

# The Game Show Support Network

*by* Todd Maupin

Week One:

Jerry smoothed out his suit. No wrinkles. He wished he could claim the same for his squared jaw. However, his teeth still sparkled as much as his cufflinks.

He performed a quick scan around the room, top to bottom, corners to curves, no lights on the blink, only the appropriate blinking ones. The snacks - with a sell-by date of the following week (he had scrutinized them all carefully) - were all arranged in a pleasing alignment on the table. A double stack of napkins sat next to them. Finally, he checked the coffee maker and confirmed that it was percolating. All of the accoutrements were in place; the meeting could begin. All that was missing now were the members of the group. They had been assembling for several weeks now, and had reached a common ground.

Twenty minutes later, everyone had arrived, chatted for a bit while they served themselves refreshments and had taken their seats. Jerry called everyone to order. He had a welcoming presence that won their attention easily.

"Okay, everyone. Let's get started. I have nothing new to tell you this time. As always, I will just listen and be your guide. Who wants to start us off tonight?" Jerry's voice exuded warmth and camaraderie. It gave the sense that, no matter how things had gone, win or lose, right or wrong, he was on your side. Even his crisp diction enhanced his engaging nature.

"I'll start. This week has been..." the woman had barely started when Jerry held up a hand, motioning for her to stop.

"Tammy, please, follow the structure. Even though we all know each other, I want our group to follow the rules and structure, please," Jerry invited her to continue, offering a winning smile to punctuate his request.

"Very well, Jerry. Sorry. Hi, everyone, my name is Tammy," Tammy said, doing her best to sound convincing.

"Hi Tammy!" Came the off-key singsong reply from the group. Intended or not, the acoustics in the room complemented the discussion format.

Tammy took a deep breath and continued. "As I was saying, this week has been difficult. First off, the buzzer in my building is broken most of the time, so instead of just buzzing to be let in, I have to tap loudly on the glass until the doorman sees me and opens the door. And they increased the rates in the coin-op laundry that I use. Now an extra spin to remove the damp from my clothes will cost me even more than before. I went with a friend to see that new movie Anchorman, thinking that a comedy might be a nice escape, but one of the characters says Whammy! as his catch-phrase. So, between the buzzing, the spinning and the constant Whammy! on screen, all of the memories came flooding back. Now, all I can think about is how I was about to win the day and had a huge lead in the second Big Board round when I hit that smirking Whammy and lost it all. I can still see the stupid poorly animated thing dancing around while I lost everything!" Tammy burst into tears, and Joy, who was sitting next to her, moved to console her.

Jerry looked around to see if anyone else would volunteer to speak. Most were looking at their hands. Everyone had heard this type of outburst from Tammy before. Granted, this week's triggers

had been more specific, but *everything* reminded her of her experience. A month earlier, hearing the Spin Doctors on the radio had been cataclysmic for her.

"Tammy, and I think this is the same for everyone, just try to remember that you were no worse off coming away from the show without the big prize. In fact, you walked away with a once in a lifetime experience," Jerry said, optimistically, distributing his charismatic smile to all corners of the room. There were some nods among the group, and a few of them slumped less in their chairs. This was what Jerry always said when he did not know what else to say. But it was true.

There were some assenting murmurs and even Tammy seemed to have regained composure. Joy scooted back to her original position, the felt pads on her chair preventing any grating screech on the floor. "Okay, who is next?" Jerry stood and beckoned, pacing a little but never facing away from the group.

"Hi everyone, my name is Alex," the titular Alex stated and paused for the Pavlovian response, before he continued. "I've been okay. Every week is easier. Naturally, I don't watch the show or try to think about it. My nephew wanted to play Tic Tac Toe last weekend, and we played several games. I let him win - he is only 4 - for the most part, until he said something silly that reminded me of some idiotic bluff that Bruce Vilanch had made during my episode. Then I became a little bit cutthroat and stopped letting him win. My nephew, I mean. His name is Doug, not Bruce. After a while, I could tell he was getting frustrated and about to cry, so I snapped out of it, and let him win again. Then we had some cookies," Alex finished with a bite of a cookie he had taken from the refreshments table.

"Thank you, Alex. I think you demonstrated excellent growth. Doesn't everyone agree?" Jerry was beaming and his enthusiasm was almost contagious, but not quite. The half nods and slow claps

were typically underwhelming. Before Jerry could prompt the next person, Tim was already speaking.

"Hi, everyone, my name is Tim."

"Hi, Tim!"

"I was watching Regis and Kelly argue about Mark Consuelos take the kids to a parade without mittens. Regis went off on some rant about how Notre Dame was disrespected in the polls again this week. I did not see the connection, but the not knowing got me thinking about how I asked the audience and they were split on the answers I already thought were correct," Tim looked around expectantly, awaiting an overpowering of empathy.

"Were the kids' hands okay?" Susan asked, demonstrating the concern that Tim would have liked applied towards him.

"I don't know. Regis said they dropped too many passes against Michigan," Tim shrugged, feeling a little dejected that no one had been moved by what he had shared.

"Thank you, Tim," Jerry intervened. He grinned, his teeth gleaming, "Susan, would you like to go next?"

"Okay. Hi, everyone. It's Susan."

"Hi Susan!" Tim's contribution to the chorus was done with a layer of pouting.

"This week, I did okay. We had an office party and they were playing that song "What is love?" by Haddaway. Maybe it won't hurt me as much next time. I don't know. I held it together and did not even cry after I was home. It still bothers me that I was excited to know the Daily Double answer that I shouted out "The first

amendment!" without phrasing it as a question. My right to free speech was censored by those persnickety judges. It cost me my lead," Susan's lip quivered, but she retained her bearing.

"Who is next?" Jerry looked around the room. He and Peter made eye contact. For Peter, resistance was futile.

"Hi, everyone. My name is Peter."

"Hi, Peter!"

"I'm fine, I honestly did not think about it until just now, and I want to bury my head like an ostrich again. I still think I was robbed. Only the 'H' was missing so when I solved the puzzle, I was ready to shake Pat's hand, but then he told me that 'So long and thanks for all the fist' was not correct! I ask you all, isn't that something someone would say as a farewell, after a fight?" Peter looked around accusingly. No one dared to answer him.

"But if there was already a 't' for 'thanks,' then wouldn't there have been a 't' for 'fist' too?" Tammy uttered the question that had to be expressed, if not each week, then at minimum once per month.

Peter stewed in his chair. "It doesn't mean I was wrong," he muttered.

Jerry's lean forward was almost a glide. "Joy, you've been quiet. How about you?" The air filled with a sense of dread. If ever there was anyone who should not have been named Joy, it was Joy.

"Hi all, my name is Joy."

"Hi, Joy!"

"I have been volunteering at the local elementary school, as a class helper. The students have been drawing this week," she paused, and although she noticed that everyone shuddered, she continued. "It has been all right, though, I help them, and give them suggestions. Just simple stuff, like the correct number of legs and arms that animal or people should have. And they are receptive, they understand, not like when no one on my team could connect that me pointing at the woman I had drawn and Vicki was a reference to her other show, Mama's Family, and that I had drawn a mother. And a cupboard. Old Mother Hubbard! How more obvious could that be?!" Joy was suddenly defiant.

"You could have drawn Battlefield Earth for the Hubbard, maybe?" Peter ventured.

"I guess," Joy replied, not looking at all satisfied.

"Peter, are you a dork or a Scientologist?" Ben asked.

Jerry would have pounded a gavel if he had one, or a crab mallet, but he has not a judge, nor were they in Maryland. He still used a firm yet tolerant voice, that still managed to be jovial. "Ben, please. This is a safe space. Peter can be both. Joy, please continue."

And she did. "Anyhow, the kids are doing well. Sometimes, I have to step in when they fight over the color pencils. And I do all of the sharpening. That is just too dangerous for kids. That is where I draw the line." Peter was smirking and started to open his mouth again, but Marcie stepped in.

"I'll go. Hi, everyone! It's Marcie."

"Hi, Marcie!"

"This week, I found some kittens in the backseat of my car. I had left the windows down in my car, because it was in the garage. Well, truthfully, the windows will not roll up. It has been a lemon ever since I won it at 'Any Number.' Of course, I lost at the Big Wheel and did not qualify for the Showcase Showdown. Anyhow, the car cost me a few thousand in registration, insurance and delivery and then the windows stopped working a few weeks after I brought it home. It's not so bad in California. So, some cat had kittens in my car. This is a clear sign that people are neglecting to have their pets spayed and neutered. Would anyone like a kitten? There are 6 of them. I have photos I can show. They are super cute," Marcie said, finally gushing, as she reached for her purse.

"That is wonderful, Marcie!" Jerry clasped his hands together gleefully like Mr. Rogers. "Who wants to go next? Scott?"

"Yes. Hi, all, I am Scott."

"Hi, Scott!"

"I did my food shopping at Vons this week. As you know, I have been banned from Ralphs for giving people advice on how to shop. I am still fighting with corporate on that. Why wouldn't they want a free consultant helping customers shop more efficiently? Apparently, it does not matter if you were a runner-up on Supermarket Sweep or not when customers file complaints about you. Anyway, not too many people go to my local Vons so my expertise is only benefitting myself. I have been leaving them anonymous comment cards on how to improve the store but I have yet to see any changes yet. I might have to talk to the manager before any change happens. All they seem to care about is that their cashiers can make change." Scott was wistful that his proven potential was so blatantly disregarded by the masses.

"I hope Vons is more accepting, Scott," Meg volunteered, then looked around and decided to take her turn. "Hi, I am Meg."

"Hi, Meg!"

"I was in the mall this week - Palisades - and someone approached me to fill out a survey. I don't mind telling you that I answered it, not really how I felt personally, but by choosing what I knew were the most popular answers. Without my family or that Richard to hold me back, I am sure that I gave the best answers faster than anyone else who had taken that survey," Meg stated, proudly.

"What was the survey about?" Tim asked.

"Oh, I think it was something about inequality. Who can remember?" Meg did not seem concerned.

"Hmm, not a good answer at all," Tim frowned. Meg opened her mouth to respond, but Jerry interjected, in his winsome way.

"Ben, I think you're the last one. Are you ready?"

Ben nodded and cleared his throat. "Hello, folks. Ben here."

"Hi, Ben!"

"So, Jimmy Kimmel still will not return my calls. I thought we really bonded during commercial breaks, and now that he has his own show, I thought he might have me on just as an everyman guest. The audience seemed to respond to me, even though Ben Stein never did. I think he disliked me on principle because we have the same first name. I was respectful and deferred to him too, but he was just rude. Did you guys feel that, that the host had it in for you from the start? Anyone, anyone?" Ben scanned the room, but none of the others took the bait.



Jerry looked at the clock, and then his watch. "We have another 15 minutes before the next group comes in. We can talk a bit more but I'll need to stop in 10 minutes to clean up the snack area. Who wants to be my helper today?" Jerry's guilt trips were always effective. His half frown invoked sincerity and compassion. That someone would volunteer, there was no doubt.

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Week Two:

Jerry had been a little late in setting things up, but it was not his fault. The group that had the room beforehand was supposed to be out 30 minutes prior, but they ran over. Jerry did not know the subject for that group, but seeing some of the members file out, he decided to sanitize the chairs and snack station more thoroughly than usual. Thankfully, the week-to-week logistics were not very time consuming.

They waited until ten minutes past to start before deciding to go ahead without Scott. It was unlike him to miss a meeting.

"I guess we will get away Scott-free tonight?" Tim asked, eliciting a groan.

"How long have you been waiting to use that one?" Marcie asked.

"I just thought of it, I swear," Tim smirked, fooling no one, somehow impressing fewer people than that.

The week had been mostly uneventful for everyone, which could be as much attributable to a lack of stimuli as anything else, but it was still progress. Peter's brother was getting married next month and Peter had been helping him write his vows. Everyone knew he meant vows, but Jerry had been able to attract the group's attention

and employ some deft body language to detract anyone from correcting Peter. Meg shared that she was going to a family reunion in a few weeks. They were still trying to decide on a venue because no one could agree but they were running out of time. Alex appeared about to point out the irony when Jerry cleared his throat and asked Tammy to share. She reported that she had dropped off some pants to be pressed, but seemed to be handling it well.

By the time they finished, no one had thought much about Scott's absence until Ben helped Jerry stack the cold chair on top of its lukewarm counterparts.

"He was probably food shopping. He will be back next week, Jerry," Ben said hopefully, putting his hand on Jerry's shoulder. Jerry nodded appreciatively an endearing grin.

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Week Three:

Still no Scott, and Joy was missing too. Tim tried for the encore that no one wanted. "We are in for a joyless evening, I see."

Marcie seemed to be in more of a playful mood than a week earlier. "If only our Almond Joy came in a fun size," she quipped, but then felt guilty. "I'm sorry, Jerry."

"It's okay, Marcie. After Tim, the bar is pretty low," Jerry replied, his smile glimmering.

And so they started, at 80% capacity. Susan had gone to San Diego over the weekend and had spent some time in Tijuana. She and her husband were shopping and became thirsty. Knowing that the water was not safe, they sought out a market to buy some bottled water. The "Potent Potables" establishment they found turned out to be one of those watering holes that was actually a bar.

Susan's story trailed off at that point, as neither she nor her husband remembered much after that, until the following morning. In addition to slight headaches, each felt a little sore due to tattoos, their parting gifts from Mexico.

"At least you avoided Montezuma's revenge," Alex observed helpfully.

Meg was confused and looked at him quizzically. "What is Montezuma's revenge, Alex?"

Tim guffawed, and Susan glared at him rather than Meg, who probably did not know any better. Jerry's poise was unblemished when he asked if anyone else had anything to say.

They all sat awkwardly until Alex spoke up again. Out of necessity, he had tried to visit the Exxon station for the first time in years. He was very nearly out of fuel, and pulled in, only to have someone in an Audi shark the pump he wanted. Some rich jerk flaunting all of those O's in the logo at the Exxon station! Rather than berate the driver, Alex had taken a deep breath and driven across the street and down half a mile to the Texaco station, and paid two cents more per gallon. No one pointed out that Texaco had both an 'x' and an 'o' in its name. Joy might have, had she been there.

His cheerful demeanor notwithstanding during the meeting, Jerry, after everyone had gone, and for the benefit of no one, exhibited a forlorn gaze as he dumped out more excess coffee than normal, and bagged up the extra snacks for the following week.

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Week Four:

Scott and Joy were again absent, but the remaining eight and Jerry assembled. The mood in the room was noticeably grim and soured by two empty chairs.

Strangely, Jerry did not prod the group for someone to start. Instead, he sparked the group by speaking up right away.

"I have something to share," he announced, holding up newspaper clippings. "I found some stories in the Times that caught my eye. Just over two weeks ago, someone drove a delivery truck into a storefront, the Safeway on Van Nuys. It was one of those episodes when the driver was not paying attention, and gears slipped. Anyway, one person was killed, a Scott Pembleton, a Glendale resident. He was pinned behind his shopping cart, and passed before they could free him. It was double coupon day and he had a handful clutched in his hand. His cart was full of loss leaders."

There was a collective gasp from the others. Group policy dictated no last names, but it was certainly their Scott. "That's just terrible, Jerry," Tammy remarked.

Marcie appeared on the verge of tears. "That is utterly horrible," she said, rubbing her sleeve against her eyes preemptively.

Jerry braced them, and himself, for more news that his invigorating smile would not salvage. "There is more, I'm afraid." Everyone looked terrified, but he resolved to continue, and read from the other newspaper clipping. "A Culver City woman, Joy Hernandez, drew the short straw in life and was killed when a Smartboard fell onto her from a crane that had been transporting it to the ninth floor of an office building." He stopped reading, but added, "there is no photo of her, but the chalk outline does not even look like the drawing of a person."

"What is a Smartboard?" Susan asked. There was a longer pause than necessary before anyone responded, as they were unsure if she was truly posing a question.

"Basically, it is a super expensive electronic interactive screen that functions like a chalkboard but mostly is just used as a standard computer monitor," Jerry explained.

"What an awful thing!" Marcie shrieked, her piercing tone was like fingernails on a Smartboard, and Tammy rushed to comfort her, assuming that Marcie was referring to Joy's death and not the Smartboard, which was admittedly objectionable.

"I'm sorry to be the messenger, but I thought all of you should know," Jerry said. His smile was there and a source of comfort, but he looked troubled. The lines on his forehead seemed deeper, like grooves on a 12 inch vinyl LP. "We can stop early this week, or just try to share our fondest memories of Joy and Scott."

Everyone nodded, but they mostly just sat in somber silence until it was time to clean up.

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Week Five:

Jerry's bravado seemed more like over compensation, rendering the group more out of sorts than even the week prior, and when Tim did not arrive, everyone understood why. Jerry had another newspaper clipping.

Marcie moved to sit beside him and put her hand on Jerry's knee to give him support and courage. Jerry's was ruefully charming as he placed his hand on top of Marcie's briefly before he held the newspaper clipping with both hands and started to read. "Timothy Kim, of Santa Monica, was found by the highway patrol, after a

friend had called 9-1-1, following a disturbing call from Mr. Kim. Investigators believe that Kim lost control of his vehicle, crashed and phoned a friend, who was unable to help him. By the time police had located Kim and called in the EMS, the 50/50 chance of survival could not be met."

"Do they know why Tim lost control?" Peter asked.

Jerry shook his head negatively. "It just says that the police will continue to interview people who witnessed the crash, and in the search for answers, each question becomes more valuable."

Alex stood up and started pacing. "Is anyone else sensing a pattern here? Maybe I am a little paranoid, but three of us, in almost as many weeks, right in a row, all just X'd out."

"Oh, I don't know. Their deaths have been shocking, yes, and I do not mean to be morbid... However, I am sure that if you asked 100 people how they expected to die, very few would say anything like this," Meg noted, trying to be reassuring.

Ben attempted to change the subject. "Have any of you watched any of these new reality tv shows? The people on them are so stupid. I yell at the screen... I could do so much better." Ben's heart was in the right place, but no one felt like talking. Jerry looked unusually apprehensive. Ben's words had not soothed him at all. Their reality was bleak enough, but still better than reality tv. They decided to stop early. If only reality tv would have stopped too.

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Week Six:

The chair normally occupied by Ben sat empty. It joined the chairs left vacant by Tim, Joy and Scott. The remaining six, and Jerry, were on edge, flinching at sudden sounds. The tension was not at all

placated when Jerry produced another newspaper clipping. Were his hands shaking or was it just his dapper almost reflectively shimmering pinstripe suit? Everyone knew what he was about to tell them. Their desire to know and not know could be summed up in one of those Damocles' sword metaphors that people use when they want to seem more intellectual, like the overuse of Latin, but *cui bono*? Jerry contained the lump in his throat, sequestering it from his thoughts as though the lump sat alone in a boggy marsh.

"Ben Peebles, of El Segundo, was discovered Tuesday morning behind Le Brea Plaza on Sepulveda Boulevard. He was holding a box containing only a single \$1 bill. Near him, the rear service entrances to three of the plaza's businesses had been patient with the numbers 1, 2, and 3. Peebles was reaching towards door #2 with his outstretched left arm, while his right arm clutched the box. His cause of death remains unknown," Jerry recited grimly. He lowered the clipping and made eye contact with the group.

Alex's intention to avoid an "I told you so" tone was only marginally successful. "Will everyone not admit that something is happening here?! How many more of us do we need to lose before we can all recognize that we are all in danger?"

Meg and Tammy both started to speak at once, as sometimes happens in group settings. They both stopped talking, but when the other did not continue, each decided to start again, only to encounter the same overlapping logjam. It was the awkward vocal equivalent of the clumsy dance of meeting someone in a tight hallway. Eventually, Meg ceased speaking, conceding the round to Tammy. Did the best woman win? Tammy's astute assessment of Ben's demise was succinct. "Gosh!" she exclaimed.

Meg had earned her turn to speak and did. "I agree that this is all very disturbing, Alex, but Ben's death does not align with the rest of them. A box, numbered doors? These have nothing to do with Ben's

traumatic experience, his loss... where is the... well, the, umm... honestly, I never watched that show, but I know it was not like that other one, which was a pretty big deal."

Peter had been nodding while she spoke. "She's right. It's almost like someone was confused or just too lazy to research Ben's show," he ventured, looking to Jerry for affirmation. Jerry was cheerfully impassive.

"Well, it was on cable and probably not very popular. Poor Ben," Susan said gloomily. No one knew if she was referring to Ben Stein or the now late Ben Peebles.

"None of that matters. Ben is dead!" Marcie shrieked. She looked to Jerry. "Shouldn't we report this to the police? How can any of us be safe out there now?"

"Gosh!" Tammy repeated, just as effectively as she had been earlier.

"Yes, yes, everyone, you're right, this has gone on long enough. Respecting everyone's anonymity, I will be in touch with the police and have them send someone to next week's meeting. Does that work for everyone?" Jerry demonstrated an impressive assertiveness, as he always did in keeping them on task.

The group responded with a half-hearted but genuine fog of submission to the mission. With this new plan in motion, they stacked the chairs and folded for the week.

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Week Seven:

The group convened with an extra person, or, more accurately, the same number of people, but Tammy had been swapped out for



someone Jerry had introduced as Sergeant Garcia. The sergeant was dressed impeccably well for a police sergeant, but considering that it was the greater Los Angeles area, his wardrobe was likely commonplace. He sat next to Jerry, who remained still more stylish, as though he and the sergeant had coordinated in order to preserve the hierarchy. It soon became clear that Tammy was not to join them, as evidenced by Jerry blazoning another newspaper clipping. By now, the group sat quietly and patiently, though on edge, more on the middle of their seats than the edge, and waited for Jerry to read the latest development to them.

“Tamsin Gilliam of Burbank was a casualty of the electrical fire that forced the sudden evacuation of The Greek Theatre late last night. Ms. Gilliam was trampled at a nearby Wells Fargo ATM, by a panicked crowd of several thousand that had fled the theatre when an alarm had sounded during the performance of one of the opening acts, Wake up, Go-Gos!, a Wham! tribute band. Investigators believe that Ms. Gilliam was aware of the boisterous crowd hurtling towards her but pressed her luck by not abandoning the ATM without her card. Forensics discovered the ATM card partially emerged from the machine, as a result of the timed out transaction. No charges have been filed, and representatives at Wells Fargo plan to waive the out of network ATM surcharge.” Jerry folded the clipping in half and stored it within a pocket of his tailored suit's jacket.

It was expected that Alex would be the first person to speak but he was silent. Unspoken agreement seemed to favor allowing this latest sobering news to settle. Jerry made an attempt to rally the group's spirits, by motioning towards the sergeant.

“As I told you a few minutes ago, Sergeant Garcia is here to talk to us about our group and its dwindling numbers. I have turned over all of the clippings to him and he has opened an investigation,” Jerry revealed. “Oh!” He added, reaching into his pocket to retrieve the most recent clipping, which he handed to the sergeant.

The sergeant accepted the cue, and stood to address the group. His voice was very measured, with a steady cadence that behooved him to speak to groups, address students at assemblies, or even narrate infomercials or pitch for radio advertising. It almost seemed criminal that his vocals were used for reading rap sheets and subpoenas instead.

“Like you, I am asking who is behind all of this and why? These are the \$64,000 questions,” The sergeant felt like he had just dropped an effective soundbite but everyone just stared at him blankly. He tried again. “I promise all of you that I am on the case and will do all I can to resolve this matter.”

“I, too, would like to solve the puzzle,” Peter began, “but, in all due respect, what can a soldier of fortune like you do when far greater wheels are in motion and everything is spinning out of our control?”

“I appreciate your concern, sir. We have already initiated a schedule of regular patrols around your homes and we are willing to initiate 24-hour surveillance with your consent,” Garcia replied, and his soothing tones rendered everyone ready to acquiesce.

“But what are you doing proactively? With our lives in jeopardy, are you questioning anyone?” Susan asked.

Garcia nodded in understanding. “I appreciate your concern, ma'am. I am looking at several possibilities. What I would like to ask now, in this group, is there any resentment? Any bad history, arguments?”

Meg seemed decisive. “No, nothing like that. We are a family. We rarely even argue, and there are certainly no feuds among us.”

"I'm sorry but I don't feel a lot of confidence right now," Marcie admitted. "It seems like we are just waiting for Death to call our names, beckoning with a scythe for us to come on down and be,,, We are ones who will pay the price, not you. Is that right?"

It almost appeared that Garcia would tense up but instead he managed to compose himself. "I just ask you all to be vigilant. Look out for anything suspicious in your daily lives, try not to do anything out of the norm. As ludicrous as it sounds, do not engage in behavior connect to the game show you los..." Jerry stood, and clasped Garcia's arm gently but firmly.

"Sergeant, this is a safe space. We do not use the L-word, especially in context with G-A-M-E-S-H-O-W-S," Jerry whispered, smiling at the group while to ward off any suspicions that he might be talking about them.

Garcia glared at him, but nodded in acknowledgment. "Right, my apologies. I do think they can probably spell though."

Jerry's immediate response was to raise his eyebrows, but then his face projected a warm gratitude. "Thank you," he said softly.

Alex finally spoke. "So, let me get this straight. It is obvious to me that we are being targeted, as though we are on a grid. And your strategy, if you can call it that, does not come across to me as anything in which I can place my faith. I'd be down with anything we could do to help catch those responsible. At worst, they are looking at three squares a day for life, while we are risking much more."

"I repeat that all we can do is stay vigilant. These tragedies have happened at various times throughout the day and night, in the late morning, afternoon, or even just after dinner. We cannot even exclude the overnight hours. I do not think this is the work of an organized group, but if it has been syndicated, an organized group, I

mean, then anything goes," Garcia summarized, hitting all of the best points of emphasis perfectly. He really had missed his calling.

"I think we are out of time for this week," Jerry reminded them. "Everyone, please take some snacks with you."

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Week Eight:

And then there were three, along with Jerry and Sergeant Garcia. So, okay, five, for the sticklers, and fire marshals. Now, Meg and Marcie had joined those missing and their absence weighed heavily on the remaining three to five in the room.

Without any fanfare and mercifully no fan faction, Jerry produced a dutiful but subdued smile, followed by two newspaper clippings. He glanced at Sergeant Garcia, their eyes met and seemingly given the strength and approval, Jerry stood to read.

"Margaret Lansing, of Azusa, met a tragic end overnight, in Huntington Beach, when her SUV, traveling at a high speed, exceeded the vertical clearance of an underpass exiting from the PCH. The vehicle was knocked onto its side and skidded into the Showcase Shower Emporium. In the final collision in which destroyed both Showcase doors, Lansing was flung over the steering wheel. She was thought not to suffer, but nevertheless bid farewell to the world. Alcohol was not a factor, but Lansing's husband, Kevin, believed that his late wife had merely been excited at driving their newly purchased vehicle. 'It's a new car!' he had exclaimed in explanation."

Jerry sighed and looked around the room. The group's silence was somewhat disquieting. He decided to read the other clipping. "Margaret Naderi, a resident of La Habra, was killed in the course of a failed robbery attempt at a Family Dollar in Fullerton. An armed

robber, who is still on the loose, approached the cashier while Ms. Naderi was paying for her purchases, and a struggle ensued. Witnesses believe that a noise from the cashier must have startled the perpetrator, leading to a misfire of the pistol. Ms. Naderi was fatally shot and the robber fled the scene. Country police have surveyed witnesses but still have no good answer as to the factors leading to the tragic end. 'I have seen similar episodes happen, and 40 times - even 80 times, out of a hundred, and no one has been hurt,' said an investigating officer on the scene. Ms. Naderi's family was reportedly deliberating on a statement to be issued as well as selecting a representative among them to respond to questions."

Morale was as low as it had ever been. Even Alex was at a loss for words. Susan stood behind her chair and leaned forward upon it, while swaying slightly.

"I never would have guessed that both their names were Margaret," Peter observed. His statement was just as helpful as anything anyone could have said. There were no words, no letters, consonants or vowels, that would assist with providing any meaning to the latest chilling revelations.

"How could you let this happen? I thought the police were watching out for us, protecting us!" Alex stomped his foot so defiantly that Susan jumped. "I'm sorry, I know you are doing what you can. I don't mean to be tacky, but the clocking is ticking for the three of us," Peter finished, rubbing his toe, victimized by the harsh stomp.

"What are our options?" Susan asked, with an implored look at Garcia.

"Have you considered a vacation? Just a trip out of here, without telling anyone where you are going? Until all of this blows over,"

Garcia advised, his voice giving weight to the soundness of his suggestion.

"But where should we go? Would we be safe anywhere?" Alex inquired.

"I'll take any flight out of here for \$400, Alex," Susan stated. "I don't know about the two of you, but I'd be content just being away from here."

"Good, good," Garcia agreed. "And in the meantime, we will continue to follow leads and investigate the others' cases for parallels, congruities, and other synonyms. I mean, synonymous leads." It was apparent that the sergeant was stressed and strained by the course of events. Unfortunately, even though he articulated it well, the sincerity within his vulnerability did not inspire much trust and reliance in his resolve.

"That's all the time we have for this week," Jerry said, striving to sound upbeat.

\* \* \*

Week Nine:

Susan and Peter arrived to find the room still shrouded in darkness. When they entered, the motion sensing lights activated. The normal signs of Jerry's preparation were eerily lacking. The chairs were still stacked, not arranged in a circle. No coffee had been prepared. There were no snacks.

"Have you heard anything from anyone?" Susan asked Peter, who shook his head. "Me neither," she concluded.

"Do you know if anything happened to the others?"

"No, I don't read the Times," Susan replied, with an explanatory shrug. "You?"

"Same here. I used to have the Daily Times. Well, on the weekends. Anyway, I let it expire when the *Berry's World* comic ended," Peter confessed. "Have you been okay? Anything unusual?"

"No, everything has been normal. I decided not to leave town. Do you have any snacks?" Susan wondered, checking some of the cabinets which only contained napkins, coffee filters, some traces of sweetener and creamer packets.

"Sorry, no, I don't." Peter admitted.

"Okay, well, I'm hungry. See you next week, Peter?" Susan touched his arm optimistically as she left the room and started down the hall.

All alone, Peter looked around for a light switch, but found none. He left the room, closing the door behind him.

\* \* \*

Week Ten:

As Peter approached the group's meeting room, he could already see that the door was ajar and that light was visible through the crack. Would it be the illumination to enlighten him about recent events? He cautiously pushed the door open and entered the room which was almost unrecognizable. The chairs, tables and cabinets that he expected had been replaced by a conglomerate of podiums, a stage and some illuminated panels. Jerry and Sergeant Garcia were off to one side talking and both turned to look at Peter when he entered. Garcia hurried over to the one of the podiums and positioned himself in behind the microphone protruding from it.

"Everyone, please welcome, our contestant, Peter Adebayo, an architect from Pamona!" Garcia sang into the microphone, then pressed a button which created the sound of applause. The artificial clapping came from some speakers mounted near the ceiling, in opposite corners of the room, and effectively shook the room. Garcia grimaced a little and toggled a knob which regulated the volume to a more acceptable level.

Peter had not yet moved from the space just inside the door. Jerry shifted to stand behind another podium. Once he was in position, he and Garcia, beckoned and motioned for Peter to join them at a third podium. The fake applause continued. All that was missing was an audience, and the nice other group members.

Peter yielded to the encouragement and tread carefully to the podium. As soon as a flick of Garcia's wrist quieted the cheering crowd, Peter opened his mouth to speak, but Jerry interrupted him.

"Welcome, Peter! Are you ready to play? Audience, are you ready? Randy, put the questions on the board!" Jerry's giddy enthusiasm was nauseating.

Garcia, who really did not look like a Randy, fumbled with the buttons at his podium and some graphics appeared on the illuminated panels.

Peter finally had his chance to speak. "What is going on here? Where is Susan?! Jerry, what are you doing?"

Jerry looked at Peter quizzically, a bemused nonchalance on his smug face. "Peter, please choose a category," he instructed.

Peter looked to the sergeant, even though he was now almost certain that Garcia had never been part of any police force.



"Sergeant, please do something. I think Jerry killed Susan, and probably the others."

"Sorry, Peter, I cannot arrest Jerry for Susan's death. That would be double jeopardy," Garcia said apologetically, his voice carrying well.

"That's not even how that works!" Peter was exasperated. His confused frustration grew due to the obnoxious smiles on both Jerry and Garcia's faces.

"Okay, Randy, we had better stop. He is not going to play along," Jerry decided. He appeared suddenly disheartened. Garcia nodded and pressed a button that cleared the panels.

"Peter, I suppose we owe you an explanation," Jerry said, stepping out from behind his podium and microphone, to address Peter more closely in a non-amplified voice. "First of all, none of the others are dead. I just called them each week and told them to go to another group. All of those clippings were just what our writers made up." Garcia leaned close and whispered something. Jerry nodded. "Okay, fine. I made them up. In any case, not one of you ever bothered to double-check the L.A. Times, or any other news source to confirm what I was telling you. And as you probably gathered, Randy Garcia here is not a sergeant."

Garcia smiled and bowed. "It's true."

"Who is he? Who are you?" Peter asked them both.

"He is my sidekick, and the announcer. He will probably also intervene if we have a tie game and time is running out. We have not exactly worked that all out yet," Jerry explained thoughtfully, flashing a buoyant smirk.

"But what is this all about? What are you trying to do? We were all trying to move on with our lives by coming to this group, and you are trying to play some game?" Peter's voice was uncertain yet stern.

"I'll handle this one, Jerry," Garcia stepped forward again. "Peter, have you ever heard of *Jump for Dollars*, *Keep off the Grass*, *You're Doing It Wrong*, *Quibbles and Bits*, *Cash Coward*, or *The Joker's Wild*?"

"The last one, yes, of course, but not the others," Peter replied.

"Oops, that's right. They did make that last one. Without us," Garcia remarked in annoyance, as Jerry frowned. "The point is, Peter, Jerry and I have lived much of our lives starring in the pilot episodes of game shows that are never picked up. Our talents - and wardrobes - have been wasted, while others have prospered in our place."

Jerry shifted his weight to the other foot, accentuating his wingtips. "You see, Peter, we created your group as a service not only to you, but for us. We have all been wronged by the industry. All of our lives - the group's, mine and Randy's - could have been improved had our time on stage lasted longer," Jerry said, clasping his hands together in a hopeful United Way logo gesture.

Peter still felt like something was missing, besides the nine others. And an audience. "How does any of this help any of us?"

"Each week, we have been secretly recording and taping our group sessions for assembly into a hybrid game show / new reality show format. We will probably sell it to ABC, CBS, NBC, or what's that other one? Hang on, it will come to me... Ah, yes, the WB." Jerry's proud expression was matched by Garcia.

"Okay, this is all ludicrous, but why am I the only one left? It's not even attrition. I just continued to show up because you told the others not to come."

"We just decided on reverse alphabetical order. That's all," Garcia explained.

"This is all so stupid, though. And why were you pretending to be a police sergeant?" Peter was not upset. He felt more of a mild pity and disgust for the direction the proceedings had taken.

"Look around, Peter. Scan the channels. People are stupid, and will watch anything. Look at that garbage where they stuck some random people in a house and people are only there because they are opportunists so all they do is argue and backstab each other," Jerry reasoned, and Garcia nodded in solidarity.

"Hey, I happen to like *The West Wing*," Peter retorted. "Whatever. I don't want any part of this. Goodbye." And he left, slamming the door on his way out.

"That did not go well," Jerry surmised, his smile wavering before he harnessed and maintained it. "Would he rather have we been crazy with some diabolical and gruesome plan?"

"Right. Or some lazy pretense that this was all a dream?" Garcia mused, in his dreamy voice.

"Well, Randy. It was all a dream. Just not his. Our dream," Jerry's voice cracked a little. Garcia gave him an assuaging hug,

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