

## “The James File”

*“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”*

—Erik Erikson

James fidgeted before he sat down in the patient’s chair. He sweated profusely and glanced at the richly paneled walls as if he were making sure he were in the right place. He studied my glass and asked if he could have a drink. I quickly handed it to him. He emptied it in seconds.

“Look, I know the last time I was here we agreed my mind was playing tricks on me, but I saw him again.”

I figured that he was just going through another phase—so many phases that his file had overflowed into a plurality of files—but something in the tone of his voice convinced me that this time was different. With James’s approval, I pressed *record*.

“Whenever I glanced up from the printer yesterday I saw all my coworkers talking to the new hire. I dropped what I was doing and ran over to greet him, only to realize that he had my face. My face! People were calling *him* James.”

He grasped the back of his head tightly with both hands.

I told him to calm down.

After all, the last session that he’d pressed his head in his hands like this did not end prettily.

He relaxed.

“As soon as I saw him I quit...I didn’t think twice.” He exhaled loudly. “I waited in the parking lot after work until he came out and got into his car. Once he drove off, I followed him. I followed him for about a half an hour through the Hills to his house. I parked about fifty feet away from his house in front of the megachurch at Rock Creek.”

James had a smirk on his face, as if he were proud of his achievement.

He continued, “He got out of his car and went in. Through the massive window in the living room, I could see him with his family. I admit I was jealous. How could a fake version of me have a better life than me?”

He started to shake with anger as the words slipped from his mouth, although his voice did not increase in volume—as if he were consciously channeling his display of frustration through his body language instead of his voice. At this point, I became increasingly worried for the man that James followed home.



"I became jealous as I watched him interact with his wife and daughter," he said. "I decided the next day I was going to confront him. I was going to make him *give* me his life, the life I never had."

I felt like I needed to interrupt him.

"James, do I need to call a lawyer?"

"Jesus, Doc. What kind of person do you think I am?"

He chuckled, as if the temptation to kill were impossible.

"You know, Doc. You and I are so alike. I did just what you'd do—I took a drive. I drove it off. I drove straight home that night," he added, "and I thought about what I saw. I laid in bed all night, I couldn't sleep until--"

The timer rang.

"Time's up, James. I have a heavy line this afternoon. Tell you what, I'm going to pencil you in for tomorrow. This can't wait. Come see me at 9. You'll be first in."

James sneered and walked out. I felt terrible about cutting him off. I was as invested in his story as he was. I didn't know if I'd even see him, to be honest. He was so inconsistent.

I laid in bed that night, unable to sleep, unlayering the many layers of his file, but as expected, James didn't show up in the morning. In fact, he never called or made an attempt to show up all week. The appetite of curiosity welled inside me and ate at me all week. Eventually, I reached a point where I couldn't focus on my other clients. People would come in and talk to me and all I could focus on was wondering what went wrong with James.

After work one day, I decided I'd had enough of sitting around hypothesizing. So I drove to the church that James had described the last time he was here. I went on a Thursday night so that I wouldn't be interrupting a service. The exterior was massive and afire with radiant light, like a furnace. Behind the stained glass windows, a fierce red glow cast beams through the glass and onto the street below. Directly across the street was the house that James described—the big window into the living room and all. It was an otherwise nondescript house, but it looked vacant. The glow from the church bathed the house red. Against my better judgement, I trudged toward the house, telling myself that I was crazy for doing this and that I probably wouldn't find a thing.

As I stepped towards the front door, a wretched smell struck me. It almost sent me sprawling backwards, as if someone had punched me. The aroma was like the last defense line of the house, as if the glow cast onto the building was not sufficient to ward unwanted visitors away. Eventually, I regained my courage and stepped up to the door. This time, I didn't hesitate. I thrust open the door and took

a giant step. I would not be afraid of a house. Kids were afraid of houses—and of boogeymen and monsters in closets. The only thing that had scared me lately was the alarm clock.

The first chamber I visited was the living room, which was to the left of the front door. There were toys thrown about on the ground, some near the table in the middle and others near the leather recliner and couch. I stepped over the toys and walked to the massive window James had talked about. Through the living room window, I could see my car. But when I looked through the glass, it seemed as if time were warping and changing before my eyes. I remember shouting in surprise, but my voice sounded far away, as if noise was of no consequence. I watched my car turn from black to green and back again. Perhaps it was the church light. The surrounding houses also changed colors. Some even changed size and shape. Was I still observing the outside world through this window, or was I observing something kaleidoscopically real yet not of this earth?

I ventured away from the living room because other than the window nothing was out of the ordinary. As I got closer to the stairs that jutted from the wall behind the living room, the smell got worse. But I soldiered on. I wasn't satisfied with a reality-altering window. I knew that I was making an irrational decision, but like a gambler, I craved the visceral if not intellectual payoff that the house might offer.

When I got to the top of the stairs, I kicked something limp. I thought to myself that it was just a rolled up rug and stepped over it to find the light switch. But when I flipped it on, I recognized that it wasn't just a rug. It was a person, and that person was James.

"Are you okay?" I shouted. I flipped him over to see if he had a pulse, but when I saw the blood that soaked the front of his t-shirt, I knew it would be of no use. He was dead. He appeared to have been dead for at least a week—swollen, rancid, and abuzz with bottle-flies. All around me were the markings of conflict: bullet holes, casings, an over-turned chair. From a gash in his forehead, he appeared to have been struck with the chair then shot in the chest multiple times. I sprinted down the stairs, past the living room and through the front door back to my car. As soon as the keys were in the ignition, my foot was on the gas pedal. I sped home.

Returning home, I called the police. They investigated the house that James visited. I expected an extensive interrogation, but after I turned over a copy of James's files, all 570 pages, the authorities left with nothing more than a word of thanks and an awkward nod of the head that they would "be in touch." Aside from that dismissive exchange, no police

had talked to me since. Odd as this seemed, I had no updates. Not a headline appeared, no obituary, no word of funeral arrangements. Apparently the nature of the case demanded maximum discretion.

A few weeks passed.

And then matters unraveled. When I was driving the boulevard shortly thereafter, a man on the street caught my eye. Usually at a red light, I drank in the scenery—the boutiques, the shoppers, the green sway of the palms. I relished these small moments in life. But this man—I could have sworn that he was me for a second—the face, weight, clothes, hands, wing-tips, you name it. Smiling outside a retro western establishment, he had a small family with him—a wife in stylish jodhpurs, a young girl astride a hobby horse. I became jealous of the man. I only saw him for a moment, and then just like that, he was gone. He disappeared into the crowd like a phantom, an image slipping the frame of a three-way mirror.

I drove to the office with that image pasted in my consciousness and thought of James—his solitary nature, his weakness for introspection—not to mention the wherefores of his murder, the seeming apathy of the police. The James that I had talked with a month ago and that I had spoken to was the James that I knew. The other James whom James encountered by his account had a normal life, a normal family, and for all intents and purposes was also James. So which was the real him? And now that I seemed to have seen myself, which one was I? Was I the real me, or was the real me the fleeting gentleman that appeared on the street? I had much work to do and a long night ahead to puzzle through it. Turning over the possibilities in the dark was already getting the best of me. The questions made me incredibly thirsty, if not dizzy.

And then there was a tap at the door.

I asked who it was.

"It's just me, sir," said a voice not unlike that of the cop who nodded awkwardly my way. Perhaps the authorities had gotten to the bottom of James before I had. I exhaled heavily at the prospect.

"Help yourself in."

My guest's white shirt was radiant in the glow of the office lamp. I was satisfied at last that he'd bothered to follow up with a personal call. He nodded familiarly, placing the thick file on the corner of the desk—and atop it a little paper cup.

"This isn't the James file," I remarked.

"The James file. sir? It's your Sunday newspaper. The *Times*." He was no longer nodding—instead glowering, with eyes of suspicion. "And this time, James," he added, jiggling the paper cup, "swallow your pills. I'll be checking beneath your tongue."

So I motioned to the glass on my desk and asked if I could have a drink. I emptied it in seconds and took a seat in the patient's chair. Then I opened the James file one last time, grasped the back of my head tightly with both hands, and pressed.

## “Glen Drager, American Hero”

**G**len breathed the hot scent of freshly printed WB Mason copy paper as he examined Canon-48651. There was no time to lose. An urgent-level help-desk complaint indicated the device in the murky corner of the cafeteria was malfunctioning.

It wasn't.

As usual, it was low on ink, another waste of his severely limited time. Glen turned to exit with an exasperated huff and noticed the dean of students rendezvousing with Ramone and James, a couple of salty janitors, at the far end of the cafeteria. Ramone caught Glen glaring at him uncomfortably from afar, prompting Glen to lower his gaze to the food-encrusted floor. He looked up to see the trio sniggering in his direction. “Damn broom-pushers,” he muttered in a two-foot voice. They thought they were so superior to the tech guys and would even bag on them occasionally. Sure, the surly bastards might clean up a slug of vomit here and there with their two-bit Zambonis, but the way Glen saw it, these NHL-wannabes were in no position to denigrate the

tech guys. They both had unpleasant messes to clean up—just different kinds.

Glen looked past tables of largely uneaten portions of FDA-approved meals, maneuvering his way through the maze of diagonal aisles. Not wanting to stir up the animals more than necessary during feeding time, he made it to the exit amid a puff of dishwasher steam. He glanced back only for a second, when an all-too-familiar sight stopped him in his tracks.

The yelling dominated the space like white noise, but this time a horde of the students gathered at the cash registers instead of at their seats. Immediately, chatter among faculty volleyed back and forth through Glen's walkie-talkie.

“Bub, what's the problem?” the dean inquired.

“Cash registers aren't working,” Bub, the school resource officer, replied—much too loudly, for at that moment, every student within twenty meters heard what Bub had said. It all happened so quickly. The students swarmed the kitchen, overpowering Bub and pillaging the snacks.

It was a full-on riot.

Glen fled down the hallway and up the stairs to his asylum, the Tech Office, not once looking back. He swung the door shut behind him on the way in and slid his back against the coolness of his leather chair. Catching his breath, he bunkered down. The place was a mess, he had to admit. He could own that



much, if not the entire district network, what with the busted Chromebooks and Chromebook chargers strewn about, a high-tech wasteland littered with post-its and notebooks and “urgent” email print-outs. Glen’s co-worker Mr. Walk was hunkered in the middle of the shamble. Entrenched in spare computer parts, his head was lowered to avoid enemy fire as he worked tediously in front of a computer screen, unaware that Glen had popped in. Sweat traveled down his brow, his blue polo unbuttoned the whole way.

After a moment of re-composure, Glen went verbal, “Mr. Walk, the cafeteria system is being raided.”

“Tell me something I don’t know, Glen,” Mr. Walk snapped, “It appears the school’s database has been hacked. Every student’s account has been credited with a butt-load of cash—all at once—and shipment records for snacks have been erased.”

“This is bad, Mr. Walk. Bad-bad. Like that angry mob of seniors that cornered us a few months ago over the Pandora filter.”

“Calm down, Glen. The students aren’t after us this time—it’s the free food they want. Let Dean Rhoades handle it. We’ll tell him about the hack after it’s all over.”

“Luke didn’t believe me when I told him about the last hack,” Glen opined, “neither did the janitors. They thought we caused the mob. They’ll never leave us be if we don’t do something about this one.”

Mr. Walk stopped clacking on his keyboard and twisted his wheeie chair in Glen’s direction. He pushed his glasses up the ridge of his nose, the muscles in his face stretching into a frown.

“Well, Glen,” he said, with all the righteous rage of an underdeveloped but plot-dependent minor Marvel character, “We can’t stop this. Our only option is to catch the little SOB by the scruff of his USB lanyard and bring him to justice.”

“Then let’s do it,” Glen responded.

Mr. Walk returned to his computer and within minutes had a bead on the desktop at the vortex of the hack.

“Room 104, Miss Kline’s. Stat.”

“Okay, Mr. Walk, let’s roll.”

Glen motioned with his arm for Mr. Walk to follow, but Mr. Walk remained seated.

“Glen, I have to stay here and fix the breach. You’re gonna have to go this alone.”

Glen’s stomach churned.

The thought of leaving his haven already made him fret, but making the trek alone through the uncharted dangers of the hallways made it worse.

Peeking into the hallway, Glen saw no sign of activity. In fact, there seemed to be no teachers or

students upstairs at all. Glen decided that he needed to get to Kline’s room as hastily as possible, so he took the hallway to his left. Sounds of anarchy amplified as he neared the staircase that led to the athletic office and gymnasium. At the staircase, Glen could sense the chaos and realized that it was closer than he had thought. In fact, a band of mutineers was packed into the stairwell, clutching and shredding at teachers attempting to fight back. This was no longer a plunder but an outright struggle for power. Glen could see a hapless civics teacher engulfed in an uncivil sea of students. The school was being commandeered, and it was apparent to Glen that the undeclared mission was to take the entire faculty hostage. The teachers on the stairs were growing weaker by the minute and soon would be overpowered.

Before the beleaguered teachers could spy Glen at the periphery of the skirmish, he spun around and made a dogleg down the hallway adjacent the staircase. Another staircase was at the end of this hallway, so Glen decided to slip down it instead. He darted as fast as his middle-aged legs could carry him, aware that the war-party would pursue him. On the bottom floor, Glen approached three hallways that intersected in a T. On his left was a middle school hallway, on his right the hallway that led to the in-school-suspension dungeon, and in front of him the corridor to the high school lobby. The most efficient route to Miss Kline’s would be straight down the middle. However, the commanders had choked off the end of it, attempting to power their way up the stairs.

As Glen stood in the middle of the intersection, assessing the calculus of his options, an unexpected offshoot of vandals and insubordinates emerged from the depths of the dungeon, on the prowl for fresh faculty hostages. By the time Glen noticed them, it was too late. They were halfway to him before he booked it down the middle school hall. Soon, a ruthless pack of upper-class alpha-males brandishing cafeteria cutlery appeared. The most dangerous of the marauders, they were faster and had more stamina than Glen, so he could only outrun them for a short period of time.

Panting furiously, Glen detected an open classroom door on his right with three shadowy figures in a skirmish outside. Glen thought they were all students, but as he approached he recognized Ramone sprawled out on the floor with two smaller bodies on top, assaulting his eyes and brow in a foul flurry of fists and sneakers and gummy erasers. The students did not see Glen watching them as he veered into the classroom. Ramone saw Glen hazily through one un-swollen eye but was in too much agony to cry out. Glen turned his back to the brawl and focused on the classroom. It was darkened, but natural light

shone from outside. Glen knew he wasn't safe, that the only other way out of the classroom was the window—and that only a screen separated him from the outside. Wasting no time, he loped full speed through the window screen, crashing to the soft ground of the courtyard.

The courtyard was dab in the middle of the school, classrooms flanking it on all sides, including Miss Kline's. Opposite where Glen lay was Ground-Zero. Glen recognized this, and he knew what he had to do.

It was a beautiful day outside, a baby-blue sky painted with a few wispy stratus, one of those days when every teacher had a window open, and Miss Kline was no exception. Calculating the survival probabilities quicker than a standard Google search, he pressed himself off the ground, brushed the grass off his white dress shirt, and stormed Kline's room with all the reckless abandon of a Storm Trojan virus. Glen launched his physique through the open window.

A skinny teenager jumped from his computer seat, surprise scribbled on his face. The brutality of event froze him.

Glen knew the boy.

He was none other than Seth Parker, recidivist violator of school cyber law. Glen had caught him before trying to access The Command Prompt—a program only those with administrative bypass could use. On another occasion, the kid had attempted to turn the Master Q into the Master P in deference to his last name. Glen did not know this, but Parker considered him some sort of idol. Seth, too, wanted to be an IT hero someday, and this melee was simply a twisted form of career research for Parker.

While Seth sat bewildered, Glen charged without mercy. He cocked his arm and let it fly. Soft flesh surrendered to steely knuckles, and in a single punch, Seth was out cold. The desktop Seth was using was still humming, so Glen hoisted it overhead and heaved it to the ground. Glass and plastic shattered into smithereens. Glen stood over Seth, his sweated shirt sticking to the skin of his lower back. His heart pounded but his knees felt weak, and as he waited for the adrenaline rush to subside, the SWAT team, much too late for the party, busted down the door.

The SWAT team relaxed its rifles and the skirmish was aborted. Ultimately, Parker was booked for an act of cyber terror, but it was the SWAT team, not Glen, who received the kudos for the catch.

Glen did not protest the lack of recognition but instead took morbid satisfaction in the fact that Ramone's facial injuries, which left him cross-eyed and bereft of depth perception, prohibited him from riding the Zamboni ever again. Sure, the janitors

continued to insult the tech guys, but it didn't sting like it used to. Now when Glen heard the janitors laughing around a corner, a smile crept across his face. He knew how much the school needed him, and a future IT superhero learned a valuable lesson.

And in the lawless wasteland of public school network administration, that was all that mattered.

## “The World”

**O** 0:00> The dawn of a new day.

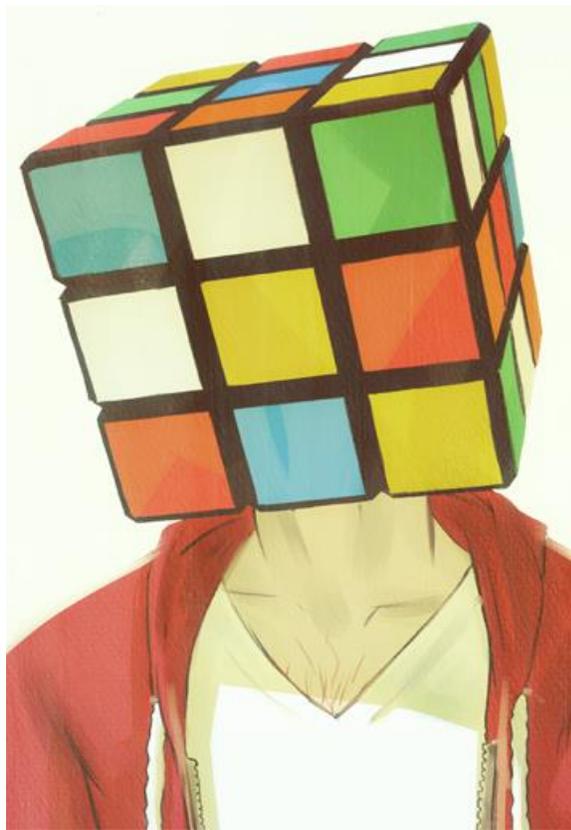
Effectively, I am writing this by a pool of industrial liquid. My reflection in the pool is a bone-white angel in a cloud of darkness. A seraph.

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts," I imagine other wingless seraphs singing beyond the toxic pools at the edge of The City. "The whole world is full of His glory."

Look at it.

From the start it was hot and rich with blood and warfare. And though the heat has cooled within the core, the pain on the surface is as hot as ever.

I can't help looking at my reflection. Though my face is bereft of distinguishing features, my body is bereft of nothing, except maybe six wings. God has no face; I have none either. Faces express emotion. Hatred, anger, misery, happiness, and love—all of which beget pain—are expressed through the face. In order to rule properly, one must disengage one's emotion. I, Great Usurper that I am, fulfill this



requirement, while managing to retain infinite mercy. Our presiding God does neither.

I understand that the world is a fabrication. There is a God in the real world, I assure you, and He guides my pen here and now beneath the acid showers where I keep alive my hope in the exercise of Free Will, where I may someday become Great Usurper of the Wastelands, perhaps destroying what's left before He hurts any others. I do not need to articulate how much hatred I bear for Him. He knows. Only a God can control His emotion with such knowledge.

My journal-book is nice and will suffice. Come rain, come acid, come fire and ice. Part of me wants to abandon it here beneath the smokestacks, to go on without it. What need have I for a record if I don't intend to suffer much longer? But I'll keep it with me as a chronicle of human suffering. For God is a sadist. He embraces deadlines. When I look around at the pain God has wrought, it becomes manifest that He condones if not enjoys it. We're dolls dangling on the strands of a double helix. Complicated fabrications.

To Him, not real people.

Is this not the rationalization of tyrants?

Full disclosure. I find the next portion of my story absurd. I make no apology. Consider it a flight of fancy. I assure you it is no more absurd than words breathed by prophets and contains neither wine nor water nor pillars of salt.

I stood at the base of the Tower which held the Seven-Tabled Room. The Gentlemen refused to see me until I promised them what they desired. Fortunately for me, they desired the same thing. Unfortunately for me, I had to travel to retrieve it. But at least I'd have fun. I'd do anything to save the world.

That morning I met the First Gentleman. The stories were true. He had two heads. A golden nameplate below the head to my left spelled out RUPERT. This head was a multicolored cube, each face of the cube a different color and separated into a 3x3 grid. The polychromatic cube contrasted starkly with the brown walls of his half of the office. I'd never solved one before, but I recognized in his demeanor the popular puzzle toy and had difficulty stifling my laughter.

The other head I could tell wished to laugh along with me. This head was a giant die of the same volume. I could not tell his name by his nameplate because it, like everything else on his half of the room, had been scribbled over relentlessly with a rainbow of crayons. I regained control and stared blankly at a single black dot in the center of his face.

"You're late," Rupert noted.

"We wait our whole lives for salvation," I replied, "have patience."

"I've tried to tell him Death is our only escape," the head on the right sneered. "He won't listen."

The die was no longer on the verge of laughing. The number of dots present on his front face was two. Rupert did not take kindly to his brother's sudden moping and revealed his name.

"Dionysus, would you shut up? We have cosmological matters to discuss."

I cared not for this fruitless bickering and so promptly interjected, "I've come to gather you Gentlemen. You are to be the first one of my party."

Rupert rejoined, "Oh, how I wish we were 'one' as you say. With my intelligence I'm certain I could deal with Dionysus' neuroses. As it stands, I can't stand him at all."

"Ooh, baby," replied Dionysus, "you know you love it a little crazy in bed." The number on his face rolled to six—a disturbing number to look at square in the eye, I assure you.

At this point, Rupert put a hand to his face and sighed. I sighed as well in relief. These were delicate matters to navigate. If I were to interrupt too often, they could become violently uncooperative. The less they responded to each other, the more frequently I could venture to speak.

"I can give you what you want," I said.

Dionysus (still with a face of six) whispered, "Ooh, honey, and how do you know what I want?"

Rupert snarled, "You idiot, he was talking to me. But I have to ask, what makes you think you can get it for us?" His voice strained to disguise his disapproval.

"If I didn't, you'd have me killed. That's reason enough for me to find a way, wouldn't you agree?"

Dionysus appeared to disapprove with his face of five, "Rupert, you'd really kill him? You're disgusting."

Rupert proceeded with an incredibly boring monologue. The entire line boiled down to a discourse on the importance of money and control and supreme order in opposition to his brother's favored chaos. Perhaps there was more. I really wasn't paying attention.

Eventually it became clear that Rupert made the business decisions. So I walked to his desk and produced the contract.

"Sign it," I commanded.

At my demand Rupert made a series of incoherent noises which may or may not have constituted speaking.

"You idiot," said Dionysus with a face of three, "My brother is inarticulate. Have you no respect for our leaders? For me? For us?" Or at least I think that's what he said, for the sound of his foot stomping under the desk made it difficult to understand. Unfortunately for me, they began agreeing with each other. I was losing control of the deal.

Rupert sniveled at me, "You should show more respect for dignitaries like us. It takes a great deal of work to run The City as efficiently as we do. We can't all get by with a dismissive wave, ignoring the work that others must do for us. I doubt you can do what you promise."

Perceptive individual that I am, I could tell that this was not going my way. But I knew I could salvage the interaction at that juncture—at least keep their power from escalating—but they did not understand. I wanted to help them understand, and so I allowed them to initiate a battle. They stood up from their desk, their empty suit-sleeves dangling at their sides. Obviously, they could not engage in fisticuffs with me, but Rupert's pure logic and Dionysus' pure emotion were enough to cause me physical discomfort. Luckily, my pistols were up for the match.

They continued to drool incoherencies as they vaulted over their desk.

Dionysus (with five this time) exclaimed, "Even if we had hands I would not touch you, you vermin."

This angered me immensely, but like the worthy God I am, I did not show it. Fortunately, this

was a room with reasonable space for a duel, and I was not intending either to flee or give ground. The allure of battle was both powerful and exhilarating, and I could see how we Gentlemen could destroy the world together in pursuit of it.

A sense of superiority radiated from Rupert in waves of such force that it ripped chunks of flesh from my form and spilled my golden ichor. Meanwhile, Dionysus' chaotic brainwaves disoriented me.

But they were no match for a couple Colt-45's. I sunk a few slugs in their suit, and while they appeared at first not to be affected, they soon began to complain.

Dionysus (with four), "Rupert? Um, do you think he can really kill us?" Their left foot, clearly commandeered by Dionysus, began to tap quickly.

Rupert responded, "Of course not, you worthless Tool of Chance. We're unstoppable."

I could feel my own wounds ease, along with my headache, as they surrendered their strength.

Dionysus (with three), "You moron. We should be fleeing right now. How dense are you?"

"It is impossible for us to lose. We're Gentlemen!" Rupert declared.

The prospect of revealing my status to these buffoons was nearly orgasmic.

"So am I," I declared. "A divine iteration, at least." I could feel the golden words swirl from my flat, blank face.

At once, Dionysus (with four) replied, "Oh no--"

"Guards!" Rupert shouted.

And they began to flee.

I don't know how they made it past me. I confess I was in a bit of a stupor, recovering still from the initial pleasure of my disclosure. But my fun wasn't over yet. I emerged from their room in full pursuit, my laughter echoing down the hallway to the very end where they stood unable to face me.

It matters not what you dress a monster up as. No matter what business suit or military uniform he wears, he is still a mindless monster. I would have no problem killing them, or for that matter their sinewy minions whose knuckles scraped the floors. They could all be easily reduced to smears and stains and an occasional blob of unrecognizable matter. They fully recognized this as I paraded toward them, spreading my arms, dangling the guns from my fingertips, letting my heart beat closer to the euphoric pulse in the air.

16:57> They signed the contract. Rupert agreed to assist me if I gave The City absolute order. Dionysus agreed to assist me if I gave The City absolute chaos. What to do?

17:57> It took only an hour. I fulfilled both their requests. The City was divided along the center road, on one side a highly logical fascist hellhole, on the other a bloodbath of absolute anarchy.

But the people needed to be saved. A balance was needed between the extremes. So I saved them from Dionysus' chaos with an inkblot from my pen. And as for Rupert's suffocating order, what could be more orderly than the silence and stillness and uneventfulness of death? That required just the tip of my eraser. And thus I killed all the people in the City. The guards, the citizens, all of them. They could be hurt no more. I assure you, Sweet Journal, they felt nothing at all. And more importantly, I felt nothing at all. Oh, how I envy the insects. Their miserable lives are measured in days—ours, in tiresome decades.

24:00> What is this? The world has ended, but here I am, floating or falling or flying in darkness with only this cursed journal to my name. There's nothing left to write in it. I've succeeded, and nothing IS anymore.

So I wonder, why do my story and I still exist? If I'd begun it on a happier note, could there have been a happier ending? They say the characters in great stories will write themselves. I believe this is true. I've guided them all to a happy denouement by ending their world, as surely as my pen has guided me beneath a barren sky.

And now I save myself—by ending "The World".

## “Busting Out the Oval”

He sighed, turned his face from his position in front of the window, and glanced in my direction. Sitting in this grand office, this bastion of power and hope for all American citizens, I heard the throng behind the barricades cheering his name. These were chants usually reserved for rock stars, not politicians.

“You know why I asked you to join me?” he questioned. Silence filled the room as he let the rhetorical question sink in. “Because even as I look into their happy faces, I have no idea what I have to do to get the hell out of here. I’ve tried to bung things up royally, you know, stuff that’s impeachment-worthy. I was even willing to go to jail—to send us into war.”

As he spoke quietly towards the window, it seemed as if he wanted to say this to the crowd below. The blinking red light on my recording device darkened in response to his disclosures, beaming off the line of *Time* magazine covers on the wall.

“It wasn’t always like this, you know? We used to be led by guys who really craved this monkey act. They wanted to make the country great again. At first, I just wanted to be a decent leader. But the pressure to be perfect was served the minute I put my hand on the Bible. Everything I’ve done in office since that day has been an attempt to bust out of this damn oval. But every horrible choice turns out to be

a jackpot and they look at me like I’m a winner. I don’t believe in winning anymore.”

With every sentence, his voice got louder, but the intermittent silences were scarier than the yelling. The only sounds were the distant chants of the crowd and his deep swallowing as he pulled himself together. All the disclosures fit poorly with the image he portrayed in public. In each carefully orchestrated press conference, major-event appearance, or *Good Morning America* interview, he was impeccably put-together, confident.

He looked at the recording device on his desk. The corners of his mouth twitched and the furrow on his brow smoothed. His breathing slowed and his hands unclenched from the fists he held at his sides. He walked over and sat down in front of me.

“I want to tell the truth about my decisions. None of them have been for the good of the people. When I decided we were going to war on Canada, I told that hot young reporter from ABC I had classified intel on Canada’s plans. You remember?”

Of course, I remembered. Everyone remembered the day President Clarke W. Clark declared war on Canada. The day the protesters camped behind the barricades and rioted in the streets. American troops stormed Ottawa. I was sitting in my living room hugging my family. It was the last time we saw each other. As a SWAT team took over Centre Block in Ontario, they found stoned parliament members finalizing plans to nuke the states, along with a drug cartel run from the



basement by the prime minister. People became less outraged at Clark after that little mess was cleared up.

"I remember, Mr. President. Melanie Wilcox, one of ABC's finest. You told her you were going to have her fired. You didn't explain why," I reminded him.

I had to tread lightly. He'd been overly-friendly during the whole interview, touching Melanie's arm and complimenting her too many times. Everyone assumed he was having her fired over rejecting his pick-up lines. The incident had people firing sexual harassment and discrimination charges at him for two days until ABC News held a press conference declaring that Wilcox had embezzled money with the help of a lover from the accounting firm ABC contracted. They were taken into custody after they spent the money in Vegas. Not a dime to their names. The headline in the *Sunday Post* read: "House Always Wins: Win for White House and the Casino". My father taped it to his coffeemaker so he could laugh with his Maxwell House. Vindication again—no matter how little Clark wanted it.

"The real reason I called for war against Canada? I thought since we had that international bro-mance thing going on, it would make folks hate me. Plus my cheating ex-girlfriend had just moved into a trailer park in Ontario. And I had Wilcox fired because people loved her. America's sweetheart? All those advances I made on her? She definitely didn't reject *me*. You have no clue what she offered to do to me in the news van after the interview. It was just plain nasty. When I had her fired, I had no clue she was embezzling."

"But, Mr. President, what's the real story behind the Doritos ban?" I asked in amusement.

He shook his head with a smirk. A few strands of hair fell out of place. For a moment he seemed like any other normal guy, albeit a guy with a powerful job and way too much boyish charm.

"Pure coincidence. How could anyone blindly disclose that a key Doritos ingredient was an undiscovered cause of cancer? Or that a Doritos factory on an unknown fault line caused 23% of the west's natural disasters? Or that the plant's heating unit emissions exceeded Tokyo protocols?"

"If you didn't know any of that, then why did you ban them in the first place?"

"Please, call me Clarke. When I banned Doritos, the only thing I knew for sure was that Americans were fat. When I was a kid my favorite snack was Nacho Cheese Doritos. After eating a bag a day for three weeks I packed on ten pounds. I just figured, heck, if it made me fat, it'd make everyone fat. I banned them just to make fat people angry."

A knock sounded on the door. Three short taps and one loud one. The door swung open and Vice President Bronston Aldon, III entered, kicked off his loafers, and assumed a too-cozy lounging position on one of the couches. He looked over at me, glanced at Clarke, and nodded his head.

The Vice President turned back to Clarke and said, "Since it's the last day I have to put up with this charade, I figure it's time to let some fratitude shine through."

Clarke let out a strained laugh and slumped forward to lay his forehead on his desk. The public liked to make memes about the bro-mance between them. It was worse than Obama and Biden.

"Bron, this is Violet Hayes, the reporter I was telling you about."

"Yeah, you told me 782 times that she was coming to 'help us' and to 'mind my manners' when she was here."

"Did you get the stuff?"

"Yes, sir!"

I interrupted, "What stuff?"

A loud crack rang out.

I looked out the window to see what was happening. An alarm rang and split my head in two. Clarke had his hand to an earpiece, probably listening to some brawny Secret Service goon whose mission in life was to appear invisible.

"My God, the barricades just broke," I shouted. "The crowds are climbing the gates. We have to get you out of here."

"The Secret Service are coming to escort Bronson and me to Air Force 1. One of the housekeepers is going to take you through the secret exit. Whatever happens, Ms. Hayes, I need you to release the recording tonight."

In a rush of movement, the two men were escorted by five men suited in black. A kind-looking older woman took my elbow and handed me my purse and recording device. She silently led me through countless hallways. We entered a kitchen that turned into a pantry. The pantry was large by any scale. I wasn't surprised that half of it was stocked with kid cereals and cases of Diet Coke, probably to be slapped in the fridge after Mr. Fratitude finished the other cases. The other half was full of dry goods of all shapes and sizes, even a solitary bag of Doritos with an indecipherable expiration date. The old woman wasn't watching (she was busy with a floorboard), so I jacked the Doritos and tossed them in my purse as a souvenir. The woman, surprisingly strong for an older gal, loosened a thick slab of hardwood with one arm, and a plume of dust exploded in our faces. She cast the wood into the corner and exposed a panel with glowing green buttons. With three swift movements, she pressed 9-

1-1 (the most obvious getaway password in the universe), and soon the shelves of the pantry started to shake. Cans rattled onto the vibrating floor, which collapsed precipitously into a staircase. Who knew? While scared, I knew what to do. I had to get out and release the tape.

"Thanks, I truly appreciate it," were my final words in the White House, and with that I descended a staircase that led somewhere east of the Potomac.

It was a thank you to the old woman for getting me out safely, but also to the President for telling the country the truth. I followed the stairway east, wondering how many presidents had probably followed it long before me in moments of distress. Did Kennedy tryst down here with Marilyn to dodge the Cuban Missile Crisis? Did Hoover bunker down here in his three-piece suit as Wall Street collapsed above him? Did Nixon speak the truth to these subterranean caverns before assuring the world he was not a crook? Did any of their prayers beg to preserve their power--or to liberate them from it? History may never know, but I doubt any of them suffered such a string of hapless good luck as did Clarke W. Clark, who really didn't want to be President.