Retro Fit & Original Copy

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By Benjamin Lambricht

dля Мавка, Однієї мови ніколи не досить сказати Я тебе кохаю.
У майбутньому всі люди будуть мати довге волосся і моя зірка корабель
сповнений нездійснених буряків.

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Retro Fit

Too bright a light shines through from behind an American flag dividing the scene with thick bands of pearl, pink and cerulean.

The silhouette of a man, trim, athletic, and powerful, strides from the right. He has the carriage of general. From the left, two shadows drag a misshapen and struggling prisoner.

They meet at a pink stripe in the center. And the light is slowly siphoned away.

The flag's colors shift from pearl, pink, cerulean, to white, red, blue, and as the last drops of backlight fade to grey, purple, and almost black.

They wear military uniforms with no insignia and would now be recognizable if not for the aviator sun glasses reflecting back the darkness and American flag patterned bandanas, worn bandit or coal miner style over their
noses and mouths. The man from the right wears no mask. His compressed, purple-grey lips convey no emotion.

The captive wears a costume. A big cat, striped and cartoonish. Its stripes seem to undulate in the bad light and its bright-white eyes and black, toothless smile mock its struggle.

All motion ceases.

The shadow who entered from the right slowly draws a cavalry sabre from a thin sheath worn at the hip.

A sharp kick to the hind quarters brings the oversized, quivering kitten to its knees.

The man with the sword bends over at the waist to address the prisoner. The camera zooms in and we can see his purple lips close enough to brush the worn velvet. The lips move.

“You are a traitor, Mr. Nubbytops. This is what we do to traitors.”

The reply is muffled. “Mo. Mo. Mo. Pweash.”

The camera pulls back and he lifts the steel above his head. A spotlight hits the blade and a lense flare forms a halo in the eye of the camera. A choir begins to sing.

_Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord_

_He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored_

_He hath loosed the fateful lightning with his terrible swift sword_
The blade flashes down in a blurred slash and seems to pass harmlessly through Mr. Nubbytops’ neck.

For a moment the audience thinks this is all just another TV Show.

The head sloughs off as though it were bored and decided to see what life would be like without a body. A torrent of fluid spouts from the meaty, pink throat concealed in the costume. The head bounces twice before rolling slowly off screen.

*His truth is marching on*

Melani considered herself a restoration artist, and at times she was. The rest of the time she was happy she could do her job high. Maybe she was happy because she was high. She wasn’t happy.

She was high. And she was swerving the big pink van through traffic in the Village at fifteen over. When the company was founded, the 1989 Dodge Ram van, which they bought at salvage auction, had been red. Now it was pinkish and business was about as bold as the red on the van. The side of the vehicle featured a faded and peeling cartoon television set that had grown robotic arms and legs which reached out menacingly towards a vaguely Italian, partially bald man dialing a phone in a panic. A speech bubble read “TV TROUBLE? CALL NYC ELECTROCARE!” The company phone number was painted beneath it in big, yellow numbers. The numbers had held up a little better than the cartoon and the red paint, but it was getting hard to tell the sevens from the ones.
For a while Melani had really loved what she did. Now she just stayed high and waited for three-word text messages from The Hippy.

NEW OLD SET

All caps. Every time. The anticipation of working on another television, another puzzle, was nearly sexual for her. It was hot and the sweat was pooling, turning the once black t-shirt from dark grey back to black in her armpits and under her tits.

She rolled down the window, stuck a wire-thin arm out airplane wing style and let out a cackle. She hadn’t enjoyed sex with her boyfriend, Bill, since the first time and even then the emotion had done more of the work then the motion, or the member for that matter. She laughed again. Maybe it was sweat, but the prospect of working on whatever relic of a television that the old man had picked up off Ebay seemed to have her moistening a little.

She whipped around a corner and slammed the breaks. The tires screamed a little and Melani slid to a stop just, avoiding a group of kids as they bolted across the street. She smiled and let the van start rolling forward. The kids darted into a play ground.

The ashtray was four inches deep with ash and loose change and had been a cupholder before fate had decided otherwise, but Melani shoved a finger into it and rooted around like a truffling pig until she found a roach. The van wobbled back and forth while she held the wheel with her elbows and fired up a
glowing red ember on the end of the joint. The best thing about The Hippy was the he didn’t care how high she was on arrival as long as she did a good job.

The man called himself a collector. Anyone else would have called him a hoarder. Melani called him The Hippy. He was voracious and had started before Melani was born. His three-bedroom apartment had been reduced to a one-bedroom with a kitchen and a bathroom. The rest was filled, nearly floor to ceiling, with television sets and spare parts. He had bought them from from all over New York City and Upstate and the closer parts of Jersey, at thrift shops and estate sales until his body had given out on him. Now he bought sets off Ebay with a tiny laptop he kept in that bedroom.

He was the closest thing Melani had to a kindred spirit or even a friend in the world. She kept him secret, even from Bill. He was rarely inclined to talk, but when he did, what came out his mouth was enough to make Melani wish she had stayed in school to learn more about electrical engineering.

She had been stumped by classic sets exactly once in her life. A Kuba Komet that the Hippy had bought. With its severe angles, black and tan wood paneling and full entertainment center set-up, it would have looked ahead of its time in the 80’s. It was made in 1969 and cost a year’s wages for the average German worker. Melani had been working on it for days when she finally snapped and shouted out in frustration. A word somewhere between “shit” and “argonaut” had threatened to shatter the nearby glass with decibels.
The Hippy calmly walked in and explained that the German wiring couldn’t support standard amperage after thirty years of service because German copper standards allowed for .05% impurity level and that those impurities degraded the copper slowly. Maybe she should replace it, even if it looked pristine. He was right. And when she was done he suggested that they donate the piece to a classic television museum in Ohio. That was the last time Melani thought of him as a hoarder.

He always overpaid her in cash every visit, from a disintegrating wallet that had probably still been part of a cow during the Taft administration. The Hippy’s hands would shake so badly that it took him two minutes to pull the wrinkled, faded bills out from the greyed cowhide. Melani liked that he never apologized for whatever medical issue he had. He was paying and she was waiting. Melani was certain that the tremor was the only reason he had, at least at first, bothered to let anyone else work on his televisions.

Melani backed into a parking spot a few yards from his apartment. He was leaning gingerly against the big blue security door. It stood like a neon light, glowing against the drab browns and tans of the surrounding brick. The Hippy had on Melani’s favorite T-shirt. It hung, tie-dyed, two sizes too big, over The Hippy’s tubular frame and read “Shalom Y’all,” in white-lettered English and something else in Arabic and Hebrew. The T-shirt changed most visits. The two-day-scruff facial hair and ripped wranglers never did. He wore the smell of melting plastic like a cologne.
“The set's in the back. The one I want you to fix. I put a sheet over it.” He called out as Melani made her way up the six steps between the street and his apartment. The Hippy never waited for Melani. He had conveyed the important information and now he went back inside. Melani would lock the door behind her and go to work. The Hippy had asked to lock the door behind her once and she had done it every time since.

Hardwood floors, two big windows that would have let the light in had the curtains ever been drawn, and enough projects to keep her busy until death: this was the sort of place she could retire in. Alone. Bill would never leave the place they had. It was rent stabilized. *Rent. Stabilized.* He should have those words tattooed on himself somewhere.

The Hippy must have started taking $200 out of his wallet before Melani had arrived. He stood there in his entryway, which was nothing more than three feet of hardwood floors and yellowed walls, all padded by several inches of empty shipping boxes. A red moving-dolly doubled as a coat rack. He extended an arm that bobbed up and down like heavy branches in the wind, reaching toward Melani with a smile that only seemed natural on the right half of his face. Melani took the money and waited a moment to see if he would talk. He turned and disappeared down the hallway that led to his bedroom.

There was no furniture. No room for furniture. Electronics were piled from floor to ceiling everywhere like ruins of a world the machines once took over and then lost. The piles shifted like sand dunes when Melani had to dig for spare
parts, and seemed to turn the apartment into a maze. Cords dangled and swayed like vines or snakes in some dark, ancient jungle ruin. She passed a hundred televisions and a hundred different, distorted copies of herself in the frozen smoke of their screens.

Melani stepped around a pile of sets and spare parts which had moved recently, probably to make room for her to work, and spotted the dusty, red sheet. It was too small for even a twin bed, and draped over the set like flag dangling off a balcony.

She pulled the sheet off and let it glide slowly to the floor. Spending most of her life working with classic electronics sent a chill running through her before her brain caught up to understanding what this was. The set stood exactly eight inches off the ground on four polished, seven-inch, faux-brass peg-legs with one-inch wooden gliders screwed into the ends. A grey-black convex lens, bubbled out from inside an oak-base cherry-stained housing. The steel-and-brass UHF and VHF dials were almost worn smooth, but she could make out most of the numbers; they were likely original. No, the UHF had been replaced, but decades ago. Melani gently pulled it off. Not replaced, modified. Someone had ground off all the original numbers and etched in channels 0 to 86. They had painted those numbers with black paint, of which only a few flecks remained. She replaced the altered dial and let her finger slide across the glass. This was original and pristine. Any smoother and it would have been liquid.
The cherry-stained casing was near perfect too. Melani got down on her knees and examined the seam between the aluminum trim around the screen and the casing. The gap was paper thin and hadn’t seemed to bow or warp at all over the years. Someone had stored this with an eye toward preservation.

She slid around to the back side of the set. No dust. Not a spec. No tack board backing; this was a single, ultra thin, ash panel, held in place by four blackened screws. Half the time, Melani found that in sets this old, rats had chewed through the cheaper back panels and had been living amongst the miniature cities of circuit boards and transistors like oversized nemeses in a Godzilla knock-off. There would be no villains behind this wall. It was pristine.

There was only one way to confirm that this was real. Melani rolled sideways onto her back so that the top of her head was near the rear of the set. She held her breath. She slid under.

The bottom of the set wasn’t perfect. It was the wrong color. A deep, ugly grey. There should have been another, slightly thicker ash panel, with a thin, tin plate affixed with two 00-size screws.

“Fuck,” Melani tried to say as she blew out her held breath. But the force the air she exhaled dislodged a decade of dust and sent particles streaming into her eyes and mouth causing her to say “Fu-cackaghluv”. She snapped her head up in reflex and slammed it against the bottom of the set. This time she managed to succesfully say “fuck”. Twice.
Melani spent a few seconds wiping dust from her eyes and swallowing the grimy taste over and over until it reached tolerable levels of disgusting. Once she got all her senses operating again she saw it: a little tin plate, held in place with two tiny, and almost invisible “00” screws. The plate had a name carefully etched into the thin metal. She whispered it slowly. “Farnsworth.” This belonged in the Smithsonian.

Philo T. Farnsworth. He wasn’t exactly Television’s father. He wasn’t just a sperm donor either. He was more like Television’s awesome stepdad. He took TV shopping for a new dress even though TV screamed at him and didn’t accept his authority. He tolerated TV’s misplaced rage and gave TV hugs when boys were mean. When TV had her first period and Mom was out of town, Farnsworth bought the tampons and called TV’s aunt to come have that talk. Even though TV never got the chance to thank him and call him Dad, years later when Television was 30 and in therapy trying to figure out why she always committed to the wrong guy, she would acknowledge, fat tears plopping onto her therapist’s too expensive persian rug, that Philo T. Farnsworth was the only father she ever really had.

There was a good chance the old man had worked on this himself. She slid out and checked the cord. Thick and wrapped in rubber, it looked a little newer than everything else. Maybe rats had gotten to the old cord. Still, it looked in great shape as she followed the cord back and plugged it in. She grabbed the
on/off switch with her thumb and forefinger and lifted it up. Nothing. Back down and slowly back up again. Nothing.

Melani smiled. She rolled up a set of imaginary sleeves until they reached the actual sleeves on her t-shirt about a quarter of the way down the pale flesh of her biceps. This would need some work. With a little luck there would be parts to replace and maybe even parts to machine herself. Wires that would need to be stripped and spliced. A internally frayed flyback to inspect inch by inch until the culprit was caught.

She went for her tool box. As she opened it, it seemed to her to almost defy the laws of physics as the action of opening the box pulled out an extended half dozen shelves. It was the only thing she kept organized. Melani selected a small, black-handled Philips-head screw driver. And went to work.

She removed four screws from the back of the set with slow ¼ turns. They weren’t original but they were as close as anyone was likely to get. She slid the ash panel off and laid it carefully on the hardwood floors. The screws were placed into a tiny, snap-shut container in her tool box.

Something was very wrong.

She recognized all the parts. There was a flyback, yolks, transistors, transformers, and more axial capacitors than she had ever seen in one set before. That was part of the problem. There were more parts in here than any set needed. The outside had been so perfect. This felt like opening a treasure chest
and finding a treasure map inside. Not exactly bad but not at all what you want to find when you open one up.

This tech was newer too. That was the other part of the problem. It couldn’t possibly have come from Farnsworth’s time. The shell was his. His fingerprints might as well have been pressed into the wood. But the real story, the guts-- they were 20-25 years after his death.

Melani reached into her pocket and pulled out some rolling papers stuffed inside a small plastic bag with a few big marijuana buds inside. Then she pulled out a second, smaller bag of cocaine. A few seconds later she had combined a little of the latter with a lot of the former and applied fire to both.

She took long harsh drags and held the burn in her lungs while she stared into the guts of the set. She could move the pieces around, see where they fit. She could lift up a flyback, with its long, black, squid-like tentacles and suction cup head, and start attaching them to the auxiliary windings. She felt almost telekinetic. Things were starting to fit together.

Old sets were difficult for a lot of reasons. Their designs varied from country to country, company to company, even factory to factory, and were driven as often by innovation as by desire to avoid patent infringement. Still, they all had some underlying A to B to C logic even when they placed B in a different place every time. A television was a television.

This thing was a puzzle. Too many parts, but a place for every part—maybe. There was a different sort logic to this. Enough visualizing. Melani rolled
up her imaginary sleeves again and pulled her real, thick, black hair back behind her head with a hair-tie she kept on her wrist. She didn’t know how long this was going to take, but it wouldn’t be over quickly. Bill would be passed out on the couch whenever she got home. He would awake and be concerned about her drug use. Then he would apologize for it when he realized that he wasn’t getting to have that same boring sex he seemed to want. Tonight she might have let him fuck her too. Cocaine and working on a challenge had a way of turning her on, and she did love him. If she worked on this until it was finished, who knew when she would get home. There was little chance of doing anything but seeing Bill’s disappointment if she got in after midnight.

This was too good of challenge to let go of.

After a few hours, Melani had small, annoying pink scrapes and thin, red cuts on most of her fingers and the backs of her hands. The spot where she had thwacked her head against the bottom of the television had swollen up a quarter inch. That quarter inch that the lump had grown represented more progress than she had made. She was snapping, twisting and screwing things into what seemed like their place just to snap, screw, and twist them out again when nothing worked. This was the most challenging set she’d ever worked on. Not it wasn’t a television. It was a torture device.

That was it. Not a TV. This wasn’t a television at all. None of the circuits were running to the tube properly. Whatever this was it wasn’t going to display
anything on that screen. She starting removing all the parts one by one until she had them all arranged neatly to the left of the set.

    Melani picked up the last half of her laced joint and lit it. If this wasn’t what it was supposed to be, then the key was to let go of the machine she thought it was and find the logic of the machine in front of her.

    She did her best to go in blank. Hours went by. The Hippy left or didn’t reappear. The machine existed at the center of a grey tunnel that the rest of the world had fled from. This was as much a piece of art as it was science. Progress was being made. She was making it. Parts were finding their places like animate statues seeking their pedestals. Another hour went by just installing the resistors.

    Assembling the pieces on some sort of half-acknowledged aesthetic principle was working. Parts jutted out like hands and fingers, but there was balance and sense to the construction. Another hour passed.

    Hopefully, Bill was comfortable. She would have to be at least a little apologetic to the man. It was getting later and Melani was not sure if she was caring more or less. She connected the last tentacle on the flyback and found that she was down to the last part. An oversized cathode ray. She held it up and let a few rays of light bend through its red-tinged glass. She carefully connected it to the rear of the screen. It was finished. No job was perfect, but it seemed impossible to have considered assembling the machine any other way. The symmetry and design were stunning. Whoever had designed this, whatever it was, was a genius.
Melani connected the set to the outlet. She flipped the ON switch.

Nothing.

Again and again, nothing. Melani flicked the switch up and left it there.

“Nothing. Nothing. Fuck.”

A low hum thrumbed off inner walls of the set and the reverberation sent a chill down Melani’s spine. A wave of static electricity pulled the almost invisible hairs on Melani’s arms towards the set and then away as it passed through. She had goosebumps over every inch of flesh on her body.

Melani sat on her knees and stared into the black glacier of the screen. She moved closer. A faint pink glow seemed to be growing from the center. The smell of melting plastic started to fill the room. The wall behind the set seemed to move and flow in shifting red and white lights emanating from the set. A tiny core of fear and self preservation was reaching out to yank the cord from the wall socket.

Although Melani’s sense of self preservation had power, her sense of curiosity had been forcing it to close its eyes and hold its hands over its ears to shut out all the cool dangerous stuff that had been going on around Melani since she was fourteen and her best friend Barry stole two beers from the corner grocery store. So when her hand reached for the cord, her shoulder and arm moved to tuck it under her knee instead.

After another few seconds of staring at the screen, the activity seemed to die down. The smell of melting plastic hung thick as fog in the room. Melani
crawled around on all fours. She saw something. Certain parts of her brain decided that it was more than she should probably see all at once so they instead only allowed her to take parts one at a time.

1. A faint, pinkish steam was rising from his flesh like fog in front of a “LIVE NUDE GIRLS” sign.
2. Immaculate, pearlesque toenails.
3. Paleish, taught, slightly leathery flesh.
4. Abundant, but not excessive leg hair.
5. Not the sort of thighs that worked out, but the sort that ran from time to time.
6. A thick tuft of chestnut pubic hair.
8. Flat, slowly rising and falling stomach.
9. Well shaped chest. The same curly chestnut hair, just more sparse.
10. Tightly pursed, pink lips.
11. Warm eyes. Inviting. The color of whiskey. Soft, with small crow’s feet reaching toward his temples. They almost seemed to shimmer.

Discovery was coursing through Melani’s veins. Solving the puzzle and creating this sent a surge of desire through her. She was fighting through a storm of lust and drugs and exhaustion in an attempt to make sense of what was in front of her.

“Am I thinking what I am seeing?” she said.
The man looked up at her; his soft eyes hardened as he seemed to take her measure. His head was resting on the base of the set. One hair stuck in the red cathode ray like a tracer following its persistent, pink glow. He was thick and physical. Deep grooves in his face like the folds of a blanket. Chestnut hair, more tussled than in any photo. Perfect white teeth shining.

“This is real,” he said, his voice equal parts comforting and arrogant.

“There is something I need from you.”

“You’re Ronald Reagan.” It was him, a little younger than any photo she had seen. It was him. But being this close to him, watching the hair on his chest rise and fall with his breath looking at the thin red and blue veins stretching out like roots down his shoulder to the soft crook of his elbow where they seemed to swell and recede of their own accord, it was too much. It made him something new.

He was remarkably attractive. She looked into an inviting smile that seemed to barely mask a great power.

His lips said, “there is something I need from you.”

Melani was going to ask him if that thing was clothing until she saw his cock stiffen. The look on his face said that he saw her watch it grow. He was an enticing threat. Melani’s eyes moved to the television cord and how it had become tangled around his ankle. She grabbed the cord and pulled it free from the wall.
Melani climbed onto him so that his cock was pressed against the zipper on her jeans. She slowly pulled off her shirt, allowing the drag of the fabric over her nipples to turn her on even more. She took the cord in her left hand and crossed his hands at the wrist, just above his head. Her breasts hung just above his mouth; his hot breath passed over them as she wrapped the cord over and around his wrists.

Again and again until there was no point in resisting.

The cement wall, overhanging ductwork, and exposed network of pipes give the viewer an intense feeling of claustrophobia. A large, wooden crucifix appears to have been tied with bailing twine to a large, brown pipe to the right. A single figure sits on his shins with his feet to the wall and his knees pointed at the camera. His body is emaciated. Ribs threaten to tear through paper-thin flesh. Only a thin cloth wrapping hides his genitals. A dark, sharp edged shadow thrown across his face makes identification impossible.

“I have been to the desert of your soul, America,” a voice from that shadow says. “For thirty days and thirty nights I have found no nourishment in you. Your great ungodly commercial machine cannot feed you! It is eating you even now. It consumes you as you are consumed by its myriad of temptations. You are a cut dog gnawing at the last stitch holding together its flawed flesh. In curing your superficial itch you will bring about your death.
“Are you listening America? Can you learn to resist yourself so that you can become more than you are? Can you find and redeem your soul?”

A figured clad in flowing, grey robes brings out a golden-brown, roasted turkey that seems to almost glow with its own light. Another follows with a bowl of mashed potatoes, seasoned with bacon and chives. The next brings wine. The next cranberry sauce. More follow until an entire, picturesque thanksgiving dinner rests in front of the man.

“And put a knife to thy throat, if thou be given to appetite.”

The figure pulls a large carving knife from behind the turkey and slices off a drumstick.

Only the idyllic drumstick is visible outside the shadow over the man’s face. He places the knife against his throat.

“We will teach you to resist temptation.”

With a deep push and drag he lets the blood from his throat and his head slumps over in the darkness.

The turkey leg falls from his hands and lands in a dish filled with red substance. It sends a spray of cranberry sauce over the scene.

Melani was naked and alone. The extension cord was still there and looped, twisted and tied tight. But Reagan was gone.
He had come as intensely as any man Melani had ever slept with. His back arched, his pelvis lifted her off the ground and his teeth began to grind so hard she thought she might have heard them crack in the midst of his moaning.

And then he was gone. Reagan took a breath as though he were about to speak and liquefied. He shifted from man to a thick pink slime that reminded Melani of meat forced through a grinder. The slime shimmered and twitched like quicksilver, then it evaporated in a puff of pink smoke and siphoned back towards the set.

She followed the path it/he/what/Reagan/slime/smoke had taken and a true sense of reality seeped in through her and whispered things like: You just fucked a president. And it was more like an alien or you just tied up and had intercourse with a reconstituted dead man and— Aren’t you currently naked on the floor of your best client? Shouldn’t he be home? Shouldn’t you be home? Where Bill is.

Melani pulled the red sheet over her like cloak and made a choice. She was not going to freak out, not yet. She would freak just little. Just inside. If she had to, she would duct tape her psyche together until she could get home and dig through her bottom drawer. If duct tape failed, four screws and deep-throat bar clamp would do the job. There was some Xanax in the bottom drawer, twice as pleasurable as a bar clamp to the forehead. She would sleep.

She put on most of her clothes. Bra, panties went into the tool box to save time. The box snapped shut with a clang that echoed off the walls.
Jesus. Had they been loud? What if The Hippy had heard? She looked at her watch. The hands were threatening to reach into midnight and beyond. The Hippy had to be sleeping.

Melani crept quietly through the maze. Normally the piles of parts were a source of comfort to her but now, now they were walls caging her and avalanche hazards threatening to collapse on her if she made even the slightest sound.

She spotted a triangle of white light cutting through shadows surrounding The Hippy’s bedroom. The door was open enough to see through. Melani took a deep breath and forced herself to step into the light. A few quiet steps later and her right eye was pressed up against the crack in the door.

His room was startlingly plain. Melani had expected tie-dye tapestries, incense sticks and a giant hookah. None of that was here. The floor was covered in old, worn carpet that was nearly grey now, but had once been white. The walls were bare. No photos of family. No posters. No clock. Nothing. His bed was only a twin mattress on top of a box spring. The blue sheets wrapping the mattress seemed so worn and tattered that she doubted if they had ever been washed. The Hippy’s head was resting peacefully on a dense-looking blue pillow. A small black book and pen lay on his chest. He had told Melani that he often journaled until he fell asleep and that appeared to be what happened tonight.

Safety. Melani took a few steps back into the darkness and allowed herself to breathe. All she needed to do was go grab her tool box and get home. It was simple.
On her way back she spotted the dolly cart. There was a living, breathing man inside that set. It would be wrong to leave him here in the back of The Hippy’s house. Something had happened. Leaving the set meant leaving the puzzle incomplete. Melani took a ball point pen out of her tool box and receipt from the pocket of her jeans. She scribbled a note.

*The set needs some extra attention. I'll have it back as soon as possible.*

*Please call if this is a problem.*

-Melani

She dollyed the machine out to the van but it didn’t seem right to just place it in the back and drive safe, so she placed it in the passenger seat and fought to get the van’s seat belt around it.

The drugs, sex endorphins, and adrenaline were all failing Melani by the time she got home to her apartment. Still, she managed to strap the set into the dolly, get it inside, into elevator, into her apartment, and leave it next to the sofa. She could hear Bill snoring in the bedroom from the moment she opened the door.

Absent the stimulation, she was tired enough to fall asleep without the Xanax, but she decided to dig one out of her dresser drawer and chew it anyway. Then stripped off her clothing and crawled into bed next to Bill.

The sheets were warm and clean. Melani needed to shower, but there wasn’t time. She reached and touched herself. Whatever that thing was, at least
it didn’t ejaculate. Her hair still reeked of the odor that emanated from the machine.

Bill’s snoring intensified and the sound echoed in Melani’s ears. She gave him a sharp poke on his third rib and it stopped. Bill stirred.

“You’re home?” He said, eyes still shut and facing away.

“Yes, hun. Go back to sleep.”

“What’s burning?”

“Nothing, baby. Go back to sleep.”

Bill mumbled something like “I love you,” and melted away like snow, leaving a dull icy lump behind. Melani doubted he would remember the conversation in the morning. Bill slept facing his closet. Melani rolled away from him and pulled the sheet between her knees.

Melani’s bedroom had a view of the bedroom window and its surrounding brick. Two pigeons, made black by the shadows, were roosting there for the night. A light switched on. The pigeon stirred, fluffed their wings up, then snuggled back together. A silhouette drifted in front of the tan, pull-down shade. It was thick and fluidic, a woman’s form—voluptuous, nude behind the obscuring blind. The shadow’s limb reached down and pulled up the screen. Ambient moon and street, the light poured over the milk of her skin and shivered against the cold.

Melani balked. The woman in the window seemed like her body was loosely stitched together from oversized parts. Her breasts laid like huge, airless
balloons over the folds of her stomach. But she was smiling. The woman shut her eyes and let a cool wind dance around her. Over the woman’s shoulder, Melani saw a man. He was wrapped in the sheets and his arm hung loosely off the bed. His finger just barely rested on a tipped over glass. He was bigger than she was, but at this distance he looked like a slain bear. He must have been begging for mercy just a few minutes ago while she was trying to slide soundlessly into bed.

The woman said something to the man and he sat up in bed. The sheet fell. He opened his arms and the woman moved her big hips in an exaggerated, sexy swing as she sashayed in his direction. She kissed him deeply and they tangled themselves into the sheets.

Melanie gave herself over to the barbiturates and watched the pigeons lift into the sky as two spirits shedding assumed forms, in search of a more peaceful place to rest.

Her left eyelid opened first and let in a painful yellow barrage of light. The right eyelid was always a step behind, probably because it was slowed by the weight of the cement block that was trying to crush her forehead. What was, in all likelihood, the warm light of about noon hung dense and caustic in the air. She pried her right eye open with two fingers as an explorer might part dense underbrush with two arms.

The world came into focus. Waking in a world organized by Bill was like waking up inside of a machine. A machine that was too simple. No challenge or
puzzle, no marvel of engineering. No invention. No innovation. Just a simple system designed for a simple purpose. On the left side of the closed door, Bill’s five drawer dresser. On the right, Melani’s. They were dark brown. They were three shades darker than the carpet. The carpet hid dirt well. The night stands matched the dressers, one drawer and a cubby underneath. Melani looked for imperfections in the ceiling tiles and found none. The dressers would last seventy-five years. The carpet, fifteen.

Melani’s brain wasn’t going to last another five minutes if the headache got any worse. She pulled herself forward over the foot of the bed and onto the floor, dragging the blankets and sheets behind her. She pulled herself up by the door handle and looked back at the mess-- a river of three-thousand thread count entropy flowing through the system.

She opened the door. Her living room was just another part of the same boring machine. The couch was blue-grey-green and wouldn’t show a regurgitated parrot, let alone dirt, while it pumped out apathy like an amp. The coffee table, Melani’s principal contribution to the apartment, was a dense network of brushed aluminum and glass. Melani’s eyes drifted there in search of a piece of paper with a few words scribbled on them.

A note would mean emotion. It would mean that he was willing to display potential energy. A few words. We need to talk. Potential energy could be transferred to kinetic or even thermal. She could start a fight; kinetic. They would stand in the kitchen like territorial bears separated by some invisible wall and
she’d be three beers deep and holding the fourth. Bill’s sand-and-straw colored hair would have fallen down over his forehead and his eyes would squint like he was trying to stare past the sun.

He’d be grumbling about self control or rehab or therapy. She’d get defensive and call him a goddamned control freak. She’d seen this show a thousand times in her head.

EMOTIONAL EPISODE 1: POTENTIAL

BILL: You could have been an engineer if you’d just loved me half as much as you love your drugs.

MELANI: What was your mother’s primary occupation again?

BILL: She was a mom.

MELANI: Did she love you?

BILL: Yes.

MELANI: So loving Bill doesn’t make people into fucking engineers, does it?

BILL: You know what I mean. It’s terrible to see you waste all this—

Rather than hear the word “potential” come out of Bill’s mouth again, Melani throws her half-finished beer at the wall and it explodes in a shower of glass and foam.

EMOTIONAL EPISODE 2: KINETIC

BILL: Whatthefuckareyoudoing?
MELANI: I transformed the potential to get drunk...er into the potential to make a point.

BILL: You’re destroying our home.

MELANI: No Bill, I made a mess. Messes aren’t destruction. Messes are the result of living.

BILL: I wasn’t talking about the mess you just made. I was talking about the mess you are.

MELANI: And after all that time and effort spent trying to put me in order. You’re starting to sound like a control freak. Does that indicate that perhaps Bill is isn’t as orderly as Bill would have us believe?

BILL: Listen, let’s just calm down a little. I don’t think we need to insult each other. The last thing I want is there to be any--

*Melani cuts Bill off by moving quickly towards him. The fear in his eyes indicates that he anticipates an attack.*

**EMOTIONAL EPISODE 3: THERMAL**

*Melani stands exactly 1 inch shorter than Bill, but Bill is shrunk just enough by her confidence and anger that their eyes and lips are level.*

MELANI: Friction between us, it’s all I want.

BILL: What?

But before there could be arguing and well before there could be fucking, there would be coffee and a note to read. Bill made coffee every morning. He had a French press, and roasted his own beans and the coffee was always cafe quality. It tasted liked charred almonds and smelled faintly of chocolate. On mornings after she got home late there was also aspirin.

Bill had left four big, round, white pills laying next to a big, red cup with a big, red handle. It was once intended for meal-sized portions of chicken soup on cold winter days, but had long since had its duties redefined by necessity, as it was the only vessel short of the flower vase (stored in Bill’s bedroom closet) that could accommodate the amount of coffee Melani required most mornings.

It usually took five big steps to get from the living room into the kitchen-slash-breakfast nook area. Melani managed to reach the coffee and aspirin in about twenty-five. She didn’t need to count her steps to know. Whatever the name of that awkward, puritan approved dance which consisted of slowly shuffling her feet forward, closing her eyes, and letting one arm wag about in front of her, while the other stayed in contact with the wall was, she was the Michael Jackson to its moonwalk.

Her feet left the warm comfort of Bill’s grey, mid-length carpeting and touched the cold, black and white tiles of the kitchen. The cold pushed the majority of each foot up into the air until Melani stood on the balls of her feet. She accelerated her movements against the chill climbing her legs and shocking her
brain with purpose. Three quick steps, a demi-plie, and what Melani was pretty sure was called a *brise*, and Melani landed on the soft, memory-foam-filled mat in front of the sink.

Melani accepted the imagined audience’s half-hearted applause, tossed back four aspirin and chased it down with coffee. There was no note next to the coffee. No note under the plate. Melani could see from where she was, but she walked over to small oak table where she and Bill never ate meals together and checked. No note. Coffee table. Fridge, door, bathroom mirror. Nope. Not. Defeated.

Melani fell into the couch and its coarse but immortal fibers roughed her exposed skin. Without the note or something to start the conversation nothing could happen. For good or bad everything in her life felt flammable. She didn’t know if it would be a funeral pyre to mourn around, or a warming glow from the fireplace, or a mad bacchanalic bonfire to lose her self in the heat of, but she knew one thing. She wanted something to spark it.

She could call Bill herself and confess to a lot more drug use than he could possibly have been aware of and let him know that it wasn’t her stellar work ethic that kept her out at night. That would inexorably lead to questions about last night. That wasn’t a conversation Melani wanted to have with herself. Definitely not with Bill.

EPISODE 4: IT’S NOT JUST A RIVER IN EGYPT
Bill is enjoying another good and productive day balancing accounts at his local bank when he hears his phone ring. Who could it be? The caller ID indicates that it is his wildly unhinged girlfriend, Melani. Although it is inappropriate to take a personal call during work hours, Bill decides that he will shave an equal amount of time off his lunch break and take the call. It could be an emergency.

BILL (TO PHONE): Hello dear, what can I do for you?

MELANI: I’ve been doing a doggbanging butt ton of drugs. Coke, weed and booze. Enough to drown, smother, and ski in, respectively.

BILL: Humph. Humph. Humph. I am glad that you told me. I think this honesty has brought us closer together. Good talk.

MELANI: Anything else?

BILL: Well I did have one question.

MELANI: Oh?

BILL: Yes. Well it’s actually a few questions. Mind if I needlessly conflate them?

MELANI: Please do.

BILL: Very well. I was wondering if you were on a metric ton of drugs last night and if you might have had sex with some sort of former president liquid alien monster and had two or three of the best orgasms you can recall having because of a possible sexual awakening where you realized that you want to tie men up and control them and if said former president liquid alien monster had a penis that was much larger, both by consideration of length and girth, than mine and so
much so in fact that you are asking yourself the question: Am I still feeling
Reagan inside me right now?

MELANI: Bill, that’s crazy talk. But since you mentioned it: is it cheating if you
fuck a former leader of the free world who seems to defy the laws of time and
space?

pot and you tell me how dissatisfied you are with our sex life?

MELANI: Very! I love how the honesty brings us closer together.

Melani decided that honesty would not bring them closer together, at least
not honesty about last night. She suspected that discussing her bedroom
boredom would have more impact with a wall or a dildo salesperson than with
Bill. Besides, she had to address whether or not she was insane.

The Farnsworth was there, still strapped to the moving dolly, and nestled
up against the couch like an endtable. She would have to plug it in and turn it on.
The cord. In her haste Melani had taken the extension cord along with the set
and somehow it had fallen out of the tight packet she had wound it into for
transport. There was no way last night didn’t happen. The plug dangled loosely
over the thick, red ‘X’ made by the crisscrossed, nylon dolly straps. Melani saw
the red marks in Reagan’s flesh where she pulled the cord too tight and then
didn’t loosen it. She had to turn it on again. She needed to put some clothes on
first… or not.
The smell of burning plastic threatened to overpower salt, sweat, and marijuana. Melani’s fingers hovered an a quarter inch from the on switch.

Everytime Reagan came back he came back aroused. Melani had set the Farnsworth up in the bedroom because it had the only unoccupied outlet in the apartment. It had turned out to be convenient for a number other reasons. Pillows, blankets, and the bed were nearby. Bill’s ties were accessible and could be used as makeshift handcuffs. The marijuana was close and did an excellent job muting the guilt no matter whose ties she used or how many times, seven so far, she brought back Reagan and fucked him. She assured herself that she wouldn’t have sex with him on this, the eighth time. Melani knew that he would come from the machine in waves of pink light and heat and he would be there clean, strong, and wanting. His eyes would start out as dull, brown marbles loosely rolling in their sockets. Slowly awareness would flow into them and pinpoints of intelligence would glow like the first seconds of twin televisions warming. Soon they’d be alive with hazel and whiskey. She flipped the switch. Hypnotic and hungry, those eyes sparked something in her. She’d see his willingness and twist the tie around and between his knees. Light and heat. Just one more time. Reagan would be bound, hand foot, and his cock between her teeth. She would bring him close and hold him there until he seemed on the verge of begging. Then she’d release and he’d evaporate back into the machine.

His body was nearly formed now and the smell of burning plastic was
overpowering and intoxicating. Melani picked up two of Bill’s ties. His eyes seemed to focus on hers as she let the tie slide down his chest. Melani leaned down to bring him into her mouth as it swelled.


The last word came out like a gunshot and Melani let his cock fall from her mouth. It landed against his thigh with a dull thwack.

“What?”

“Stop. Please we need to talk. Please.”

Melani pushed herself up onto the bed and looked down at Reagan laying prostrate on the floor, the tie across his chest as though he’d grown frustrated in his attempts to tie it properly and given up.

“Very well. What can I do for you, Mr. President.”

Reagan grabbed a nearby sheet and wrapped it around his waist as he stood up. Melani had never seen him stand before and seeing him drawn up to his full height was intimidating. She liked him better in restraints.

“How many times have we had sex?” He said.

“Eight.”

“Then you can start by calling me Ronald.”

Dum da dadadum. The music stops. A man in a dark suit and red tie sits at a desk bouncing a thin stack of white papers against the polished black glass surface of the desk-top. He’s wearing aviator sunglasses and a grey baseball cap
with an American flag above the bill. A green-screened background pans slowly over the continental United States of America set against a field of blue. A second man, wearing a tie dyed t-shirt, has a mop of long blond hair draped over half his face. He’s slouching down to the point that his head rests against the top of his chair, which would normally stop in the middle of his back. His eyelids are barely open.

“Hello America.” The upright man beings. “And welcome to tonight’s episode of The Hot Seat. We have a very special guest. Don’t we guest?”

The guest smiles and nods slowly almost as though it’s something he does periodically rather than as a response to a question.

“Do you think you’re special, guest?” The interviewer continues.

The man spins slowly in his chair while he speaks. “Like, we’re all special man. We’re unique creatures of the earth’s gorgeous and beautiful life energy which sustains all creative creativity, ya know.”

“Guest.” The man in the cap leans forward and the camera zooms in, magnifying his intensity. “Guest?”

“Yeah, man.”

“There are seven billion people on this earth. 350 million of them are Americans. Which means you are but one three-hundred-fifty-millionth of the best twentieth of the population of this planet. So I ask you: What. Makes. You. Special?”
The camera cuts to the guest. He is still rotating slowly in his chair. “I love everything man. I spread a better world through love and acceptance.”

“Guest, do you love canine feces?”

“Canine?”

“Dog.”

“Feces?”

“Biological waste excreted through the anus.”

“In like its own way man. Dog poo is part of all of us.”

“I think I see where you are going with this. You're reforming some of the philosophy from the Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita to fit your own lazy ideology.”

“I mean, yeah sorta.”

The interviewers voice drops into a more dramatic register. He speaks slowly. “Guest, will you enlighten us with a quotation?”

The guest stops spinning. “I uh.”

“Guest?”

“I mean I never really read it, man.”

“Do you mean: “He who experiences the unity of life sees his own self in all beings, and all beings in his own self?”

The guest shakes his head in disbelief.

“Does that fit your worldview guest?”

His blond hair sways gently. “Yeah man. Peace and love and togetherness.”
“That’s wonderful. I do see some of me in you, I suppose. And that seems to fill me with some feelings.”

“Go with those feelings man, they’ll set you free.”

The interviewer smiles and lightly clicks his teeth together twice. “I think I shall. Tell me, guest, do you know the next part of that quote? It fits my worldview.”

“Sorry brother, you know. I didn’t read it.”

“‘and looks on everything with an impartial eye.’ Do you know what that means, guest? It means to judge. So while I acknowledge that there is one three hundred and fifty millionth of me within you, I am afraid that I must judge the remaining three-hundred forty-nine-hundred and ninety-nine parts.”

_Dum da dum da da dum. The music stops. The host directs his gaze at the guest and the audience can see two copies of the blond man spinning in his chair reflected in the dark sunglasses._ “Are you ready for your Hot Seat questions, guest? Are you ready to be judged by your own philosophy.”

“Whatever man, totally.”

“How would you solve the healthcare crisis in this country?”

“Free healthcare for everyone, man.”

“How would you pay for that?”

“Tax the rich, man.”

“Do you have a job?”

“No, man.”
“So you want people who have jobs to pay for your health care.”

“Health care is a right, man.”

“I think that makes you a thief.”

“No way, man.”

“You want all the people with jobs, who make enough money to pay for their healthcare to pay for all the people like you with no jobs so that they can keep on not having jobs as long as possible?”

“I mean, yeah man. We got to take care of each other.”

“I see. You’re worse than a thief. You want to turn us into a nation of thieves, a government of thieves. You know what that makes you?”

“What, man?”

“A traitor. Listen guest, thief, traitor, I only have one more Hot Seat question for you.”

“Sure, man.”

“What three words does a jobless, hippy, thieving traitor never have to worry about hearing?”

The blond man stops spinning and seems to think hard for a moment.

“This a joke?”

“You are fired.” A heavy steel cage drops from the ceiling around the guest. He stands up and grips the bars with both hands, attempting to shake the cage. He looks down.

“What the fudge?”
Flames rush up from under the guest's chair in an explosion of red and yellow. He is engulfed in seconds and thrashing back forth against the bars. The cage shakes slightly as the host watches, emotionless. The guest’s hair flames first as he begins bashing his head against the bars over and over again, his face, skin, and clothing turning black amidst the licking flames. His right eye bursts and a pale, white liquid pours down his face. After a few seconds either the fire or a hard enough impact to the head causes him to collapse in a pile near the base of the chair.

A sense of satisfaction coats the host’s stony gaze like glaze on a pastry. At any moment he might begin to smile.

“That's all we have for tonight, America. I’d like like thank our guest for stopping by.”

“I’m burning up.” Said Ronald, tugging at the topmost button of Bill’s white, oxford dress shirt. Melani had been following him down seemingly random transfers, double backs, and turnstiles throughout the New York City subway system. Melani’s shirt clung to her like saran-wrap. But she wasn’t half as bad off as Ronald was. He had insisted on wearing a suit. Melani didn’t think she could really handle seeing him in something Bill wore often, so she put him in a dense, scratchy, dark green suit that looked like it was made from the skin of some great and monstrous spider or ten thousand non-monstrous spiders. Ronald was
sweating so much that the collar on Bill’s white, button-down Oxford dress shirt was nearly translucent.

As soon as they had gotten outside, Ronald had started walking as fast as he could. Melani was certain that he would have been running if not for her presence. She had expected him to “ooh” and “aah” at the various technological marvels of a world he had never seen before—after all it seemed as though he might have spent the last forty years inside of a television— but there was none of that. He circled blocks like a bloodhound tracking a scent and then nearly dragged Melani into the first subway station they saw.

After that it didn’t seem like he had any idea where he was going. They went from train to train and from line to line. Melani would have put a stop to it early on, but Ronald was insistent and Melani was getting him to tell her a little about himself during the short times they would be in the subway cars together. He had three types of memories. The first was like looking at someone else’s home movies from their perspective. He knew he wasn’t the person whose eyes he was seeing through when Ronald Reagan accepted awards or got acting lessons or was a lifeguard. He was disconnected from the sensation. Still there was a rightness to the idea of inhabiting that space. So when he went into his library of Reagan movies he saw that the man nearly always had a suit on in public. It felt right that Ronald should wear one as well. Melani had forced him to borrow a big pair of her bug eyed sunglasses to keep people from recognizing him. The second type of memory was exclusively sexual encounters with Melani.
He revealed this to her on the only air conditioned car they managed find all day. Those memories were definitely his. The problem with the other type of memory was that they were almost too perfect. It wasn’t just that he could recall the words to all of Reagan’s speeches, he could see actual pages and coffee stains and things no one had any business remembering. The memories he had with Melani were intense and messy. Emotion colored them. When she was tying him she seemed taller and stronger than she should, but standing next to him in the rear of the subway car she was almost a foot shorter and forty or fifty pounds lighter. Those were real memories.

After telling her about the “real memories” Ronald had refused to talk about the third type. Melani kept after him for another two hours of hopping trains but he stopped responding with salient deflections and now just refused to talk altogether. She owed him something. They’d slept together a handful of times and she had been high for all of them. She had treated him a bit like a sex toy but he hadn’t complained, in fact he loved it. She had her own damn problems to deal with. Bill for one. No note. She needed to get back and try to have a real conversation with him. Instead she was following this, this something or someone, around. Between the frustration and the heat and the sweat and the stonewalling, Melani was losing her patience for exploring the subway with Ronald so when he said “I’m burning up.” Melani replied “Stop. Just fucking stop.” As they stepped out into the 191st street station.

“We’ve been at this for fucking hours. Where the fuck are we going?”
“Farther,” Ronald said, motioning for her to follow.

He wasn’t headed towards the exit or another subway car or even a bench. He was headed towards the tunnel. “I’m not fucking going. I’ve had enough of the sweat and the bullshit. If we need to have some conversation we need to have it here.”

Ronald took a few more steps toward the tunnel. Melani marched over the aging grey tiles towards a wooden bench. It was covered in gum and god-knows-what-else but the only way she could make her stand was to sit down. She turned and let her tired, sweaty butt fall onto the seat.

“You can keep going,” she said “but the second I lose you I’m getting above ground, flagging a cab and going back to my goddamn air conditioned apartment.”

If Ronald had a clockwork brain, Melani was sure she could see the gears turning. He was half facing her and his body was leaning towards the tunnel like a sunflower bending into the sunlight. He took a deep breath and threw his shoulder towards her. Like a two-year-old on the verge of a tantrum, he marched a few frustrated steps in her direction and forced himself to sit. Sweat was pooling above the borrowed sunglasses on his forehead and streaming down like rain drops on a window pane.

“Thank you. Now can we have that talk I am now suspecting you made up just to get the hell out of the the apartment?”

Reagan nodded. He was taking big, laboured breaths.
“You’re going to die of fucking heat stroke if you don’t take that jacket off.”

Reagan looked around and Melani followed his eyes. Aside from two rats fighting over something in a styrofoam container, the only other people in the station were a group of four Hasidic Jews waiting on the other side of the tracks, covered completely in thick, black garments. They were the only people who might have been sweating more than Ronald. Their heads were bowed in prayer but Melani thought they looked more like Russian supervillains than religious zealots.

Ronald took off Bill’s suit jacket, folded it neatly, and set it down on the seat bench next to him. Sweat had now completely soaked the the undershirt and the button-down and it looked like Ronald was wearing a second skin that he was about half-way through shedding.

“I don’t know what changed, but I’m conscious all the time now.” He said. “After we...” his voice trailed off.

“Fuck.”

“Yes. After that, I’m aware while I’m inside the machine and it’s maddening. I don’t have a real sense of what I am or how long I’m in there. It’s terrifying.”

“What makes it so scary? I mean, I don’t know what it’s like to be in something like this. I don’t even know what you are.”

Ronald closed his eyes. “I can see green words on a black computer screen. I was part of a program that aimed to create a clone of the president who
could take his place in case his condition worsened. But that’s really all I could
tell you. I can’t tell you why I’m in an old TV set. I can’t tell you why I’m aware
now but I wasn’t before you brought me back. The only thing I can really tell you
is that when I’m trapped inside the machine, I’m scared. I possess no means to
escape. I have to wait. I have to fear.”

All the blood had drained from his face. Melani didn’t dare to touch him,
but she knew the sweat had gone cold. “Fear what?”

“That you won’t bring me back. It’s hell. If you die I could spend infinity
trapped and insubstantial, waiting for someone to bring me into existence.”

Somewhere in a control room under Grand Central Station an old woman
pressed a small, green button labeled “1 TRAIN ALT TRACK” and Melani saw
the rail realign so the next train through would leave on different track. As the
rail moved it split the two rats and they scurried off terrified that the small change
meant a big threat could be here any minute.

“That’s easy to solve.” Melani said, smiling. “I can rig a press timing switch
so that it completes the circuit at any interval you want. Shit, I might not even
need to rig something. They used to make these little timers for people who
wanted the TV to keep the cats company or make it look like they were home
while they went on vacation. We set it to bring you back every hour on the hour if
we want. All Ronald all the time. It won’t matter if I’m home or-- shit.”

“Shit?”

“Bill.”
“Bill?”

“My um, boyfriend Bill.”

“Boyfriend?”

“You’re wearing his clothing.”

Ronald looked over the sopping wet clothing he had on. It seemed like he had been given a riddle and he thought the answer had been stuck somewhere on his body.

“Look. I’m sorry. I’m a mess sometimes. I don’t always understand why I do shit. But the fact that a lot of the shit I do is drug-shit is probably a factor.”

Reagan looked up when Melani said “Drug-shit.”

“I don’t do too much. I do a lot but not really too much. Not yet. I smoke a lot of pot and drink a lot but not too much.”

“I need to know something and you need to be honest.” Ronald interrupted. “Is Bill a threat? Is he the sort of man who would do something? Something like throwing away the machine or calling the police?”

Melani laughed. “Fuck no. Bill is the opposite of a threat. I’ve been with him for eight years and he’s never been anything but the opposite of a threat. He is a white wall. He doesn’t call anyone. He doesn’t express. I come home late and drunk five nights a week and he doesn’t notice. I come home high and he doesn’t notice. I break dishes and his attention doesn’t see me, it sees the small mess that must be addressed. He has this simple fucking bullshit.” Tears began to form around the edges of Melani’s eyes. “Way of doing things. All he has to
fucking do is accept that whatever is fucking wrong is the way that things must fucking be and so it can be fucking dismissed as not a fucking problem. But fuck what am I supposed to fucking. I am a fucking problem. The lack of a fucking problem between us is a fucking problem. For the love of fuck, I, I, I. You are a whatever the fuck you are and I fucking fucked you. What the hell is that? What the fuck is wrong with me? Why am I fucked up on drugs all the fucking time? Why do I torture me? Why did I? I tied you up and I, I, I..."

Reagan pressed his lips and against Melani’s and they kissed. Melani fell into the release for a second. The energy was going to transfer. She could lose herself in this. She saw herself fucking him in the back of a darkened subway car, her screams of ecstasy barely eclipsing the chaotic rumble and screech as the train roared through the tunnels beneath the city. She pushed him away.

“What was that?” she said.

“That’s the only thing you’ve shown me I can do to make you happy.”

Melani took a deep breath. “C’mon,” She said and gave Ronald a quick kiss. “There is one more thing I want to show you and then we have to get you back in the machine before Bill gets home. We’ll stop and buy a press timer on the way.”

It was starting to get dark when they climbed the stairs out of the 42nd street-Times Square subway station. A family of luminescently-blond, Swedish tourists pushed Melani and Reagan against wall as they climbed the stairs, and then as the Swedes were in turn pressed, Melani and Reagan were pressed
together. When they reached the top of the stairs Melani gasped because the trip up the stairs was hot, sweaty, and claustrophobic.

Ronald gasped and said “how did they get rid of all the porn? This place used to be covered in dirty bookstores, strip shows, porno theaters and prostitutes.” The Swedes, who must have known more English than they employed, hurried their children into the crowd as fast as they could. Reagan took off his glasses and looked around. “This was the capital of filth and sex.” He said to Melani. “How in God’s name did they clean it all up?”

Ronald didn’t wait for an answer. He was wandering into the heart of the Times Square. He was moving too quickly through the crowd for Melani to keep up. Naked Cowboys, huge costumed red Elmos, Disney characters, Superheroes, princesses, and blue Elmos blocked her way. Melani started ducking under fuzzy arms and pushing through tourists until she spotted Reagan standing by himself staring up at an eight-story tall digital billboard.

Ronald didn’t see the girl underneath the bright-pink hair skipping and running towards him. Her black mini skirt and leather bra reminded Melani of the girl she was in college. The girl pirouetted around a tourist who was checking the battery on her camera, grabbed him and yelled “Oh my god you’re fucking perfect!” Ronald froze. She pulled him down to her height and snapped a selfie with him while she stuck her tongue out between two fingers. Then she stuffed a dollar bill into his suit pocket and ran off into the masses.
Melani laughed and made her way over to him. “Congratulations Mr. Reagan, you’re a star.”

Melani let Reagan pose for a few more photos with tourists. He made eight dollars in just about a half hour. Then Melani pulled him off to the side and held him against the wall. She put one small hand against the center of his chest and pressed hard. She could feel the nest of hair there and strength that could push her away in a second. But he remained pinned. Melani pulled a twenty dollar bill from her pocket.

“I’ve got a little money here, but you’ll have to work for it.”

“Just tell me what I need to do.”

Melani grabbed Ronald’s shirt and pulled him down to her level and kissed him; she bit his lower lip until she felt a slight shiver just before pain would have taken over. She released him and kissed him quickly on the lips.

“That’s a good start,” she said, stuffing the bill into his shirt pocket. “You’ve earned one of those dollars.” She took him by the tie and started leading him back towards the subway. “Let’s get you home and see what it takes to get the other nineteen.”

Melani was in the shower when Bill got home. She heard the door shut and felt the water temperature change when Bill got a glass from the kitchen tap. Getting Reagan back into the machine hadn’t been fun. She tried to fake it, pretend she was incredibly turned on and had to have him, but it was obvious
that this was about hiding him. Reagan didn’t really look at her the whole time.

He kept rolling his eyes and his head back while she rode him, exposing his neck
like bait in a bad vampire movie. His moans were fake. But the job was done and
Melani felt the need to make herself clean. She’d been in the shower for over an
hour.

He hands were pink and pruney from the too-hot water. She always liked
her showers that way. Their bathroom was small and it filled with steam. She sat
down on the big, blue, gill-less fish that doubled as a no-slip shower mat. How
long could she stay here before Bill would come in to see if she had fallen and
split her head open? Long enough for all the blood to drain out of her, if she had?
Melani reached out with her wrinkly, pink hand and shut off the water.

Melani walked out naked and dripping, a trail of wet foot prints on the
carpet. She could hear a faint sizzle and smell caramelizing onions. She followed
the smell and stood in the living room with one hand barely concealing her
vagina while she used her forearm to cover her nipples. She did her best to look
as vulnerable as she felt.

A minute passed and Melani was starting to get cold. Dinner would be
delicious. Bill was a fantastic cook. It looked like they were having lamb or maybe
steak and onions and mushrooms. The oven was on, so there were probably two
potatoes inside, wrapped in tinfoil and smothered in butter and spices. He wasn’t
going to turn around and notice her, but he was doing that for her. His dedication
was measurable.
Melani turned and headed back towards the hall closet. Bill would have perfectly folded eight towels. They would be on the second shelf. Melani’s towels would be on the right and in a few moments she would no longer be cold and wet.

Melani sat the kitchen table with Bill and imagined carving BILL & MELANI 4 EVER into it. She pushed the lamb around on her plate and piled the onions and mushrooms in her split-open baked potato like grave worms into a casket. She drank three IPAs and waited for a reaction. Silence was order. Bill didn’t disturb order. Melani watched him eat bite after bite in quiet contemplation or perhaps there was just a faint buzzing noise constantly playing in his head that made not thinking or talking easier.

She tried to be grateful for the meal and for the towels. But she liked cold pizza and she wasn’t above just shaking the water off and wrapping herself up the blankets until her hair started to dry out.

“I have a friend that needs to stay with us for a little while.” Melani said.

Bill put down his fork. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You don’t even know him.”

“Him?”


“How do you even know this guy?”

“I met him at work.”
“I don’t like it.”

“Please. It would mean a lot to me. Look, it’s the right thing to do.” Those words were like magic. Bill met needs. Bill always did the right thing. If he ran it through his system of checks and balances and the threat level was low, the right thing always won.

“I think I’ll need to meet him first.”

“Great. Come with me.” Melani stood up and headed toward the bedroom.

“Where are we going?” Bill asked.

“To see what’s on TV.”

Bill was in the living room. He was sitting on the couch, cross legged, breathing air into a plastic bag because Melani couldn’t find a paper one. Reagan was in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes rolled as far up into his skull as they would go and his chin pointed towards the doorway Melani was standing in so that she could talk to both men as necessary.

So far there had been panic from both of them. Bill had panicked because his conceptions of what is and is not possible were forced to shift, and without Melani’s lifetime of drug use to prepare him for something truly new, his brain tried to make his stomach go for a run and only managed to get its contents to take a walk. Melani would clean up the vomit later. Reagan had come out expecting sex before he realized someone else was in the room and barely
managed interpret the fear in Melani’s eyes in time to stop from pulling her down onto him.

He hadn’t spoken since he asked for clothing. He was stretching out a grey pair of Melani’s sweat pants and had the blanket wrapped around him like a shawl.

Melani decided it’d be easier work with a weakened Bill than a pissed off Ronald. “He’s real Bill.”

Bill let the bag fall to the ground and looked up. “It. Whatever It is, It is an it. Hes and hers come from hes and hers and its come from machines. That is an it.”

An image of Ronald, his back arched over and hands tied behind his back as he came, flashed through Melani’s brain. “That’s not fair. He’s a man.”

“It doesn’t even qualify as an animal.”

Reagan shouted from the bedroom “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

“It quotes.”

“Bill, you’re going to have to chill out and accept this. Otherwise”

“Otherwise, It can take its TV and take itself for a walk and never come back, because It, whatever It is, is not my problem.”

Melani blew out a blast of air and made her way over toward the freezer. There was always a bottle of vodka there. “How about we have a drink and start over?” Melani reached into the freezer and pushed aside a bag of organic frozen
kale and found a fifth covered in a thin frost. She held it up. “Something to take
the edge off?”

“Does It even drink?”

Melani heard Ronald get up from the bed and march towards the kitchen.
She bit the inside of her cheek. He walked up to her and put his hand out. Melani
laid the bottle in it. The frost melted under the warmth of his hand and the bottle
slid out onto the floor. It didn’t break. It bounced a little and then spun in tight
circle. It stopped, pointing at Melani.

“I guess it needs a little more practice.” Said Ronald.

Melani picked up the bottle by the neck and pointed it at Bill. “Why don’t
you go first, honey.”

‘Honey’ had been a mistake. Reagan must have balked. Melani saw the
realization illuminate Bill’s face like a camera flash. Then it was gone and Bill was
standing there holding the bottle before Melani could start damage control.

“I don’t usually drink,” Bill said. “It’s bad for the liver.” He opened the bottle
and took a slow drink. He turned his gaze to Melani. “Does it even have a liver?”

Ronald took the bottle from Bill’s hand. “Let’s find out.” He took a longer
drink and handed the bottle back to Bill. “Thanks for sharing.”

Bill kept his eyes on Ronald. “Melani, how long have you had it?”

“A couple days.”

“What to took you so long to tell me? I mean, you discover some sort of
slimy, TV, robot thing and you’d think that’d be the sort of thing you’d share with
the love of your life. Wouldn’t you? You’d think you’d mention it when you crawl into bed next to me every single night. Don’t you? After all, it is pretty incredible.”

Melani saw the same growling dog in both their eyes. “Let’s sit down for a second.”

Both men moved towards the table and took a seat opposite each other. If grinding teeth threw sparks the apartment would have been on fire. Melani sat down so that she was facing the wall with a man on either side. She took half the remaining bottle in one pull.

“We have to treat Ronald like a man. It’s only fair. He’s here. I can’t explain why, but he’s real and he’s here and he’s a real human man.”

Bill slowly turned toward Melani. “How do you know?”

Melani took another drink to stall. “What?”

“How do you know he’s a man. Did you see him get cut and bleed a little? Maybe watch him eat and drink and respirate? Meet his normal human kids? Or did you just break down and give him a complete physical?”

“I... It’s not like that.”

“Like what?”

Melani took one more drink. “Shit. Bill, I was bored.”

“You were bored, so you...?”

“I was really high.” Melani watched Ronald’s face drop into his hands and rest there. “The first time, well I was bored for a long time.”

“The first time you did what?”
“When I was a little girl I liked to fill tupperware with water and then put a Ken doll in and freeze it. I never knew why, I just called the game ice rescue.

There were other games too, like dungeon rescue, where Ken fell into the neighbor boy’s He-man set and got chained to the dungeon wall. And this game where Ken gets caught in a spider’s web. And a lot more. But then I got older and I stopped playing with my dolls and stopped thinking about why my dolls didn’t drive around in the pink car or go by the pool and get tans or anything the other girls seemed to do.

“Then he slid out of a machine. He was a doll and he was new and there was this electrical cord and it was perfect. I could tie knots around his wrists. And I… It was like having… I’ve been floating for so long and then the shock of seeing him just grounded me in…”

The way Bill had his lips sucked into his mouth showed that he knew exactly what Melani did.

She looked at Ronald. “Ronald you better go for a bit and let Bill and I deal with this. Take some money from my purse and the suit you had on yesterday and go down to the diner on the corner and I’ll come get you later.”

“Don’t bother.” Bill said. “I’m leaving. You can’t afford the lease on your own and I can. Find somewhere else to stay before I get back. You and it.”

Melani had disturbed order and Bill was going to restore it. He had taken steps to remove himself from stress and chaos. Then he would force the chaos
from his world and rebuild it in his own image. He was a little god, not in need of inferior worship.

Ronald hung his head and didn’t look up for a second as Bill packed his suitcase. Melani wanted to shout out to Bill or beg Reagan to intervene. But she was the chaos-tumor. To plead or beg or fight or scream would be to prove herself malignant. She watched him pack seven distinct outfits from socks to shirts in a silence that expressed itself as colossal pressure throughout the apartment.

The pressure amplified sound waves. Suitcase zippers sounded like chainsaws. Labored breaths pushed back the walls. Footfalls threatened to crash through the floor. Bill must have been aware of the same amplification. He pulled the door shut softly and the latch clicked into place with the near-silence of a blood vessel popping.

There was a long silence. Melani took three more big drinks out of the bottle, draining it with the last and choking. She tried to avoid letting Ronald know that she knew he was watching her drink. She opened her mouth to speak.

“I am a copy.” Ronald said, first. “I am not an original. I’m an It to Bill and a doll to you.”

Melani felt the vodka warming her limbs. “I don’t want to deal with this. I want to smoke and I want to undress. Then I want you to fuck me.”

Ronald was silent for longer than Melani’s eyes could focus on him, but the blur said “Whatever your desire is.”
A grey haze hung in the air while Ronald laid Melani down on the bed and took her roughly. She lost herself in the force of his thrusts. Blacking out and being shocked back into reality by spikes of pain and pleasure. He went at her with all his force and sweat poured from them in the summer heat. Half conscious, his sex took her into an ocean storm. Her rag-doll body tossing violently in the waves until she gave up the struggle for air and took the water into her and sank, drowning in the darkness below.

The next morning Melani rolled over into a crinkling noise where Ronald should have been and found a note where she wanted to find his lips. It read:

Melani,

I am copy. I can see the image in my mind clearly. I was made to be a copy, a brilliant and near perfect copy, but it is clear to me that I was never meant to believe that I was the first. However, it appears I must somehow learn to be the first me. This is why I cannot go on being with you. I can't be an it to Bill. I can't be a doll come to life to fulfill your sexual fantasies. I have to go figure out what it means to be me.

I'm am sorry, but in order to do this I have taken the clothing you loaned me last time we went out, the Farnsworth machine, and since it is too heavy to carry, the red dolly you used to transport it.

I doubt it is worth much, but I have an enjoyed my time with you. I owe you a great deal and regret we must part this way.
Sincerely,

An Original Copy

Melani pushed the note and half the pillows onto the floor. Half of a joint was still laying on her nightstand.

PREVIOUSLY ON MELANI’S LIFE:

Bill, Melani, and Reagan seemed as though they would never get along. Bill nearly had a mental breakdown as his perception of what is and is not possible took a severe nut-punch in watching Ronald Reagan slide out of an antique television set. He then spent the next few hours accusing Melani of drugging him.

Eventually his panic subsided and they were able to have a good conversation over a reasonable amount alcohol. They discussed Melani’s infidelity and in a scene absolutely fraught with emotional moments concluded that her cheating was as much Bill’s fault for ignoring her as it was hers for fucking Ronald a few times.

From the fires of honesty came a healing light that blessed them all. After a few weeks, everything was perfect. Bill resumed his role as caretaker and food cooker. He accepted Ronald, at first on a trial basis, and then permanently into their home. Ronald started making significant money just by going to Times Square and taking pictures with tourists. Melani even regularly went to work
herself and found a customer with a vast collection of classic televisions to repair and she spent her days challenged and satisfied.

The nights were just as satisfying. Bill admitted that he was in fact interested in being tied up and had just been repressing this desire, so Melani started performing joint sessions with both him and Ronald, much to the pleasure of both men.

EPISODE 5: He’s Company

Birds are singing harmony somewhere in the distance as Melani wakes from restful sleep with Bill on one side of her and Ronald on the other. Melani kisses each of them in turn. They kiss her back. There is raccoon carrying a rose in its teeth scratching at the window. Melani spots him and smiles. The light reflects off her perfect, pearly teeth.

MELANI: Look boys it’s our old friend Mr. Bandit. Won’t someone please let him in.

Bill gets up, opens the window wide and lets the raccoon in. The raccoon brings the rose over to Melani.

MELANI: Hello Mr. Bandit. Did you bring me a li’l present?

MR. BANDIT: [Squeaks and titters]

BILL AND RONALD: Isn’t he adorable?

Mr. Bandit drops the rose on Melani’s lap. She picks it up and inhales.
MELANI: Yuck! What’s that smell.

A small pile of raccoon poop sits on the bed just behind Mr. Bandit.

ALL: Mr. Baaaaandit!

Mr. Bandit stares into the camera and winks.

BREAK FOR COMMERCIAL

A powerful, overhead spot light illuminates a pulpit. It’s occupied by a single man. He’s wearing hooded black vestments after the style of benedictine monks. With his hood pulled up, only his nose and lips protrude far enough to catch the light. The rest of his face is shadowed. Three crosses, one directly behind him and one to each side, form a backdrop behind him.

“Fornication. I’ll say it again. Fornication. No one likes to talk about fornication, but we must. America, the Bible says that it is the will of God that ye abstain from fornication. The Bible says to consider yourself dead to being overly affectionate, to being unclean, to coveting, to concupiscence, and to fornication.

“But you aren’t listening, America. You are fornicating. You are fornicating more than ever. You can’t stop putting your penises anywhere that they will fit and filling your vaginas and your anuses with all manner of protuberances.

“What is to be done, America? What is the cause we need to root out? What rotten limb must we amputate before the infection spreads into the blood?”

The man throws a cloaked arm up and a pale white finger extends toward the cross on his left. “What about…” He pauses. “THE MEDIA!”
A spotlight shines down on the cross. We can see now that a man in a suit has been tied there. A black, velvet bag hangs over his head and is drawn tight at the neck.

“This man manages top musical talent in rap music videos.” Prerecorded booing pours out from an imagined audience.

“I’m upset too, America! He hires the booties that bounce up and down, up and down sending the minds of our youth to languish in a lust-laden pit of despair.” More pre-recorded booing.

“Don’t worry, America, he’ll get what’s coming to him. I ask you again. Who is responsible for telling our girls to be sluts and harlots and sexpots, taking men into their sweet and virginal mouths and swallowing the poisonous seed of fornication?”

He throws up a cloaked arm and gestures at the cross on the right. “THE MEDIA!” A spotlight illuminates a female form, dressed in pantyhose and a blue business suit, head concealed by a black velvet bag. “This woman. This Jezebel, has lined her pockets with ill-gotten gold by making television programs which glorify the fornicating ways of women who prostitute the God-given beauty of the holy temple of their bodies. “

More pre-recorded booing. “She makes me sick too, America. Her punishment will be just.” The woman on the cross seems to struggle for a moment, then collapse under the strain.
“But America, I’m not through. Who belongs on that third cross? We could crucify members of the hedonistic, corrupting, American media every minute from this minute until the minute of Judgement day, and we’d never end the problem.”

A spotlight shines on an empty cross. The pre-recorded audience gasps.

“Who belongs there? Who is consuming the media?”

His voice drops to a whisper and the camera zooms in on his shrouded face. “You are, America. You’re forcing your daughters to fornicate with you. You’re sodomizing your sons in front the whole world. America, you deserve to die on that cross. And we are going to put you there.”

The man reaches into the pulpit and withdraws a weapon of some kind. It looks like a standard shotgun with an oaken stock and a gun-black barrel. It has two attachments that do not look standard. The first is a small, silver-painted metal canister with a long silver tube coming out of the back and connecting to the stock. The second is a long chain of thick, metal nails hanging down from the barrel.

“America, technology isn’t all bad. The Romans had to nail Christ to the cross by hand. We seem to have improved on that.”

He levels the gun at the man in the suit. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Nails rip through the man’s hands and the last penetrates his chest. He screams and struggles and writhes on the cross as blood flows from his wounds.
He swings the gun over to the woman. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Hand, hand, chest. The woman growls in agony. Blood flows from the wound in her chest and begins to pool in her stockings.

The shooter turns back to the camera and rests the gun over his shoulder, barrel pointed away from the camera. “It’s going to take them a little while to bleed out. America, this is your fate. Unless! You can change your ways. America, I tell you now. If you don’t stop forcing our youth into the heinous sexual slavery of fornication, I will find you. And I will,” He pulls the trigger on the gun and the nail flies into the center of the empty cross, “drive a stake through the heart of your evil.”

Original Copy

Ronald had twenty-eight dollars. It was ten-thirty in the morning and the only thing he knew to do was to get on the subway. It had taken a lot of work to bring the TV into the subway car and he didn’t want to do the work it would take to get it out. So he was going to ride the 1 train as far as it went.

There only a few other people in the car with him. On the far right stood a long-legged blonde, in a dark skirt and silver top. Either her clothes were tailored or the designer had made them for someone with exactly her proportions. She had her back against the metal pole in the car to brace herself when the train stopped at stations or bounced on the tracks. Ronald knew that behind her
sunglasses, which reminded him of Melani’s, were a pair of black eyelashes that reached out into the world like silk-fine, barely visible spider’s fingers. If she had needed the train to stop and go back it would have found a way.

Ronald followed a faint odor to the man on his left. The car was air conditioned but it was still summer and still hot in the subway. But this man was still wearing a thick sweater and maybe a few more layers underneath that. He was stretched out across three seats and his jeans were an oblong patchwork of stains. Even though he seemed to be sleeping, one of his hands had a tight grip on oversized, military issue duffel bag.

Ronald looked back and forth at the two passengers. He had the memories of a man who spent a lifetime with people with long elegant legs and larger than life personalities. There wasn’t a pair of eyelashes that could reduce men to their knees behind the big sunglasses he had stolen from Melani, but there was the face of a man who had led Hollywood and then a nation.

How many days without a shower or sleeping on a park bench before he was the man sleeping with an iron grip on a soiled duffelbag? If you looked at his suit, he might still belong with her. If you looked in his pockets and counted his twenty-eight dollars you know he was closer to being the bum.

“Miss,” He said. “Could you help me settle a bet?”

She didn’t move. “Miss?” He said a little louder.

She sighed and turned a little toward him. “What?”

“Could you help me settle a bet?”
“This better not be some kind of stupid pick up line. I don’t have time for your bullshit.”

Ronald put his hands up in defense. “No, I promise. I just want to know if you know where the cheapest place to stay for one night in the city is. You see I have this bet with a friend—”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Bed-Stuy probably.” The car came to a stop. “This is my stop. Don’t follow me.” As soon as the doors opened she stepped off and hurried out of view.

“You got a dollar?” The accent was thick and caribbean. “I know where you need to stay.”

Ronald turned around. The man was sitting up now and clutching his bag to his chest with both hands. His smile, which was several teeth short of a full smile, was warm nonetheless. “It’s just a bet I have with a friend.”

“I know broke when I hear broke. But if you got a dollar, I help you win you bet.”

Ronald reached into his pocket and found a dollar. He walked to the end of the car and sat across from the man. The man took the dollar from him and smiled.

“Get you to Chinatown. Place called the Gold Moon Hotel. You stay there for cheap. Or you come to shelter tonight.” The man’s smile said he knew Ronald was going to a shelter.

“You got another dollar?”

He considered paying the man for the directions. “Thanks anyway, but I’ll get there on my own.”

The train pulled into the next stop and Ronald got off to study the New York City Subway map.

Ronald stood outside of the Golden Moon Hotel. He was down to $24 dollars, but he was there. The building was eight stories tall and painted a flat beige. Scaffolding hung haphazardly off half the windows and the fire escapes looked like they wouldn’t support a cat that happened to wander on to them. The blue sign outside was in Chinese but someone had hand painted “Golden Hotel” under the characters in white letters. The entrance to the Golden Hotel was a single glass and metal door with a sign that read WELCOME in English and probably “Don’t Stay Here” in Chinese. It was squeezed in between a nail salon and a fishmonger.

The door opened to a steep set of stairs that went up at least two floors. At the top there was a small receptionist desk and a surprisingly clean waiting area decorated with fake plastic plants and gold framed mirrors. A small, plump Asian woman with a bob hair cut and nurse’s scrubs stood behind the desk smiling. The room smelled like a hospital.
“Hello sir!” Her head bobbed up and down with exaggerated hospitality as she spoke. “Would you like a room? We have one bed and two bed.” Her smile was too big and it revealed the age lines on her face.

“How much is a single?” Said Ronald walking up to the desk.

“Fifteen dollars. Cash only. Would you like a room?” She said still bobbing and smiling like a dashboard decoration.

Ronald pulled his twenty out and she gave him back five and a key labeled 6V. She directed him to a staircase to the left of the desk and said “Check out at eleven in the morning or you have to pay for another night. No exceptions. Please have a good stay.”

The only room in the building that was airconditioned was the reception area. By the third set of stairs Ronald was dripping sweat again. He was peeking in the rectangular portholes of every grey-steel door and seeing the same long grey hallway with an uncountable number of doors lining both sides. It was like walking around the inside of hydra and staring down a thousand monstrous esophaguses.

He came to a big grey door with a blue six painted on it and pulled it open. Three doors down on the left he found another grey door, this time made of wood, with a blue 6V painted beside the peep hole. The key slid into the lock and with a little jiggle the door opened.
The combined stenches of urine and stale cigarette smoke burned his throat and lungs like sulfur. He coughed and doubled over, grabbing his knees with one hand and covering his mouth with the other. His eyes started to water.

Ronald spun so that his back was against the wall and the open door shielded his view of the room. He took a deep breath of air from as far away from his room as he could manage and went in.

After a few seconds the burning sensation in his eyes subsided and he allowed himself to breathe. With the door open the smell was fading. That, or his sense of smell had been destroyed forever. There were dark stains on the walls and a thin yellowing film on everything. It was the same color of grey as everything else outside of the reception area. There was a metal bar, dotted with rust, running across the room. It was either holding up the building or just there to hang clothing on. There was also a small foot locker to the right of the bed that could double as a nightstand. It was different shade of grey and put together with rusted-metal screws and bindings. The bed was small and seemed the sort of thing a sick child might sleep on in a hospital during the 1940’s. A sheet, blanket, and pillow (all grey, all stained), were folded as though a twelve year old boy had been told to fold his bedding before he got to play with the friends standing outside his window.

Ronald sat on the bed and the springs let out a dreary metal on metal groan. The smell was definitely coming from the bed. Ronald closed his eyes
again and pushed the toxic fumes out of his consciousness. This needed to be tolerated. This would be tolerated. He opened his eyes.

Someone, perhaps the first someone, perhaps the last someone, had taken the time to decorate the wall around the room’s entrance. They used a brown marker, perhaps a lot of brown markers, to draw a huge, conical pile of feces. Aside from the upper corners and space left blank by the open door it took up the entire wall. Ronald got up and shut the door.

The artists had left a message in the same marker with big, angry letters filled with slashes and bold lines. It read:

YOU ARE NOW INSIDE
THE BIGGEST PILE OF SHIT
ON EARTH
(watch out for the rats)

Ronald flicked the deadbolt over and fell back onto the bed. He ran his hand down his pants and felt the folded cash there. Something forced his mouth to smile as though it were a grape pushing out through its skin. He chuckled. He giggled. He began to laugh. Full throated, he laughed until sides ached and his throat burned from inhaling the smell. He doubled over and pushed his face into the pillow try muffle his cackling. He laughed until his neighbors pounded on the wall and screamed in languages he didn’t understand.
He pulled himself together and explained his laughter to whoever was listening. “It’s just, if I want to stay here again tomorrow, I’m going need to find a way to make some money.”

Times Square was as alive as it had been all week. Heat, rain, dense crowds, nothing kept the tourists away. Couples were coming up to hug him and snapping pictures with their phones. Teens were giving him the middle finger or bull horns and making rude faces and taking pictures with their phones. Today, a woman with her hair in a hundred tight braids and a pink T-shirt that read “bachelorette” came with an entourage of drunken bridesmaids and they took turns getting on their knees and opening their mouths wide in front of his zipper or bending over and grinding against his crotch or spanking him or having him spank them. It was a little demeaning but he had made thirty five dollars in ten minutes. The maid of honor asked him if was willing to do some work as a stripper later, but Ronald just smiled and shook his head. He’d already made enough to pay the rent and eat today. There were more tourists lining up.

Ronald moved through the text of The Original’s speech at The Brandenburg Gate. It was his biggest crowd pleaser. When he got to the speech’s punchline he always gestured back to the giant eight story tall screen and demanded “MR. MAYOR! TEAR DOWN THAT WALL!” to raucous applause. And as much as twenty dollars stuffed into his pockets.
Today had been going especially good in the donations department. Ronald found getting the motivation to work long hours very easy. He had been fending off rats and hunger pains at the Golden Moon Hotel for long enough. But even with the stench and the vermin and the mold encrusted communal showers, it was cheap. At fifteen dollars a day plus another ten for food and another seven for subway rides (Ronald refused to travel any other way) he was managing to save a few dollars every day. He knew he wanted to turn that money into an apartment somehow, but without a social security number, or a driver’s license, or an address, or a taxable job, or, he discovered, even fingerprints, he had no idea how he would do that.

On the plus side he was starting to get to know a lot of the other street performers. He was new and popular and posing together meant more money for everyone. People loved to see Ronald Reagan posing alongside the Disney characters, the Super Heroes, the cowboy in his underwear, and beggars with signs that read things like “Why sleep in my $1,000,000 mansion When I can sleep under a $18,000,000 bridge?” and “Heroin is Expensive. Can I get $50 and Needle?”

What really brought in the money was the Elmos, blue and red. They seemed to be partners and Ronald figured out that they weren’t really official Elmos. They were wearing “Blue Monster Costume” and “Red Monster Costume,” but it was close enough for the public. What made the extra money wasn’t that the crowd loved them, but that they were pushy. They didn’t like one
dollar tips. They pushed for five and ten and they got them. Sometimes Ronald made as much in hour when the Costumed Monsters came up as he did all day giving his speeches. He didn't like the Costumed Monsters all that much but he couldn't argue with their effectiveness.

Around 4 pm Ronald took his first break. He was slick with sweat and the smell of melted plastic threatened to overwhelm the garbage, urine, and body odor that pervaded New York City. He bought a hot dog and a Coke for five dollars and the vendor gave him an extra hot dog in exchange for snapping a photo with him. The extra food and the kindness was encouraging. This wasn't the best way to eke out a living, but it seemed like it might work. He was tired, but full, and he had $59 dollars neatly folded up in his back pocket. If he could stay on his feet another few hours he could call today a great day, financially anyways.

He returned to the Square and gave his speeches with passion. Pointing his fingers and leveling knowing gazes at tourists as they streamed by like an erupting next of confused insects.

“I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls
had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still…”

Most of the speeches were successful, but it was the 1984 speech that was his favorite to perform. People stopped to hear the Brandenburg Gate speech. People stopped to listen to him talk about the shining city America could be. He repeated the best sections over and over until it was close to 9pm. That was when the crowd started to change. New York might be the city that never sleeps but it certainly works different shifts from time to time. The after nine crowd was crass and tipped poorly. Still, they did tip and every dollar counted.

Ronald never stopped to count his money but the Elmos worked the asshole shift with him from nine until about eleven and Ronald could tell from the bulges of wadded up and folded over bills in his pockets that he’d had a great day. If there was a fifteen dollar hotel in the city then there had to be a thirty dollar hotel in the city somewhere. Maybe he could find a room that didn’t have rats and a stench that made him want to drink whiskey first thing in the morning, just to get the lingering taste out of his mouth.

Finding a new place would have to wait. Ronald hadn’t eaten since four and he desperately needed to find a slice of pizza. He started down 42nd street. There was faint mist in the refracting and reflecting the orange streetlights, yellow headlights, red-glowing signs and myriad of other colors, so that the whole city seemed to be awash and swirling in an otherworldly fog.
Through the fog he spotted a spotted a blue sign ringed with moving white lights. It read, PIZZA.

Hope let Ronald indulge a bit. He was halfway through the first of three slices of meat-lovers pizza he had purchased and a sipping a grape soda. The store was warm and overwhelmed with the smell of spiced meats. The booths were made of wood, painted red, and the most comfortable place Ronald had sat in days. The floors were made of red and white tiles that had chipped, cracked and been replaced over and over through the years. He couldn’t be sure but Ronald thought the young greaser in a photo above the cash register, wearing a black-leather jacket and slicked back hair looked a lot like the old man wearing an apron that was equal parts pizza sauce and flour.

Ronald thought about asking if he could rent out the booth he was sitting in. He reached into the Original's memory of a state dinner where he and Mikhail ate a dozen Russian delicacies. The Original enjoyed the caviar and kotlety but favored Monkey Bread over just about all other foods. Ronald looked down at his reheated pizza and grape soda. He shook his head, casting aside the memories of the other flavors. If he was really going to figure out who he was he’d need base everything off his own memories. For right now thin-crust sausage, pepperoni, and bacon pizza, with white cheese, and almost no sauce was his favorite dinner. Grape soda, his favorite drink.

Ronald didn’t really know exactly what time it was, but it felt late and he wanted to ride the subway for a while before he went back to the hotel. He said
goodbye to the owner, who only smiled in reply, and went back out into New York City.

Just as he exited, the Red Elmo was walking by. “Hey man!” A faintly hispanic accented voice half-echoed out from inside of the giant, fuzzy head. “How you doing? Mind if I walk with you a little bit? I want to talk about today. You were good but I got some pointers.”

“Alright.” Ronald said and headed back 42nd street.

“Where you headed?” The huge, lifeless eyes on the Red Elmo made everything he said feel like a joke Ronald couldn't get.

“One train.”

“Okay first tip. Never go back toward Times Square to catch any of the trains. That for tourists. You’re not a tourist. Follow me.” Elmo pivoted in place and headed back down the street.

Ronald followed as he darted down side streets, trying to keep up with Elmo and the muffled words, which never stopped coming out of his mouth.

“Okay man, here’s the big deal. If you’re going get the tourists money you can’t look or act like them at all. Me, I got this big mask and the costume and all that, my problem fucking solved. But you, fuck, you got set yourself apart. You got to stand out. Announce yourself. Mother fucking stage presence. You look like fucking Reagan and all that shit, but how are people supposed to know you are fucking working. Maybe you just look like fucking Reagan. You think you’re
the only fucking guy who stands in Times Square fucking shouting about changing America and ending evil regimes? I mean—" The Elmo bumped Reagan a little knocking him off balance and pointing down at the sidewalk. "Look the fuck out man you almost fucking stepped in dog shit. That's fucking lesson number two: look fuck out while you walk. Shit comes at you like BAM out of fucking nowhere in this city. That was dog shit but it could have been some fucking doped junky that you would have just pissed off and he's got a damn pistol with two bullets and then, fuck, now he's got one bullet and your money and on the way to get his junk. So look the fuck out, okay? Okay. Oh, shit. Hang a right, right here with me. It'll save like five minutes." Red Elmo stepped into side street. “Okay, so back to lesson one. You got to set yourself apart and you got let them know you’re working. You see me? I got this bag with the word tips nice and big and bright. So when fucking tourists see me they know I am working and I am working for that money. You get it? Ya fucking get it. It’s not hard science shit. You’re a smart fucker and shit. We got you like collection plate or a hat to pass or something. Otherwise you're going to wind up like me and be working two fucking jobs. My first job is doing this costume thing, I work all fucking day but I don’t make enough cause I got like this little bit a fucking drug problem and shit. You understand. It’s like I do this second gig where I give people advice and guide them around and shit that pays a little better, so between fucking things I can kinda get by. Oh shit, man. I didn’t give you the most important thing for you to know.”
Ronald stopped for a second when the Red Elmo turned to face him.

“What’s that?” Reagan asked.

“What’s what?” Red Elmo shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s the most important thing for me to know?”

“Blue Elmo ‘bout to fuck up your guts.”

Before Ronald could process the meaning of those words a mass of blue slammed into him and forced all the air out of his lungs in a concussive blast. He landed on the thick, black rubber of a trash bag. Dazed, Ronald made eye contact with a dark brown rat perched on top of a half eaten fast food hamburger, still mostly in the wrapper. The rat seemed offended.

“I’m sorry.” Reagan said to the rat.

He couldn’t be sure if it heard him. Blue and Red sacks filled with coins slammed into his stomach and face. Fists came out from under big, fuzzy hands. Giant blue and red feet stomped down like huggable tree trunks against his chest. Reagan felt a break and pain rippled through everything he was. He pushed his face as deep into the garbage as he could and tried to protect the back of his head with his arms.

They were going to kill him. He rolled hard, away from the blows and opened his eyes. A huge blue foot came out the darkness. He saw nothing but light. He couldn’t be sure whether or not the blows were landing anymore because he couldn’t feel anything. His vision shifted from white to a blur of red and blue hovering just out of reach.
“I got his fucking money let’s just go.”

“Nah man. I got one last thing. I’ve always wanted to do this.”

A portion of the red blur slid down revealing a darker blur.

“Do what man?”

“Piss on a fucking president.”

“What the fuck is that?”

The heavens opened up with lightning and thunder. A warm wet spray hit Ronald in the face. And some portion of his vision began to return. He looked up to heaven and saw himself looking down from under wide brimmed hat. Two small tufts of curly hair dangled down like earings.

“Is something burning?” Ronald said through a mash of broken teeth and bloodied flesh. He felt himself being lifted. Then nothing.

Reagan wasn’t sure how long he been moaning in pain before he realized he was moaning in pain. Neither of his eyes seemed to want to open but he managed to force one open just enough to let a dull orange light in. He could taste a little blood. One nostril was clogged and the other was filled with the smell of melting plastic. His skin felt like a thin sheet stretched over a bed that was a size bigger than the sheet.

As the scent lingered in his consciousness, a realization crept into his mind. He was not alone. Something like him was close.
“Are you awake, brother?” His voice asked him from somewhere off to his left.

Ronald formed the words “where,” “am,” and “I” in his mind and tried to form them with his mouth, but found that his tongue filled too much space between teeth both missing and present and that his lips were heavy and swollen. Whatever sputterings he pushed out were unintelligible.

“Very well,” said the voice. “I’m going to place my finger in your hand and I want you to squeeze once for yes, twice for no. Do you understand?”

Ronald felt something fleshy slide in between his fingers. With some effort, he managed to squeeze it once.

“Good, very good. I think by now you should understand that I am a clone too. I’m exactly like you, created for the same reasons. We were drawn to you as you were to us and, fortunately for you, we found you. However, you’re in a very bad state right now. By our count you have several broken ribs, your right forearm is definitely broken, and there are likely a number of other potential injuries ranging from internal bleeding to permanent damage to your eyes and multiple concussions. We don’t have the technology or medical knowledge to diagnose or treat these injuries. Do you understand?”

Ronald tried to form the orange light coming through one partially open eye into an image but that proved impossible. He squeezed once.

“Very good. If you are left untreated it is possible you will die, though we don’t know when. Do you understand?”
It took Ronald a long, contemplative moment. He was frightened as he searched his pain and the swelling and the nausea for some sign post that pointed toward death. He squeezed.

“Very good. You need to understand that this is why we are going to have to kill you.”

Ronald squeezed twice. Then harder two more times.

“No. No. No. We are past all that. You will be killed. There is no other option. We want you to know that we take this very seriously, but the choice has been made. We would prefer to have your consent in this matter. Do you consent?”

Ronald did everything he could to push through the orange blur into some reality he could interpret. He tried, against the pain to move his arms and legs. He felt them lift. The muscles were working. It didn’t matter how badly it hurt he would get up and he would fight. He would run. His right arm lifted, then it stopped. The pain wasn’t stopping him. He looked in the direction of his arm but still only saw an orange blur. He tried to move again and heard it. Chains, the faint ringing of chain links clanging together and metal gliding across metal.

He was chained to the bed.

Ronald started squeezing the frantically and with all his might. Finally, he clenched it and refused to let go.
“No. No. No. I’m sorry brother, but this will not do. You are going to have to accept this.” The finger wretched free. “We will be humane. This will be as painless as possible.

Ronald felt something cold press against the vein in arm. He started to shake as violently as he could manage. The pain radiated through the orange blur in lightning bolts of red and black. Strong, powerful hands were grabbing him and holding him down. He was filled with the smell of melting plastic.

A chorus made from his voice begin to speak as one, hypnotizing, monotonous tone.

“There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”

A single voice concluded the prayer. “Amen.”

“Do it.” Said the same voice from a different place in the room.

Ronald tried again to struggle, but the parts of him that weren't broken weren’t strong enough to break free. He felt one small flower of pain bloom in the landscape. He was cradled by a warm darkness whispering to him that it was all over now.

RETRO FIT
Bill was outside. Melani had purposefully broken her key off in the lock and Bill was knocking. He had been calling and leaving message for a few days. She had listened to his first message.

“Melani I will be returning to the apartment in three days, at six pm. I expect that you and your belongings will not be there. You may reply either by phone call or text message to confirm your receipt of this message. I expect that you will.”

His tone was robotic and commanding. She would have listened to the other messages as well except she knew that they were same. “Melani, I will be returning to the apartment in two days,” “Melani, I will be returning to the apartment in one day.” “Melani, no matter what words come out of my mouth all I have ever said is I am in control. You will do what I say because I am in control. It doesn’t even matter whether you choose to listen or not my will determines the outcome.”

He had stopped knocking and she could hear him working at the key in the lock. Bill would eventually get the broken piece of metal out and then he would enter the apartment and then he would win.

She had been in the apartment alone for over a week and she hadn’t cleaned once. Making a mess had become an act of open rebellion. Drinking heavily every night had made that easy. Save for the kitchen, as much discarded clothing was visible as carpet. Forks, knives and spoons were piled in and next to
the sink. Bowls and plates were never used. The bedroom had been converted into a beer bottle bowling alley, with two dozen empty bottles set up as a pin set and an empty forty-ounce bottle laying nearby to be used as the ball. Overturned empty and half-empty boxes of Chinese food dotted the floor like miniature pagodas. She had hoped to attract bugs or, maybe even a rat. If she was going to be forced out of her home she could at least leave a big fucking rat behind.

“Rats.” Melani said as she heard an “almost got it” come from the other side of the door.

The police had said rats had been gnawing at the bodies of two costumed workers they found dead near Times Square. Melani had gone out looking for him several times and eventually got to asking around Times Square. That’s when the police picked her up. Apparently, someone had found two Elmos shot to death. Whoever had murdered them had shot them both through the head with masks still on. If it wasn’t for the fact that she’d gotten high and had sesame seed chicken delivered twice that night, she wouldn’t have had an alibi.

The cops had shown her horrific photos. The crime scene looked like a child’s birthday party gone horribly wrong. Someone had filled the piñatas with sausages, silly string, and Kool-Aid before shoving a fire cracker in to see what would happen. The cops said rats had been eating the body.

After that she had stopped looking for Ronald. Now it felt like the rats were gnawing at her. A boring, incessant rat named Work gnawed as she turned
screws and swapped circuit boards for people who were just going to sit and get fatter thanks to her help. A guilt-ridden rat named Ronald gnawed at the base of her brain and rubbed its tail against her ear whenever she saw an extension cord or knotted tie tossed into the corner. Now a rat named Bill was gnawing at the door. Sooner or later it would chew a hole right through.

She heard the rat slide its rat key into the door. The tiny golden knob twisted and so did the world it reflected. He pushed the door open and squashed a few take-out boxes against the wall.

Melani thought she might have seen Bill balk at the wreckage. This had to look like a nightmare he’d never admit to having. Aside from the masked emotion, Bill looked good. Of course he did. He was five pounds lighter. His shirt was perfect. He’d skipped the tie and left his top button open. He hadn’t shaved this morning. He knew she loved him with scruff. There was something magnetic about him when he allowed himself to relax a little.

“Looks like you’ve been having a tough time,” Bill said. There was kindness in his voice. “Do you mind if I clear a little space on the couch?”

Melani nodded. She had armed herself for battle and pulled the pins on her grenades. Instead, Bill had come in flying a white flag and now Melani didn’t know if she should throw them or throw herself on top of them. It seemed like only Bill knew how long it would be before they exploded.

Bill pushed aside a pile of clothes and sat down. He looked like a lighthouse in the chaos. “I think we should talk about all of this. Don’t you?”
All Melani could do was nod.

“Is Ronald here?”

“He left. I haven’t seen him since you left.”

“I’m sorry. I really am. But I thought something like that might happen. Listen, I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said, about being a bore. About all the drugs and drinking. And I’ve been thinking about your infidelity. And I want you to know that I forgive you.”

The words echoed in Melani’s ears for a moment. She had wanted to confess and be forgiven.

Bill kept talking. “I forgive you and I want you to know there is a scenario where I could take you back.”

Melani was so disarmed by the forgiveness and the acceptance that she couldn’t manage a real response. “A scenario?” she said.

“Obviously, you’ve done a lot of things to damage this relationship. And some steps will need to be taken so I that I know you won’t do them again and we’ll have to address your drug use. I’ve let that go on for far too long. You’ll probably need some therapy and rehab. I’ll need to monitor your progress so that I feel secure in accepting you back into my life.”

“Therapy?”

“Yes. It’s necessary. Melani, I want you to know that I still love you. Despite everything you’ve done, I don’t want to see you out on the street. But the fact remains that I can afford this apartment and you can’t. So, unless you agree
to these changes I am going to have to ask you to leave tonight. After all, I’ve
given you plenty of advance notice and I’ve called you every day to remind you. I
just want you to know that I forgive you. And I love you. But the choice is yours,
you can either trust me or you can going on living in this, this hell.”

Melani stood up and pulled a beer from the fridge. She pushed the cap
down against the countertop and hit the bottle hard, sending the cap and part of
the counter flying.

“Heck for you, but heaven for the rats.”

“Rats?” Bill’s brow wrinkled. He couldn’t mask his confusion.

“I’ve been living with a bunch of rats.”

“There are rats in the apartment? It hasn’t been that long.”

“There are rats. I’ve named them all. I love them. I feed them. This is their
apartment now and it’s my job to dump out the chinese food.”

“We’ll clean up the mess and call an exterminator. Everything will be fine.”

Melani drank half the beer in one drink and belched as she let it fall to the
floor. “Woopsie. Sorry, some of the rats like to drink.”

“You’re testing me? Is that it? You want to see if I’ll respond with anger
and become as big of a mess as you are.”

“No, Bill.” Melani grabbed another beer out of the fridge, popped the lid off
on the counter and took a drink “I’m breaking you.” She dropped the beer and
foam sprayed all over the kitchen.
Bill was standing now. “What the hell? I forgave you. I said you can come back.”

Melani picked the beer up off the floor and swallowed a little foam. “You’re right. I can’t afford this place on my own. I’m a total mess. I drink too much. I can’t clean. I cheated on you. If he were here now I’d probably do it again.”

Bill took a deep breath and extended his arms out in a gesture that was half-way between asking for a hug and showing that he didn’t understand. “So what is all this misplaced animosity? I have done things the good and just way. Why won’t you accept my offer and change?”

“I want to live here with the rats in hell. I’ll build a paradise for them here. I’m going to order two pizzas every night. I’m going to hide one under the couch and eat the other. I’m not going to pay the rent. They’ll evict me. I’ll wind up a drunk who lives in her van and then I’ll feed the rats in the streets.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“No Bill, I’m making a counteroffer.”

Bill laughed. “Let’s hear it.”

“I offer you to come and stay with me in rat paradise. You can have the bedroom. I’ll take the living room and we’ll each pay half the rent. You can have the exact life you want in that room. You can have the fridge. I’ll just be ordering delivery all the time anyway. But outside of the bedroom and the fridge I will live exactly as I please. Out here it will be just me and the rats. I’ll drink until four AM and train the rats to sing with me. I’ll smoke pot with the rats until they get so high
they forget to go to work in the morning and end up getting fired from the their rat jobs. I will pile pizza boxes into rat condos and spill so many beers that the carpet becomes a rat lagoon. If you can live with that, then I think we have a deal."

Bill laughed again and summoned a look of concern to his face. “You know that can’t work for me. To suggest it was cruel and unproductive. I came here in the spirit of making peace and giving you a second chance. I guess you’ll just have to hit rock bottom on your own.”

Bill headed for the door. This time there was no great pressure filling the room. This time, only a lightness emanating from Melani’s chest as though she was being allowed to breathe easily for the first time.

Halfway out the door, Bill stopped and turned to look at Melani. “I just want to ask you one question,” he said. “When it’s all done and the rats have taken over, and you can’t pay the rent, and you wind up an addict living in her van, what then?”

Melani blew Bill a slow kiss. “Baby, I’ll just have to learn to forgive myself.”

Bill left.

Original Copy
Someone was bringing him back. After the other clones had done something to him. Maybe they had killed him? He had gone back into the machine, that much he could be sure of. But without a body or any true sense of time it was impossible to tell how long he’d been in. One thing was for sure, someone had activated the machine.

Ronald opened his eyes. There were four exact copies of his face staring back at him. He felt no shock in learning that there were more of him. It was as if he had always known. He found their scent, melting plastic, comforting, like the memory of a warm blanket. Then he realized, he was wrapped in actual warm blankets as well.

“You killed me.” Said Ronald.

The left-center Reagan spoke. “Yes, and you have been made again, anew and in his image.”

Ronald ran his hands up and down his body searching for signs of injury, pressing here and there to see if it triggered pain.

“I’m better.”

“You are made anew.”

“You are home.”

Ronald remembered the Elmos’ assault. “You saved my life. But how, how did you find me?”
The center-left face continued to speak for the group. “Do you remember feeling compelled to go underground into the subway system and finding yourself at the 191st station?”

“Yes, of course. I love to ride the subways.”

“That might be true, but you’re drawn underground because we are attracted to each other. The same thing that draws us back to our machines draws us to each other. We found you when you were in the station. We would have approached you, but you were with a woman.”

“Melani?”

The four clones exchanged worried glances. “I can see we’re going to have a lot to talk about. For now, let’s just see about getting you into a good suit.”

They had good suits. The Brothers (as they called themselves) lived in an abandoned subway station just off the 191st station. Beyond the suits, which were tailored and ranged from Brooks Brothers to Armani, The Brothers had a full Hollywood wardrobe. They had a full Hollywood everything. They had been down here since the late 80’s and slowly built their own small production house.

The entrance to the studio was only accessible by walking south, into the tunnel leading to and from the 191st street station. About a hundred yards down, there was a spot with plenty of distance between the track and the wall. As as a
result, this area had been covered with graffiti for decades. So many groups, gangs, taggers, and artists had left their tags, signatures, and artwork there that it was impossible to tell which artist made what and when. Completely camouflaged by graffiti and underneath it all was a rusted steel door that the city thought they had sealed in 1989. In between trains, four Hasidic Jews, the only costume The Brothers wore outside the studio, would pull the door open just enough to quietly slide in.

On the other side of the door was a long, unlit tunnel that led to another steel door, which separated the studio from the tunnel. When the city shut down the station they shut off the power by pulling down a giant breaker and locking it with huge metal lock. The homeless people who moved in shortly after cut the lock and restored the power. That made it the perfect place for The Brothers to occupy.

They had separated the old station into six rooms, and each room led to the next starting at the entrance: The first room was a changing area with the full wardrobe. Clothing lined every inch of the walls from floor to ceiling, on a set of parallel steel bars running around the entire wardrobe. Everything came in sets of five: Five subway worker outfits, five sets of aviator glasses, five military uniforms, five cat costumes. The second room was a supply closet. One side was filled with practical things: mops, brooms, bleach, blankets, pillows, tissues, towels, and anything else someone could use for day to day life. On the other side they stored props for the films they made: guns, swords, Bibles, desks, fake
food, crosses, boards, and crates filled with potential set pieces were neatly
organized and tagged on shelves. The third room was the eating area. It was by
far the most barren room in the studio. The Brothers filled one wall with
office-sized canisters of bottled water, another crates of canned tuna fish and
saltine crackers sealed in big plastic crates. There was no running water or
stove. The Brothers slept in the next room on four identical beds. Ronald was
given a fifth. The beds reminded Ronald of the Golden Moon Hotel but the
pillows were more comfortable and instead of urine and stale smoke they
smelled of melting plastic. At the foot of every bed was a television set,
positioned so that as the machine pushed them out they would find themselves
laying comfortably on a bed. The fifth room was the largest and contained the
sound stage. There was a large camera aimed at a stage and series of
backdrops ranging from American flags, to crosses, and dungeons and several
more. There was a full set of stage lights hung overhead and a control board to
help operate it all. Cords ran like thick, black snakes into the next room, which
was labeled the broadcast room. Inside it, The Brothers had built a floor-to-ceiling
broadcast tower designed to spread their productions throughout the city.

Living with The Brothers was wonderful. There was an intense sense of
belonging that came from being with beings just like him. There were things that
were tough to adjust to, for example: they didn’t use any names. They just knew
who they were talking to. At first it had seemed ridiculous, but after the first few
days he understood. He knew them by scent. Melting plastic with a apple peel
note. Sauteed rubber over oak. Burning ink pen. Orange infused with boiling crayon. Ronald (who was told he smelled of heated dashboard with a twist of lime) knew who was walking into his room before he saw them. A minute or two before he would be eating applesauce, summer blacktop laced with sea salt wafted into the room.

The Brothers didn’t ask anything of him but help. He was given an equal portion of the chores and told that they thought it was best that they give him some time to acclimate before they asked or answered questions. Ronald was fine with that. They seemed to be good men and it was a lot better than staying at the Golden Moon. Though, he often found himself missing Melanie and her scents, salt, blue jeans, pot and vanilla.

On his third day with them, Ronald noticed that they were moving supplies into the sound stage and beginning work on something there. “We have to have a conversation.” It was Sea Salt Reagan talking but distinguishing which of them was speaking mattered about as much as which Coca-Cola came out the vending machine. “It’s about time you know where we come from?”

“It’s been hard not asking questions. But you said to wait.”

Sea Salt smiled. “We have a minor problem. We have to control it so that it doesn’t become a major problem.”

The rest of the brothers walked in, as if the timing was planned and took up positions near Sea Salt.
“What problem?”

“I’ll get to that. To understand the problem you need to know where we come from. During the Cold War, there was a scientist named William Robert Graham Jr. He made us, that much we are certain of. Why, is a little tougher. The problem was that America and the Russians were racing to the largest nuclear stockpile in the history and no one was really sure who had more. And we didn’t have a Cuba to launch them from. So, in a system where whoever shoots first can annihilate ¼ of a country and then, when both sides strike again, lose another ¼ and then another and another, mutually assured destruction actually meant that if the Russians struck first and the apocalypse rained down on us, their government might just hole up in Siberia and survive.”

One of the brothers jumped in. “The idea was to bankrupt them.”

“Yes,” said Sea Salt. “They were just as obsessed with winning the arms race as we were and wouldn’t accept that our economy was better suited to it. So The Original okayed funding on everything. After all, the only things we definitely had more of than the Russians were churches and money.”

The other brother started listing. “Funding for everything: ICBMs, ABMs, orbital intercept planes, satellites that could shoot nukes out of the air, x-ray lasers, deuterium fluoride lasers, particle beams, autonomous tungsten kinetic warheads, light gas guns--”
Sea Salt interrupted. “Our spies spread disinformation, suggesting that we were talking with aliens and that we engineered everything from AIDS to a new hyper-addictive street drug called crack.”

“They also spread a rumor that we had nearly perfected cloning.” At that all The Brothers smiled a little.

“Which we hadn’t.” Ronald watched all of their jaw lines clench.

“No. We hadn’t perfected cloning. Graham had made five machines that could spit out a sort of lifeless lump of flesh-rubber.”

“It didn’t matter whether it worked or not. As long as it looked like it might work.”

“They couldn’t afford not to try and build everything we were building. They also couldn’t afford to build them.”

“The idea was to leak a video showing these machines printing out 5 copies of The Original, make us twitch somehow and then cut the feed. The Russians would have to start a cloning program. If the US could clone, the space race wouldn’t matter. We’d be making soldiers and leaders right here on the ground. The program was never supposed to produce viable clones; it was supposed to look like it produced the viable clones-- which was a lot cheaper. That way the Russians would try and start an actual cloning program and go broke trying to beat us to a technology we weren’t trying to build. They’d let a few suspected Russian spies see our predecessors lying on some table and maybe
they’d even let them touch us. We’d feel real and scare the Russians. Then the
spy would conveniently get a copy of the video to bring back."

“IT was working too. They never even had to leak a video. Russian spies
got wind of the program and by 1984 they had a program.”

“Then things changed.”

“By 1985 The First had a real diagnosis. Alzheimer's was eating his mind. He had barely survived a gunshot wound. The Russians had lost two presidents and grown successively weaker with every replacement. The Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse and everyone knew the Bushes were fools. The Vice President couldn’t be allowed to take office at such a critical moment in history.”

“So The Original changed the plan.”

“All the programs that were supposed to possibly, actually work (some of which did): ICBMs, Space Lasers, and a good chunk of our Nuclear Warhead production, all of that funding got diverted towards making a cloning program that was never supposed to work, work. All the other programs would continue as dummy programs. No matter what their spies told them, Russians would never believe that the US stopped building weapons of war.”

“They called it Operation: Matryoshka-Pinocchio.”

“Now they were dumping billions of dollars and the best minds in covert research, lead by Dr. Graham, working to bring us from dead lumps of flesh-rubber to living, breathing, presidential replacements.”

“In case the president died.”
“But he didn’t die.”

“No, he didn’t die. In fact he lived through his presidency and in the last few days he ordered us all destroyed. “

“Destroyed?” None of this seemed like anything more than a conspiracy theory but it would have been hard to not believe in flying saucers if he has talking with aliens.

“Destroyed. We didn’t have a purpose anymore. They couldn’t have five former president Ronald Reagans running around. The funding was cut and we were to be disposed of. But, Dr. Graham couldn’t do it. We were nearly finished.”

“He had copied life. We were alive and he knew it.”

“Just down the road from the his lab in D.C. there was an old TV repair shop and he started installing us into old sets and pretending he was just working on repairing them. He made the long drive to smuggle us here to New York, in broken televisions every night after work. He stored us in a small storage room on Columbia University's campus. That’s when something went wrong.

“What happened?”

“We don’t know. Somehow we went from the storage room to locations all over the city and the state. Maybe we were stolen or some janitor discovered us and moved us, but we were separated. He never found us again.”

“How did you all find each other?” asked Ronald.

“There are three main things that set us apart. The first is our homing instinct.”
“We’ve found each other from as far away as New Jersey.”

“The instinct that brought you underground will always help you find us and us find you. There’s something in our scent. If we are near each other we will be subconsciously drawn together.”

The Brothers looked at each other and nodded knowingly. “The second and third have to do with returning to the machine.”

“It’s a sort of of built in reset mechanism. The men behind the project realized that we would be a major threat to national security if we went rogue or were killed then we couldn’t be replaced with the next clone. If someone had one of our bodies or we decided to take the governing of the country into our hands the results for America could catastrophic. So Graham took the natural properties of the substance he used to create us and built in some fail safes.”

Ronald knew what they were going to say but the question still came out of his mouth. “Fail safes?”

“The first is simple after we experience death, we liquify and return to the machine. As near as we can tell there is an electrical signal that runs through us and as soon as that’s interrupted, the process begins. But that wouldn’t have done much to control us if we had just decided to run the country on our own. Would it? So we were engineered so that orgasms interrupt the signal in the same way. Then out sex drives were set as high as biologically possible. After two days without orgasming we begin to develop...urges. Sexual urges. They’re strongest in the presence of attractive, scantily clad women, but given time they
will drive us to masturbation. After four days you’ll be a virtual walking erection, unable to think about anything but sexual intercourse or masturbation. By a week the urge will be too strong to control. You’ll find yourself touching your genitals absentmindedly, considering masturbating anywhere you are at any time. You’ll be sexually excited by the urge to urinate and the feeling of fabric against your genitals. In the end the urge will consume you and, no matter how hard you try, you will be reduced to the sin of masturbation or sexual intercourse outside of marriage.”

The Brothers shook their heads in dismay.

“How long before I just can’t stop?”

“No clone has ever made it more than eight days without resetting.”

Ronald looked down at his crotch and the crotches of the other clones. It had been several days and he’d was starting to feel a vague swelling sensation. He saw Melani, one knee on each side of his his waste. She was pull her shirt up and over her head, her body slick with a sheen of sweat. As the shirt slid over her breast, impeded for a moment as her shirts stretched around they were pulled up and then fell, bouncing slowly as she cast aside her clothing.

The swelling was getting worse. “How do you deal with the urges?” Ronald said.

“If thy hand offend thee, cut it off: It is better for thee to enter life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell.”

Ronald crossed his legs. “You want to cut off my…”
The brothers laughed together. Sea Salt spoke. “No, no, no. That wouldn’t do.”

“We want you to die.”

“Couldn’t I just be very careful to only masturbate in private?” Ronald said, not sure who was joking.

The Brothers laughed. “I think it’s time to show you.”

Sea Salt and The Brothers turned and headed toward the production studio. Sea salt spoke as they walked. “It’s important to understand that while we were created for a specific purpose, to take the place of The Original should he die or become incapacitated, we we’re to replace him. A life of perfect meaning and significance. We were to be dormant until needed. But, as often happens God had a different plan.”

Sea Salt opened the door to the studio and the other brothers walked through the door. The studio was completely dark, except for the light spilling in through the door. The Brothers disappeared into the darkness as Sea Salt draped his arm around Ronald’s shoulder like an ox yoke.

“What are men to do with a life whose purpose they have outlived?”

Ronald didn’t have an answer but he had opened to his mouth to let words spill out until Sea Salt began speaking again.

“We are must take stock of who we are and measure our abilities.”

Ronald had the phrase now, “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”
“Very good.” Said Sea Salt. “Is that from the Bible?”

“I think so,” Said Ronald.

“And what are our gifts?”

Again Ronald opened his mouth but had it shut by Sea Salt’s words.

“We have an encyclopedic knowledge of The Original. Hardly any use in the face of the library of congress. We have been blessed with good physical appearance and an appealing voice. They too are redundant. So what is it that makes us unique? It is what we can do that no one else can.”

Ronald shook his head. The thwack and thump of large metal breaker switch being pulled somewhere in the darkness. An electric pulse filled the air like the mass-insectine flurry of a disturbed nest. Ronald’s eyes fixed on what looked like a large, wooden compass rose. It had thick, metal chains dangling from thicker, metal cuffs. Those chains ran to a four separate mechanical winches. Ronald’s brain was still putting all separate parts together when Sea Salt finished his sentence.

“We can die.”

Ronald turned and studied the lines of his own face as they were contorting on the top of Sea Salt’s neck. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen that much earnest belief in the mirror felt it pull back the skin around his eyes with anticipation. What’s more, he could that Sea Salt already knew the answer Ronald would give. Sea Salt was absolutely certain that he would say yes. Yes,
to being strapped into that machine and having his arms and legs ripped from
their sockets for some greater cause.

Ronald didn’t want to say yes. Sea Salts expression changed from
something like a child showing a friend his newest toy to the look of someone
who is on the verge of realizing he just gave a gift that someone already had.

“Of course,” Ronald said. “It makes sense.”

Sea Salt’s broad, knowing smile returned. “We die for the sins of America.
We take on the appearance of the most sinful traitors. We become symbols of
the evil in this world. And then we die. We die to show them the error of their
ways and the punishment they deserve.”

Ronald looked at the rack. “Then we come back? Always? There’s never
been an accident?”