoth Muffin. Upon closer inspection, it was not even two halves of the same muffin.

Perkins did not even wait the requisite awkward 30 seconds to ask his follow-up question. “And how is everything?”

“Everything looks great. Thank you, Perkins.” Geoff said the word before he could stop himself. Perkins did not notice, nor did he seem concerned about Monica's sudden fit of laughter.

“Let me know if you folks need anything.” Perkins took the tray and quickly cleared the evidence left behind by the unruly quartet.

“He was not even phased when you called him Perkins.”

“I think maybe he thought I was thanking Perkins, the restaurant?”

“That’s weird, but it does make sense.” Monica bowed her head solemnly. “Thank you, Perkins.” She lifted her coffee cup, a tribute mug to Lloyd Bridges, that was an interesting link to the Golden Gate Bridge from earlier. Better than Nash Bridges. Responding to her respectful toast. Geoff raised his cup, a print of Van Gogh’s Café Terrace at Night, and clinked it with Monica’s outstretched cup. Whether or not his was a downgrade from his Starry Night mug at home was purely subjective, but it made for a better toast than the toast on his plate.

They poked at their food, each only taking rare bites. Perkins was pleasantly attentive, refilling their coffee, and maintaining a constant flow to their ice water, which they appreciated as a reverse chaser. Monica had discovered that she liked the tots most of all; Geoff, instead, was tastefully smitten with the hash browns. Swapping potato variations gave each an embarrassment of riches that could still not tempt their absent appetites. If Perkins was aware that they had violated the strict No sharing policy, he did not call attention to the transgression.

“What are your plans for the rest of the weekend?” Geoff asked, fighting the increasingly powerful temptation to play with his food.

“Oh, you know, this and that. Sleep. All of the adult type stuff that I never feel like doing, or never have time to do, during the week. I am supposed to go out with some girlfriends tonight, but I think I will cancel on them. I need to sleep. What about you?” Monica had not built anything with her beloved tots, but had been studying the

inner cross-section of her Mammoth Muffin, trying to determine its age, as though it were a Giant Sequoia.

“Much the same. Sleep is definitely becoming more a priority. I had thought about seeing what some friends were up to, but most likely, I will not reach out. I expect my mom will stay with me for a day or two, while she is in town.”

“Ah, yes. Hopefully, the organization did spare her at least the outbound expense of the trip from Texarkana. It would be like a half free trip. It's funny that I'll be meeting your mom soon, and you my sister. First date faux pas.”

“Well, look at it this way. There will not be all of those normal pressures, just the pressure of saving their lives and all, but they are not going to be quite so judgy having spent hours with duct tape over their faces.”

“I think they were gagged, not taped, but point taken. It will be a low-key, high-pressure first meeting.”

“You're right about the gags, now that I think about it. You got me thinking though. Were the creators of duct tape really concerned with ductwork, or were they in the abduction supply business all along?”

“Ha, Geoff, very nice. I know I gave you a hard time about movies, but this whole experience tonight seems like the Liam Neeson version of Before Sunrise. I would be Milla Jovovich, I guess.”

“Great comparison, although I think I would be closer to Gavin Newsom,” Geoff decided, laughing.

“Remind me who he is?” Monica asked, even though the name sounded familiar.

“Exactly. Anyhow, we are much more obnoxious than those characters, but all they did was take a train. We have done that and more.”

“Oh, we are absolutely insufferable compared to those two! It has been a very eventful night and morning to say the least. In spite of it all, I had fun, Geoff. Kind of surreal, isn't it?”

“Definitely, Monica. This has been an experience, and I have enjoyed it too. This is certainly not like the bad dates that Sallah warned Indiana Jones to avoid.” Geoff was pleased that Monica smiled at his obscure reference.

“You reached pretty deep for that one. You do not monkey around.”

“Not to put you on the spot, Monica, but I really want to see you again. Provided we save my mom and your sister, of course.”

“Yes, me too, Geoff. I would like that. Well, all of the above, I mean.”

“What you were saying earlier has me thinking. Just sitting here for a few hours, and having nothing happen. Is the organization building tension, or messing with us?”

Monica had leaned over to the side and was investigating their booth. When she sat back up, she satisfied Geoff's curiosity without him having to ask. “Sorry, I was feeling around on the seat cushion here and something felt funny on this one side, but it's probably nothing. It's just too much padding in this part.”

As they sat and idled more time away, other customers came and went and the restaurant started to show signs of life. Perkins announced that his shift would be ending soon so they settled up with him before they were ready to go, ensuring him a plentiful tip.

According to the receipt, his actual name was Liam, which they considered an auspicious sign.

07:32. Geoff and Monica had driven back to the convention center, parked and were approaching the main entrance. Their departure from Perkins had not piqued any apparent interest from the staff or fellow customers. The Subaru revealed no signs of tampering, and the drive was unremarkable. While it was still early, the convention center showed signs of life, and they hoped to keep that streak alive. The marquee indicated that IMEX America was to start on Monday, but pre-event activities and registration were available as of that morning. To the pleasure of Monica and Geoff, the doors at the main entrance were open and accessible.

No one was sitting at the information desk. All of the people they could see were milling around the meeting rooms and ballrooms that were emblazoned with IMEX America banners. No one paid Geoff or Monica any attention but they still felt that someone was tracking their progress.

“There is Suite A. D must be close by,” Monica gestured to the giant A above a nearby door.

“Probably down that way then. Be prepared for them to run another interference.”

Suite B. The Magnolia Suite. The Overture Suite. Suite C. The Holberg Suite. The Planets Suite. They reached the end of the main corridor. There were no more suites. Where was Suite D?

“Are they messing with us again, Monica? Maybe there is no Suite D.” Geoff’s stomach suddenly became queasy, and not in the overwrought excessive coffee and hash browns sense.

"I knew it was too easy!" Monica was spinning around, looking for a suite they may have missed. Also her head was spinning, which was not particularly helpful.

A likely convention center staff member emerged from the Holberg Suite, locked the door behind him, and headed towards the main entrance. "Let's ask this guy!" Monica pulled Geoff along with her. "Excuse me, sir. Are these all of the Suites?"

The staff member turned. He gazed at them in momentary bewilderment as though he had been briefly catatonic. He collected himself. "Can I help you?"

"We're looking for Suite D, but we cannot find it. Could you tell us where it is?"

"Suite D? Well, I'm sorry but you will not find a Suite D here." He was either genuinely apologetic or just very good at customer service.

"Wait, what? You mean there is no Suite D?!" Monica and Geoff spoke almost the same words simultaneously.

"Oh, no, forgive my dramatic poor choice of words. There is a Suite D, but it's just in the South Corridor. You are in the East Corridor. Just take a right after that fountain, and you'll see it."

The immense relief nearly put them at a loss for words. Monica managed to eke out a feeble "thank you."

"Can I help you folks with anything else?" The staff member offered.

"No, thank you, that was all. You've been a great help!" Geoff shook the fellow's hand quickly before he was dragged by Monica in the direction of the East Corridor.

07:47. Suite D. They found it as described, and as promised. Was this the end? Monica and Geoff looked at each other, as they stood outside the Suite D door, not knowing what they might encounter on the other side. What final surprise awaited them behind the door? Alligators, lasers, a hall of mirrors, a floor of lava, robots, rabid dobermans, piranhas, mummies...

"We're here. Finally. What do you say, Monica? Let's just get this over with and see what happens."

"Yes, this won't be like one of your movies where we would be racing for the door, just as the second hand strikes the hour. Hopefully, they will not take points away because we are early." Monica squeezed Geoff's hand as she opened the door to Suite D.

And the door was not locked. It opened like doors do. They entered Suite D. The lights were already on. There had been no indicative click that opening the door had triggered a sinister Rube Goldberg device. There was to be no harrowing finish. No drawbridge falling into place just in the nick of time, no collapsing walls, nor spikes extending from the floor and ceiling. It was just a conference center room, with rows of padded chairs and additional stacks of them on the side. There was not even a large LED clock counting down to 8am. In fact, the room had no generic clock on any of its walls. At the opposite end of the room sat Geoff's mother and Monica's sister. They were indeed gagged, but duct tape had been used to affix them to their chairs. The eyes of both women betrayed their relief and joy at seeing Monica and Geoff, who rushed over to them.

Monica attended to Pamela, removing the gag from her mouth, while Geoff gave his mother the same treatment. Both women looked exhausted and unkempt but they insisted that they were otherwise okay. "We just want to go home," they said in unison. The duct tape was just as resilient, but less prepared to leave.

“Monica, I don't suppose you have any scissors in your purse. This is not the 1950s so I do not carry a pocket knife.”

“Sorry, Geoff, I don't. It's fortunate that we did not have to cut some distinctively colored wires to thwart the doomsday explosion.”

“Ooh, yes, that could have been bad. It is always the navy blue wire, never the black one.”

“Let me go see if the IMEX people have anything we can use.”
Monica went off to search for something sharp, leaving Geoff to entertain a captive audience.

* * *

It was Saturday again, of the following weekend. Monica and Geoff had since slept, a lot, and Geoff's mother had returned to Texarkana just that morning. Pamela had been miffed that her South American trip had been truncated, but shrugged off the few belongings she had no choice but to leave behind when she was taken. Her things were lost forever in Argentina, which she had decided to visit earlier than planned because she had determined that Peru was lame. Monica had been amazed at Pamela's indifference about being plucked from another continent without her stuff, but Pamela had the assurance that her traveler's insurance would reimburse her. Geoff's mother had little to say about the experience, but was grateful for the unexpected visit with her son. She had been treated humanely, even kindly, and truly only remembered going to sleep, being in a van, and then spending hours duct taped to a chair. In sum, this was only marginally worse than Geoff's experience flying to New Zealand. Monica and Geoff had maintained in contact, even taking Geoff's mother out for dinner one night. Finally, a week later, after the dust had settled and the smoke had cleared, the stars

aligned along with their schedules and here they were, at the coffee shop where Pamela worked.

Pamela was adamant about treating them to their drinks. Whether the free percolation was a perk of her employee discount or rather a discreet bit of charity from management, Geoff and Monica did not know. They had just obtained their beverages, and a behemoth muffin that they did not really want but that Pamela had foisted upon them. The coffee shop was mostly empty, with just a few wi-fi leeches squatting in the far corners.

Geoff situated the muffin's plate at an equal distance between them, where it seemed destined to sit like a muffin abandoned at the 38th Parallel. "It's very nice to see you again, Monica. My mom said to tell you hello."

"You too, Geoff. I've been looking forward to this. Did Gwen make it back okay?"

"She did. Actually, she just called me before I left the house to come here. She likes you," Geoff added, trying to gauge Monica's reaction.

"She is a fun lady. I'm glad that she recovered and was not traumatized or anything," Monica said, sipping at her coffee.

"And Pamela? I don't really know her, but she seems okay?" Geoff spoke more softly as he looked up at the counter, where Pamela was playing with her new phone, an upgrade of the one that had been forsaken somewhere in Cordoba.

"Eh, she's okay. No more or less scattered than normal. Already planning her next trip to the Faroe Islands. I think she'll be fine."

“Okay, good. I'm glad that she did not press us to file a police report or something. My mom also seemed satisfied with the story that it was some kind of prank. Not a lie, entirely.”

“Yeah, I think we're good. So, Geoff, where do we go from here? Your mom likes me, I like you. And I am hoping you like me enough to try some more conventional dating.”

“I do like you, Monica, and as long as conventional dating excludes the convention center, I'm all for it,” Geoff finished, laughing. Monica rolled her eyes, but joined him in his contagious laughter.

“You're not all that funny even when I am awake. Just teasing, Geoff.” Monica took a long sip from her cup, and played with the muffin plate, shifting it imperceptibly, only to a certain degree, probably the 127th, but still within the demilitarized zone. Something was on her mind.

When she finally spoke, her voice was grave. “Geoff, before we go any further, I need to be honest with you about something. I want us to start off in complete trust.” She paused and looked him in the eyes before continuing. His complete attention was hers. “Part of last Friday night was not an accident. I mean, it was not all by chance. I was told to respond to you on the dating app and agree to go out with you. Then I had instructions to lead you to the second hand store after dinner and convince you to buy clothes. You see, it was...”

“Ransomware,” Geoff interjected. “Someone put a lock on all of my accounts and told me to contact you on the app. They directed me to take you to The Tilted Pheasant, and then agree to whatever you suggested. They were implicit that I not tell you about the situation with my accounts.”

“Oh my God, you too?!” Monica exclaimed, more loudly than she intended. Some of the wi-fi leeches glared at her. At the counter, Pamela seemed not to have notice the outburst. Monica lowered her volume. “They had all of my accounts too, and same deal. They threatened that If I told you about the ransomware, they would empty out my accounts. I don't know if it started from that stupid app, or something else I did.”

“The internet is a dirty and dangerous place. Built on blood and gore, and Gore's blood, sweat and tears. So they told you that they would free up your accounts after Friday night? And did they?”

“Yes, they did. Geoff, I swear to you that everything after the bar, the business card” - she lowered her voice another decibel, but the octave remained constant - “Gwen and Pam getting abducted, that was all a shock to me.”

“I believe you. Same for me, I only knew the restaurant and that I was to follow your lead. I have control of my accounts again too. Well, minus that \$200. Like you said, everything after dinner was a surprise to me.”

“Okay, thank God. I have been feeling so guilty about getting you involved in all of that, Geoff.”

“Me too, Monica. I was just about to tell you actually.”

“Mmm-hmm, sure you were, Geoff,” Monica looked at him skeptically, but then laughed, and squeezed his hand. “Just kidding. I do believe you.”

“I've been thinking about this all week. The organization had to have targeted us with the ransomware, and then the rest. Pamela and my mom.”

“That was my guess, too. Why us? And then, they did not make it all very difficult in the end. The whole thing was pretty anti-climactic, don't you think? Not that I am complaining.”

“No, you're right. I guess even mysterious organizations run out of inspiration, or it was getting late and they all wanted to sleep too, who knows?”

“Some great scheme and masterplan! It's hard to believe that the author of something like this would just get tired of throwing stuff at us and want to move onto something else. I'm okay with that though.”

“It's definitely odd, but I am not going to question it either. These things can only go on for so long. As I see it, my mom and Pamela are okay, our accounts are ours, and out of this whole experience, I got to meet you.”

“Absolutely. We have quite the origin story. Well, one that we cannot tell anyone, but still.”

“We'll just say that we met online. That's the capsule version.”

Pamela appeared at the table. “Are you two doing okay? You did not try the muffin!” She was partially disappointed, as though she had baked it herself.

“We're fine, Pam,” Monica told her, but did not take her eyes off of Geoff. “We're going to be just fine.”

The arrival of other customers beckoned Pamela back to the counter. Monica and Geoff talked about less pressing matters until they had finished their coffee. To avoid offending Pamela, they each pulled off a few bites of the muffin, which was as delicious as she had attested.

Geoff discarded the cups and the muffin stump and rejoined Monica at their table. "Monica, would you like to join me now for a proper date?" He asked as he stood, holding his hand out to her.

"Geoff, I would love that. Thank you." She stood and took his hand in her own. They exited the coffee shop, each with a second hand clasping their own.

Having watched them leave, Pamela made a quick call on her new phone. "You told me to tell you if they confided in each other, and they just did. We had a deal, right? I gave you two candidates and you cancelled all of my debts. I can't help it if they were honest with each other now." She listened to the voice on the other line, frowning and nodding. "What?! But I told you that Monica was on that dating app. I took a few weeks off of work and stayed at a crappy motel, while you worked out my 'abduction.' You cannot keep me on the hook forever. I did my part! I should be free and clear." More listening and nodding. "Okay, I will keep you informed on what Monica tells me, but I'm not the target anymore, right? She and Geoff are the ones who broke the rules. I never did."

The coffee house door opened and Pamela smiled at the new customers. "Listen, I have to go. I'm at work. Just let me know what I have to do. Okay. Bye." She ended the call and placed her phone behind the counter. She turned to the customers, two elderly women and an old man in a wheelchair, and greeted them. "Hello. So what can I get for you folks?"

Copyright 2020 by Todd Maupin

