



Page 1 – FRITZ by Mark Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell writes, “I graduated from Cal State Long Beach with a degree in Screenwriting and currently live in the greater Los Angeles area. My short fiction has appeared in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety and Black Sheep: Unique Tales of Terror and Wonder* (Dec. 2023). Follow me on instagram @markmitchell.writer.”

Page 8 – THE COLORLESS EXPANSE by Daniel Lenois. Mr. Lenois graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Central Connecticut State University in 2023. Daniel currently moonlights as a graduate student while also pursuing his real passion in the area of literary achievement. Prior publications include *The Helix*, *Blue Muse*, *Unleash Lit*, and *Shacklebound Books*.

Page 9 – TWO FOR DINNER by Edward Ahern. Mr. Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He’s had over 450 stories and poems published so far, and ten books. Ed works the other side of writing at *Bewildering Stories* where he manages a posse of eight review editors, and as lead editor at *Scribes Microfiction*.

Page 15 – THE DEADLINE by Michael Fowler. Mr. Fowler writes humor and horror in Ohio.

Page 22 – THE MYRIAD CONSEQUENCES OF UNHINGED DOORS & WOMEN by Eloise Corvo. Author Eloise Corvo finds inspiration and peace of mind while wandering in the woods. Her work draws upon her time living in Northern Michigan where she is also active in environmental advocacy. When she isn’t writing, she spends much of her time putzing around her home library which her husband affectionately (?) says embodies an “Edgar Allan Poe meets Applebee’s” aesthetic. Her debut novel is set to release in March of 2025 through Level Best Books. Learn more at EloiseCorvo.com.



“FRITZ”

by MARK MITCHELL

Clare walked back into the kitchen to find her husband still standing at the sink where she had left him to go put the kids to bed. The window above the sink had steamed over from the constant flow of hot water. He appeared to be standing motionless. She didn't know what to do. Upon moving closer, she saw his jaw muscles were flexing. She let out a small sigh of relief.

“John?” she said in a soft tone so as not to startle him. “John, honey, something the matter?”

She walked up to him, keeping a safe distance in case he got spooked by her appearance. His mouth dropped open, then closed a few seconds later. He repeated the motion several times. Clare swallowed the growing lump in her throat. She tried to smile.

“John? You're not done with the dishes yet?”

The running water made the only sound in the kitchen. She glanced at John's reddening hands under the constant stream. He held the sponge to a plate, but hadn't removed any of the spaghetti sauce splattered along its rim. She reached out and placed a hand on his forearm. His jaw opened and closed. His eyes fixed on a point beyond the window.

Through the steamy window, the peach tree they had planted together when they first moved in slept in the ivory moonlight. Nothing out of the ordinary. Her worry grew. She moved closer to where John would be able to see her.

“John? Honey?”

She turned off the water. In the quiet John snapped out of his daze. He blinked a few times before finding his wife's worried eyes. She gave him a peculiar look.

“Clare, I told you I would wash the dishes tonight. I thought you were putting the kids to bed?”

“I did,” she said, searching John's face. It seemed her old husband had returned. He smiled.

“What? Am I not doing them to your standards?” he asked. She placed a hand over his. His smile faded. “What's wrong? One of the kids sick?”

“The kids are fine. It's you I'm worried about.”

“Me? I'm fine. I'm just doing the dishes.” He shrugged and turned the water back on. He scrubbed the plate clean and grabbed the next in line.

“Maybe I should finish them.”

“Don't be silly. It's my night.” He turned the water off and set the sponge down. He dried his hands before taking

Clare by the shoulders. “Besides, you could use a night off. Take a bath. Relax. I got this.” He kissed her forehead and resumed the washing.

“John, is something the matter?”

“What would be the matter?”

“You were being weird a moment ago.”

His features darkened. “Weird? How so?”

“Well,” Clare said. She grabbed the glass of wine she failed to finish during dinner off the counter. “When I walked in here just now, you kept opening and closing your mouth. I tried calling your name, and even touched your arm, but it was like you were miles away.” She sipped her wine. “Has something happened at work?”

“No.”

“Something I did?”

“No,” he said, this time with a small grunt.

“Come on, you can tell me.”

John ran the garbage disposal, having completed the dishes. He turned off the water and wringed out the sponge. He spun around and looked at Clare before diverting his eyes to the laminate floor.

“What?” She set her glass down.

“What is it?” After a few seconds of silence, she said, “You’re making me nervous.” He looked back up at her.

“I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Try.”

He seemed to weigh the words in his head. “It’s weird. Every time I open my mouth, I hear a strange static. Like when you’re driving in the middle of nowhere,

searching for a radio station. When I close my mouth though, it stops.” He held his hands up. “I can’t explain it.”

“When did this all start?”

“Sometime after lunch today.” He threw the towel down on the counter. “At least that’s when I first noticed it.”

“Could be anything,” she said, trying to make her voice sound more hopeful than she felt. “Maybe you’re just tired.” She reached for his hand and squeezed it. “It’s been a stressful week.” He nodded in agreement. “How about I go start the bath? The kids are asleep. We could bathe together?”

He smiled weakly. “I’m pretty tired now that I think about it. I’m going to watch a recap of the game and then head to bed, if that’s alright?”

“Sure.”

He kissed her forehead again and headed for the stairs. He stopped before leaving the kitchen. “Tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

They exchanged smiles. He went up stairs and she heard the tv turn on. She finished her wine and left the glass in the sink to wash in the morning. She wondered if all marriages had these issues, or just the ones where their spouse was a robot.

#

The next day Clare kept a vigilant eye on John. The weather turned out to be more pleasant than the weatherperson had predicted for the weekend. They decided to take advantage of the unseasonably warm day and went to the zoo as a family. After

spending a couple hours there, Clare was finally able to relax. John carried his girls on his shoulders, alternating piggy-back rides to see the gorillas, the tigers, the pandas on loan from China. It seemed all he had really needed was a good night's rest. To recharge his batteries. John was energetic, happy. Whatever had been going on the night before was in the past.

While standing along the railing outside the Chimpanzee enclosure, the girls giggled and pointed at two of the apes getting to know one another more intimately. Clare gave a quick explanation of the activity they were engaged in, and hoped the girls wouldn't ask any follow up questions. With luck on her side, they didn't. They opted to stop for ice cream instead of continuing to watch the wonders of nature.

John wrapped an arm around Clare's midsection before she could get away. He rested his head on her shoulder, forcing her to watch the two chimps with him. He whispered into her ear, "Looks like I could learn a thing or two from these apes. Think I picked up a couple new moves to try out on you during our rain check tonight."

"Naughty!" she said, astonished.

John smacked her butt before running to catch up with the girls. Clare smiled to herself, thankful the old John showed up today.

#

On the way home from the zoo, the family stopped at one of their favorite restaurants. John wanted an upscale

steakhouse, whereas the girls wanted something with a ball pit in the recreational area. They compromised on a diner that didn't have a mascot, but still had a decent kids menu.

At dinner that night, John taught his girls how to expertly blow bubbles in their chocolate milk without having any of the contents dribble down the sides of the glass. Clare didn't approve of such behavior, but she also didn't want to put a damper on the lively atmosphere. Today had been just what the doctor ordered. From top to bottom, it had been a day to remember. Weeks from now, when stuck at work or school, they could all look back on today and appreciate the good time they had.

Toward the end of the meal, the girls took up a game of trying to land bits of their leftover french fries in each other's glasses of water. This activity was different from the bubble blowing, which had been done more discreetly and didn't attract the attention of the other guests sitting nearby. No one, however, could mistake the girls tossing spud missiles across the corner table. Especially with the amount of giggling that accompanied any successful toss.

"Ok, girls. That's enough," Clare said, trying to get the situation under control.

The girls paid no attention. More french fries flew across the table. One excessive toss hit the back of the head of the lady sitting in the next booth. She turned around to see what the commotion was all about.

“That’s enough,” Clare said more firmly. She turned to the stranger. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s ok,” the woman said. She glanced at the two girls, then turned back around.

“Fun’s over.” The girls tossed another round each. “I mean it, stop this right now.” Clare pinched the bridge of her nose with growing embarrassment. John, on the other hand, didn’t seem to mind. He had half a steak still to eat, and enjoyed watching the girls while he finished. He laughed. Clare gave him a stern look. “John, you’re not helping.”

“Come on, honey. It’s only some harmless fun.” He cut vigorously into his steak.

“I think we should be a united front on this,” Clare said. “They’ve already hit this lady and I don’t –”

She gasped.

“John, your finger!”

“What about my finger?”

He looked down at his plate. He had missed the steak and cut into his own finger, sawing off a sizable chunk from the tip. Blood pooled on the plate, mixing with the juices of his steak.

The girls took notice and both burst into tears from the sight of blood.

“It’s ok. Daddy’s ok,” John said. He dropped his utensils on the plate. Clare slipped out of the booth to help him.

“Didn’t you feel that?” she asked.

“No,” John said. His voice was high, startled. “I didn’t notice at all.” He looked down at the missing tip of his finger. Amongst the gushing blood, it appeared as

if wires were sticking out. One blue and another red. Before he could examine it closer, Clare wrapped a napkin around his fingertip.

“You have to keep pressure on it,” she said.

“Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“It looked like wires. Why would there be wires in my finger?”

“You cut yourself pretty deep.” Clare blew a strand of hair that had fallen over her eyes. “Maybe you saw a vein or something. Hold the napkin tightly.” John took over pressure duties as the waiter came back to the table.

“Everything alright here?” he asked. The girls’ sobs had quieted down, though tears ran down their cheeks. The waiter’s eyes went wide at the amount of blood.

“The check, please,” Clare said. The waiter ripped the check from his pad in his front pocket and placed it on the table.

“Anything else I can get you?”

“No, thank you.”

Clare grabbed her purse. “I’m going to go pay and then we’ll get you to a doctor. Don’t take that napkin off. You need to keep pressure on it.”

John was tempted to take another peek, to see if the wires were there, but Clare returned quicker than expected. She helped the girls into their coats and they all headed for the door.

“Thanks for coming in,” the waiter said. He grabbed the plates off the table, turning his nose up at the swashing blood surrounding the unfinished steak.

#

When Monday rolled around, Clare's concern for John's strange behavior peaked. After Saturday's incident at the diner, Clare wouldn't leave him out of her sight for a minute. She followed him around the house. Ate when he ate. Showered while he showered. She even went as far as to sit in a folding chair in the shade while he conducted his ritual yard work. Keeping that close of an eye on him, she didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. As if the mere act of spying kept him on the straight and narrow. It was only when she let her guard down for a moment, the final strange occurrence took place.

A few months back, John had taken over assembling the girls' lunches. Apparently he knew how to make the sandwiches taste better, at least according to the reviews coming back from the Spectre County Elementary School. Clare shed the task without a fight - one less thing for her to do in the morning while trying to get ready for work. This particular morning, however, it was John who was running behind.

Upon entering the kitchen, Clare froze in her tracks. John stood behind the island, the knife he'd been using to spread peanut butter - all the way to the edges of course - held up to eye level. Clare thought he might be having a staring contest with the knife. She passed behind him, creating a break in the reflecting light. All at once John came back into being.

"Hi, honey." He gave Clare a kiss on the cheek. "Kids almost ready?"

"Yeah, they'll be down in a sec." She grabbed two apples and dropped them into the pink and purple princess lunchpails. "What were you doing?"

"Me?" John closed the sandwiches and cut them into fours. "Nothing." Clare reached up and felt his forehead, making him laugh. "What are you doing?"

"You feeling alright?"

"Never better."

He gave his wife a funny look, then wrapped the sandwiches in cellophane and plopped them into the lunchpails.

"You sure?" she asked. He nodded. "I forgot something upstairs. I'll be right back." She walked out of the kitchen, taking one glance back as she rounded the corner. John had picked up the knife and resumed staring at it. The stairs creaked, signaling she had left.

John held up his right arm, watching the tendons dance as his fingers moved. He swapped the sandwich knife for a sharper one from the drawer and pressed the tip of the knife into his forearm. Bright red blood sprung forth and ran down to his elbow before dripping onto the island. He began carving a complete circle around his entire arm, never once grimacing in pain. In fact, he didn't feel a thing.

The stairs creaked again, but John paid them no mind. He continued the knife's path back to the initial entry point. Once done, he dropped the knife and slipped his fingers under the loose skin. Like taking

off a glove, John pulled the skin toward the fingertips. The skin cover came off without opposition. The glob of skin made a mushy sound when it hit the floor.

John's face showed no signs of terror. Nor pain. Nor amazement. Nothing. He stared blankly back at the robotic hand in front of him as if that was what he had expected to find. He moved the fingers, watching the mechanisms react. The work was intricate with blue and red wires wrapping in and around the arm's structure. John twisted the arm to see it from all different sides. While he processed this new information, he failed to notice Clare sneaking up behind him.

Clare grabbed the frying pan John had

used to make the girls breakfast. She raised the cast iron skillet above her head and struck a heavy blow. John fell down, his legs spasming against the cupboards. Clare whacked him again, hoping he would stop before the girls came down to investigate the sound. It took another blow to get him to stop. Clare placed the pan in the sink.

The stairs creaked with little feet racing down. Clare only had a few seconds to get John out of sight. She lifted him under his arms and dragged his body behind the island. Only his feet were visible when the girls ran into the kitchen.

"Stop," Clare shouted.

"What's wrong with Daddy?"

"Nothing sweetie. He's just working



under the sink. Don't come over here, there's a lot of bottles and things on the floor."

The girls looked confused, but accepted their mother's explanation.

The school bus pulled up out front, announcing its arrival with an expulsion from the air brakes. Clare walked around the island, careful not to slip in the blood, and grabbed the lunchpails. She gave one to each girl.

"Better hurry. You don't want to miss the bus," she said.

"But, Daddy—"

"He'll be fine." Clare smiled. "Now, off to school. Both of you." She kissed them goodbye and closed the front door once they were safely on the bus. She went back into the kitchen.

"Oh, John," she said and let out a sigh. "Why did you have to go and do that to yourself?"

She got out a mop and bucket from the closet under the stairs. She filled it with hot water and started to clean up as much of the blood as she could. John's body lay on the floor, face up. She closed his eyes as she mopped around him. Getting to a stopping point, she retrieved a business card from her purse and used the landline. She punched in the phone number from memory. She cradled the phone against her shoulder, waiting for someone to pick up.

Reading off the card, she said, "Member number 9384702301." She heard computer keys clacking on the other end. "Yep, it's my husband again." A pause. "He

became self-aware. Again." She dropped the business card on the counter. "I was supposed to be at work today, but seeing as my husband's on the floor, unresponsive, I guess I'll be here...Yes, well, you've said that before. I thought you'd get the problem fixed by now. This is my third husband this year...Umm-hmm....ok. Between noon and four you said?...Great... Thank you."

Clare hung up the phone, thought for a second, then dialed another number.

"Mom? Can you do me a favor...? Can you pick up the girls from school today?...I'm having some work done to the house and it would just be easier if...John? He's not feeling well...yeah some kind of bug in his system...I've heard it's been going around too...Thank you so much, Mom. I'll be by to pick them up hopefully before dinner...Love you too."

She hung up the phone and slumped into one of the chairs around the island. She had some time to kill before the delivery men showed up that afternoon with her new unit. In the meantime, she still had more cleaning to do.

Clare picked up the business card from the counter and peered at it. She had read it a dozen times, but always got a kick out of their slogan: "Believable Replicants - They'll never know." She laughed.

"Boy do I wish that were true."

She replaced the business card in her purse and got back to work. The house needed to be cleaned before the girls returned home from school. ❖

“THE COLORLESS EXPANSE”

by DANIEL LENOIS

Momma says that when she was little, you could look up, and the sky would be filled with blue light. After a while, the light would go away. They called that “night”. Earth was full of bright colors, she said. So many colors that some people were afraid of the night, when the only light came from the stars and moon.

But then, the planet became sick, and that made everybody else sick too. Then we had to leave. I don’t remember back then, but Momma, she told me I was very small, one of the last earthborn.

We have our own compartment, just the two of us. The walls are dark gray. Charcoal gray, Momma calls it. There are two beds, one above the other, that slide out from one wall. Momma has a desk where she works. Sometimes when she’s done, I’ll crawl underneath, and she’ll cover the desk with a blanket. The words from her holofeed over the wall shine through the blanket, flying past like meteors.

Momma tints the windows when we’re inside. She doesn’t like to look out at the stars. The people she works with think she’s scared, but Momma isn’t scared of anything. She just wants to go home.

I tell her this is our home now, and she smiles and her lips say yes, but the

smile doesn’t reach her eyes, and fades away when she thinks I’m no longer looking. Her home was on Earth, with its color and light. Part of her died there, a part I’ll never know.

She won’t talk about her life on Earth, not very much.

I listen very closely in class whenever they teach us about Earth. I try to fix every image, every video, every hologram, all in my mind, and when I lay down under the desk and look up at the flickering lights, I try to fit it all together, to see what Momma saw. But it just slips away, like the streaks of light around me. ❖

“TWO FOR DINNER”

by EDWARD AHERN

I watched a fly join several others on an adhesive strip. I wondered how long it would take him to die. A day or two at least. I also wondered how Oscar Blaisdale could tolerate having so many vermin in his house, but then smiled. I was the human vermin Oscar had brought inside.

We met at an AA meeting. I was on my fourth attempt that year to get clean. Oscar said he had twenty years in the program. Maybe. The other drunks and druggies had only vague recollections of seeing him around.

Oscar took me aside after the third meeting we'd been at together. "I've been listening to your story, Rolf. I was homeless myself some years ago."

I wondered, given the apparent sympathy, if I could hit him up for a twenty. "Yeah it's been hard. Everybody uses at the shelter I'm at, it's a joke."

Oscar nodded. "I might have a temporary option for you. But I have to ask you to keep this just between you and me."

I half closed my eyes. I'd been scammed before by pros. "I'm out on probation, I don't do anything illegal."

"No, no, nothing bent about it. I've got to go on a week's business trip and I need someone to live in my house until I get back."

My street smarts were twinging like first day withdrawal. "What would I need to do?"

"House cleaning. Basic security. I'm in and out a lot, and I've been broken into. I'd need to have you there twenty-four-seven. That's important, you wouldn't be able to leave the house at all for the whole week. If you leave early there's no payoff. And if you come, I'm going to pat you down for drugs and booze. Absolutely no getting high. If that's a deal breaker just say so."

"What's it pay?"

"A hundred twenty a day cash, food and drinks provided. There's streaming and internet, I'm not a savage."

I looked more closely at him. Old, really old, but still dressed expensive. Skinny, no, stringy, like he had strength left. I needed the money bad, but still wanted to turn Oscar down. Then I remembered the rip offs and abuse at the halfway house. I almost said no again when I realized I'd have no contacts for my dry goods of choice. But \$1700 would give me walking around money. And there were other guys from the meeting who would shove me aside to take the job.

"When would it be?"

"Sunday afternoon around 4pm. I can

pick you up. No problem if you don't want to." Oscar's smile was agreeable.

"Can I get some upfront money?"

"Sorry, no, payment on completion."

"I have to call my P.O."

"You can call whoever you like."

"Why really couldn't I leave the house?"

"One junky to another, I need you clean so you can keep a proper watch."

"What about meetings?"

"There's plenty of AA Zoom meetings you can join. You can use my laptop."

I was out of questions, but the low-grade fear still nagged. "You gonna lock me in so I don't steal stuff?"

Oscar frowned. "Nope. Just call me if you decide to walk away before the end of the week. No money payable though."

If I changed my mind, I could always tell Oscar to go screw. "Okay, you got a deal."

I didn't back out. Oscar arrived in his Prius the next day, patted me down and went through my rucksack. Then he drove me for a half hour out of town and up to an isolated house. There were exterior security cameras.

Oscar gave me a hustle along tour of his surprisingly large home. Four bedrooms upstairs, finished attic further up, dining, living, study, kitchen, TV room ground floor. All requiring dusting and cleaning. The door to the basement had two key locks.

"That where the valuable stuff is?" I asked.

Oscar laughed. "Not salable, but

important to me. I keep my history down there. The house has security alarms and ground floor motion detectors, programmed from upstairs and to my phone. I set the alarm every night at 10pm, release it every morning at 6:30. You need to be upstairs all night. If you set off the alarm the cops will charge me \$150 to come, which I'll take out of your pay."

The house was furnished in down market motel; other than the laptop and the flat screen there wasn't anything I could have made money off of. "No offense, but why bother with a house sitter?"

Oscar quit smiling. "I value my privacy more than you can imagine, and I punish violators." He gave a sideways glance at me. "I was still 6'2", but the 230 pounds had wasted away to 170. Figured I still had enough beef to throw him around if I needed to, but he didn't look worried."

"Oh," I said.

"I precooked our dinner, let me just thaw it out and warm it up. I hope you like Goulash."

"That's beef stew, right? Should be fine."

"Kind of."

While Oscar rattled and bustled in the kitchen, I turned on a football game I didn't give a damn about, and wondered if I'd mis-figured things. Then, bored, I set the table in the kitchen and poured iced tea and water. As Oscar was chopping, a little onion rolled off the counter and under the refrigerator. Without hesitation or apparent exertion, he stooped down, put one hand under the appliance and tilted it six

inches up, grabbing the onion with his free hand. I could have maybe done it two handed straining and cursing. He was strong, real strong.

He noticed my gawk. "It's just leverage."

Oscar had prepared noodles and French bread to go with the stew, but he didn't eat either of them, just a big mound of meat.

It was heavily spiced, not mouth burning, but very herbed. The meat tasted funny, like it was a little off. Not beef. "What kind of meat is it?"

His smile came back, but twisted a bit. "It's aged pork. I like to hang my meat a bit before I eat it."

"Oh." I ate it, it was better than the slop we usually got at the halfway house. Bits of the skin were occasionally attached to the meat chunks, but I cut around them. Oscar shoveled down the meat so indiscriminately I thought of a dog at its bowl. Which surprised me, he'd struck me as an elegant type.

After I'd done the dinner dishes, he showed me how to get on the laptop and get the streaming channels on the TV, then left me to go down to the basement, relocking the door behind him. About a quarter to ten he came upstairs with a five-gallon jar that he stuck in the refrigerator. "It's 10 pm," he said, "time to go upstairs. Take the laptop with you if you like."

Once upstairs he set the house alarm and waved me to my room. It was so bare it qualified for a monk. I'd been trying to mask my twitchies all evening, but was pret-

ty sure that as a fellow alum Oscar had noticed them. Alone in the room I let myself short circuit. The hit I'd taken just before he'd picked me up was long over, and I was cold sweating. Sleep wasn't going to come easy, so I waited until Oscar was most probably asleep, took out a little mag light from my duffel, and walked over to the alarm keypad. Five keys with repeated smudges. If I could watch the way his hands moved in the morning, I might be able to suss out the combination.

That next morning Oscar tossed a small suitcase in the Prius and left me alone with the flies. The front door really was unlocked. I was pretty sure I was a long way from the nearest dealer, and I needed the money, so I stayed put, nerves screaming. I almost gave in and pulled the tape from the taint between my balls and my asshole, but didn't. Save those hits for the worst, I thought.

I gave the house closer inspection. The cellar door locks were Yales, okay but not top end. The refrigerator held bacon, eggs, frozen veggies, juice, milk and the jar of meat. The kitchen shelves were pretty bare, but held unopened packages of bread, cereal, cookies and crackers. There were no sweets of any kind, not any sugar, and I needed a major sugar high to try and keep sane. I called Oscar. He understood without asking questions. "I'll order Amazon to deliver you some. What kind do you like?"

I checked out the drawers in his office and bedroom, but there was no money or checkbook. I pulled up a couple porn sites on the laptop, but even that required more

focus than I had. I did some spastic calisthenics, but that just turned my cold sweat hot. This was going to be a tough gig.

I'd stuck a couple lockpicking tools inside my toothpaste tube. Once extracted and cleaned they went to work on the Yale locks. I got nowhere with either one for the first half hour, then old habits kicked in and I got the feel of them. With luck I'd get them both open quick when I needed to. So far so good.

Dinner that night was more of the same meat, but I fried it. It still tasted a little gamey. I sweated jam into my sheets again that night, but the next morning, felt good enough to run through all my chores and get back to Yale. Both locks opened.

Rough wooden stairs lead down to an unfinished basement as big the footprint of the house. It smelled of mouse piss, and was partly full of furniture that was even worse than the upstairs stuff. There was a work sink and a stand-up freezer, almost empty, that held another jug of meat. The flies and the rank smell were thicker. One corner of the basement had a boxed in storage room, its metal-door closed with a high end Best lock. My man Oscar looked to have some secrets, and the urge to run away came back. I stood looking at the locked door, trying to think things through. Another day or two, I thought. Run away when I had something to take with me.

I decided to hold off trying to pick the Best, went back upstairs and relocked the Yales. Good thing I did, Oscar Facetimed me.

He studied my image. "Your coloring is already a little healthier. Another few days and you'll have flushed most of the poison out of your system. Still feel like shit maybe, but more wholesome."

We spent a few minutes comparing addictions. He'd been an opioid addict, never did fentanyl, or crack or meth. Just an old-fashioned guy with a hypo. Almost Victorian. And disappointed when I said I wasn't eating all that much. "You need to rebuild some tissue."

"I know, but right now food is hard to swallow."

"Eat the candy bars at least."

That night after curfew I sat on my bed and tried to think. I figured Oscar to be playing me, but why? I had no money, no special access to drugs, just a little expertise in burglary that he didn't know anything about. He could do better on the street corners of Bridgeport. As I lay there, I thought I could hear the house rumbling a warning, but wrote it off to Jonesing from lack of dope.

My phone was quiet the next day, which figured since it was a new burner. Once back in the basement I spent almost an hour cracking the Best lock before I got into the little room. The stink was worse inside it. There was a rack on one wall with butcher's tools, a table bone saw, and a hose. Oscar also had a small work desk and stand-up filing cabinet, thankfully unlocked. He kept meticulous records in a flowery script I'd seen only in old movies, of some kind of trade he had going with a guy named George. Didn't say what they

traded, but it was measured in pounds, even Steven, back and forth. They usually traded every month, but there was a six week pause since the last entry.

The cellar suddenly felt really cold. I walked back over to the work table, pulled a six-inch boning knife off the rack and slid it between belt and pants in the small of my back. I needed a gun, but it was all I had.

Meat. They traded meat, and I'd be the next processed pig. Time to get the hell out. I loped back up the stairs, leaving everything unlocked. Too late. Oscar was waiting behind the door at the head of the stairs and slammed it shut after me as I ran out.

He took a step toward me. "Pity you didn't notice the concealed door alarm. Also a pity you couldn't wait another day before violating my lair. You would have tasted much better with additional drug cleansing." He sighed. "Guess I'll just have to put up with dooper stew."

As he started to take the step that would put him up against me, I swung a looping left fist toward his face. It never made it. His snake-fast right hand grasped my left fist and squeezed, cracking bones.

As I screamed, he put his left hand on my shoulder and started to pull me in for a terminal bear hug. I yanked out the boning knife and thrust it upward into the dwindling space between us. I got lucky. The



knife jabbed in under his chin and into his brain. He let go, but didn't drop, standing like a man who'd forgotten something. He should've been on the floor dead.

I pulled out the knife and slammed it into where I thought his heart was. He still stood, making random movements like he was trying to wake up. I screamed again, this time at him, and slit his throat. What little blood came out of him was thinned down like red wine in crushed ice.

His twitching became more pronounced, and I bent over and sliced through an Achilles tendon. Oscar teetered and dropped, still sucking air in through the slit in his throat. I moved behind his head where I'd be tougher to grab and stabbed once more, into and past his right eye. He finally went still.

My breathing was as ragged as his had been. I needed to think but was completely buzzed out on endorphins and pain from my hand. I sat in a kitchen chair for five minutes staring at Oscar not moving, half expecting him to do so. Then I got up and pulled out his wallet.

There was a little over two grand in fifties and hundreds that I confiscated, along with the car keys. According to the driver's license his name wasn't Oscar. I thought some more.

I cleaned up his eye with my good hand, took out his cell phone, and used facial recognition to unlock it. George was listed, and I called him.

"Hello George. I'm an acquaintance of Oscar. I'm the one you were going to eat. Don't hang up, I've got to tell you what

you're going to do. Oscar is maybe dead, and you need to cut him up and dispose of him. Pretty sure you know how to do that....

"Your working arrangement was clever-you process Oscar's finds and he does yours. You don't foul your own nest. If the cops asked you could just say that your visitor left to go cop before the week was done...

"That's bullshit and you know it. I'm taking Oscar's log book and phone. You come after me, the cops come after you. You don't want the town cops to find the body and you do want to continue to chase down your hobby. You need to stop by today and take care of things..."

"That's better. We leave each other alone we're both happier."

Once the phone was off, I did more thinking. The car I'd drive away in would go to a chop shop I knew of. The wallet would hang out with the ledger and phone in a stash I had. George was apt to become my ATM. I thought about the jug of meat in the refrigerator, but left it there. It was okay, but not as a steady diet. ❖

“THE DEADLINE”

by MICHAEL FOWLER

Professor Phelps smiled at the transparent reflection of himself in the window of his study, and then effortlessly transferred the smile to his backyard, where a crooked water feature spumed endlessly into a small brown pond. In the clear blue sky high above the water feature, a jumbo passenger drone was passing on route to a nearby lofthub, in perfect silence. Jumbo passenger drones, carrying Earthlings as well as visitors from several far-flung planets and space stations, had flown in silence since his undergraduate days, or he would not have moved so near a lofthub.

Exhaling, he felt a perfect degree of satisfaction. Professor Emeritus in Mathematics at an elite coastal university, now happily ensconced as a part-time researcher in the math department of the huge Midwestern university he had attended as an undergraduate, he was days away from winning his second Scott Medal in Mathematics, awarded to whomever cracked a hard-nut problem on the official Scott list of such, along with a prize of one million dollars. Phelps couldn't have wiped the grin off his face with sandpaper.

He had won his first Scotty forty years ago at the age of twenty-three, for proving Renotti's famous Conjecture on Primes. As a mere college freshman, Renotti had pro-

posed...but why go on and on about the Conjecture, when it's as familiar to every educated person as the taste of broccoli?

Since there was no limit on the number of Scotties a single mathematician might win, Phelps had long plotted his return to the victor's ellipse, and now at sixty-three, a decidedly advanced age for first-rate mathematical work but well ahead of senility, he had solved another problem on the Scotty list of eligibles: a proof of Flarbaqil's Method. Flarbaqil's Method, a valuable but unproven hypothesis applied in the manufacture of ball bearings and orthopedic shoes...but again, why babble on about a theory that to every literate Tom, Dick and Harry is as well-known as gastritis?

But it wasn't the expectation of another million dollars in his wallet that induced Phelps's grin. In fact, he had gone out of his way to ensure that some other genius won the award. Having arrived at what was assuredly the correct solution to the Flarbaqil business half a year ago, he could have posted it at once on *TheoremsandNumbers.com* and, so long as his work defied refutation and received the nod from his peers around the world, become the prize's first second-time winner. As such, he would have received the

gold medallion and whopping check in a few weeks from the well-funded award committee. That's the way it had transpired when he was twenty-three, and he had every expectation that it would happen that way again when he was sixty-three; that is, if he wanted it to.

But Professor Phelps was a generous man, and knowing himself to be a big-hearted person, in addition to being a quantitative savant on the level of Gauss, was part of the reason he kept smiling at his image in the windowpane. Sure, he could have used another million. He had a current wife plus two exes and five adult offspring along with seventeen grandchildren, and the first million had scattered in ways that no accounting system could track. No one who called on him at the tiny condo with its simple water feature that he now shared with his wife and one failed son could accuse him of being wealthy. But he simply didn't think it fair of him to claim the same prize twice. That would be hoggish of him, and the Midwesterner in him preferred not to be hoggish. His wife, for one, wished him to be hoggish, but he did not. The missis, having caught wind of his scheme, had hoggish designs on a second million, as she was not from the Midwest, but from the coast. But he would be hoggish, he firmly decided, only if no one else came up with the answer even after he had pointed out the correct path.

In accordance with this selfless idea, he had made a bold announcement on *TheoremsandNumbers.com* three months

ago: he would post his proof of Flarbaqil's Method at midnight December 31. However, and this was the kicker, he encouraged others to beat him to the punch. He would even help others triumph over him by dropping two hints to the right answer on *TheoremsandNumbers.com* over the next three months.

He was as good as his word, and along with his announcement had posted the first hint on October 1. The hint provided an overview of the branch of mathematics needed for the proof, and served as a sort of warmup for dummies. The second hint, posted by him a month later on November 1, indicated the initial steps of the proof but left out the final key equations; it also failed to supply the keen analysis and insight required to find them. That left only the red meat of the thing and the final QED, and this he would post a few days hence at midnight December 31, at last steering the tight ship into the heretofore impregnable harbor.

Still his stipulation remained: at any time before midnight December 31, Phelps declared, another mathematician could jump in with the finished proof and win the day, being more than welcome to use Phelps's hints as a start. If that happened Phelps would not publish his concluding equations at all, and neither would he ask for or accept any share of the prize money. The professor couldn't help smiling again at this clever method of remaining true to his plain roots and not becoming an outright hog.

Oddly however, given the extent of his

helpfulness with the proof and his generosity with large sums of money, he was not overly pleased when, recently over his antenna-sensitive ears, he had picked up a certain buzz on the stifling air in the faculty lounge at his university. This irritating vibration foretold that a proof of Flarbaqil's Method, perhaps even a novel one that did not build on his extremely helpful hints of October and November, was about to be published on *TheoremsandNumbers.com* before the midnight December 31 deadline. When it came down to it, it seemed, he didn't really relish the competition, especially when rumor had it that his competitor was a nonentity in his own department named Dr. Arnold Throbeck.

Phelps didn't know the man, not really, though he was somewhat familiar with his fairly competent work on partitions. A search of the vast university library for more advanced work or any recent publications by Throbeck turned up a null set, as did a thorough computer search of the entire numerical world, and his only memory of the man, a vague one, was of sitting with him on some faculty committee, where Throbeck's main duty had been to keep the coffee pot percolating. He had performed brilliantly at this, in Phelps's recollection, but then he, Phelps, was a tea man, like Einstein.

Phelps decided to beard the lion by personally calling on Throbeck in his university office, to refresh his impression and get a feel for the fellow's acumen. His gut told him that a numbers theorist with such

invisible credentials must be a mathematical cipher, not unlike the two unknowns who had already posted so-called proofs of Flarbaqil's Method in recent days. These two frauds, from unidentifiable parts of the globe and of tenuous university affiliation, had posted number salads so unrelated to his choice hints and so egregious that he had felt no need to reply. Throbeck almost certainly planned to toss out more of the same sort of roughage in hopes that he might get lucky or fool somebody. Phelps desired to see him at once for the purpose of encouraging him, if against all odds Throbeck was close to winning the challenge, or otherwise to gloat over his inadequacy and once again prepare himself to become a millionaire. Phelps was a Midwesterner, true, but he was also human.

In preparing to leave his office and visit the probable pretender, Phelps secured his station. This involved a complex and time-consuming ritual understandable in an open and generous man who also happened to be a devious paranoiac when it came to safeguarding his claim to a million. But before he could close and lock his laptop that contained the valuable file, titled "Proof of Flarbaqil's Method," and then lock the device in his desk, and then close and lock his office door, and finally undertake the short trek to Throbeck's lair—up one floor on the y axis and then down three doors along the x axis—two callers, neither of them Throbeck, announced themselves.

They were Kravits and Stobald, two

professors in the math department who waltzed in and, as it were, hotboxed him in his office. These two jokers, as he knew, loved to take advantage of his Midwestern hospitality, especially Stobald, who hailed from the planet Fintobol, where apparently everyone was jocular. Kravits, however, though an Earther like Phelps, was no slouch in the gags department himself.

“And so, Phelps,” said Kravits, scratching his dark, unkempt beard with a forefinger, “do you enjoy the feeling of becoming a millionaire for the second time?”

“If I had that kind of loot,” said Stobald, turning toward Phelps, his hatchet face with its oddly low brow and purplish quadruple lips, “do you know what I’d do, Professor Kravits?”

“What would you do, Professor Stobald?” Kravits obliged him.

“Yes, yes, my dear colleagues,” Phelps rushed to stave off the punchline. “You’d invest in the restaurant you two plan to open together in a feverish gush of entrepreneurial spirit, your improbable restaurant where the hypothetical diner orders food and invests in financial futures at the same time, presumably off parallel menus. Gentlemen, may I remind you that the million can be all yours if you validate Farbaqil’s method? Then you can leave off begging for alms.”

“Why don’t you help us validate it?” boldly suggested Stobald, expressing the radical idea in the forefront of his active mind.

“Yes, show us how to do it,” said Kravits. “If it’s true you don’t want the

filthy million yourself, what have you got to lose by helping us win it?” He paused a moment and then said to Stobald, “We’re upsetting the poor boy now. He’s embarrassed by our abject penury and bold solicitation. If only he knew what a sound investment our restaurant is, he’d punch himself in the face for not getting on board this instant.”

“He’s so foolish,” said Stobald, “my heart pumps raspberry syrup for him.”

“Gentlemen,” said Phelps with forbearance. “Why not ask Professor Throbeck to invest in your ingenious enterprise? I hear he is completing a proof to Flarbaqil’s Method and will soon have greenbacks plastered all over him.”

“Throbeck!” scoffed Stobald. “Throbeck needs help filing his taxes.”

“The man still uses a slide rule,” said Kravits.

“You really must excuse me,” said Phelps, desperate for his guests to depart. “I have a hundred more places of pi to memorize before lunch...”

“Well then...” began Kravits. But before he could start in on what Phelps knew would be more gibberish intended to entangle him in a financial venture of extraordinary risk, the three were joined by a fourth, who also took advantage of Phelps’s lax open-door policy this day. This was the twenty-year-old Axpier, or some such name, a third-year math major at the university.

“Ugh!” cried Stobald at the sight of Axpier, and “Gad!” cried Kravits. Both abruptly stood up to leave.

Phelps himself would have liked to flee his office, not that Axpier, a student of other-galaxy parentage, was terribly dangerous or obnoxious, but in all advanced life-forms, including humans like Kravits and Fintobolians like Stobald, he induced a certain degree of neuralgia and headache. It was not his unearthly appearance that did this, though the youth's form—a gray mass of what looked like oatmeal with a face, including a few sprouts of hair at its apex—did take a bit of getting used to, even though his trunk was encased in a fashionable Boston U T-shirt and his feet flowed into spotless running shoes. But rather, folks of Axpier's lineage emitted a type of radiation that interfered with the thought processes and metabolic functions of other advanced beings, causing them some amount of pain and distress. Foil vests of aluminum or lead, the metal woven into soft fabric, were often worn by Earthers and Fintobolians for protection, along with tinfoil-fabric skullcaps. Kravits and Stobald, both unprotected from Axpier's emissions on this occasion, left hastily. Both had had Axpier, an exceptionally able student, attend their classes, and both had had learned the unpleasant cost of going without armor.

Alas, Axpier's people could not themselves wear lead and foil clothes to protect those around them, as they were allergic to direct contact with those metals, which rendered them feverish and delusional. But Axpier, a thoughtful creature, had thought of that.

"I brought this for you, Professor," said

Axpier in New England-accented English, the current locale of his parents, as he took the chair vacated by Kravits in front of Phelps's desk. With a self-deprecating Midwestern smile, Phelps took the proffered tinfoil cap and put it on. Never having had Axpier or any other student of his provenance attend one of his seminars, he lacked a protective hat of his own. He would need one, he mused, if Axpier got his way. This, as he well knew from having had Axpier buttonhole him in the hallway and drone on about it on several earlier occasions, the student's voice flowing forcefully from his bubbling hole of a mouth, was to enroll in Phelps's seminars for advanced students of mathematics, for which he needed Phelps's permission.

"Axpier," he said before the eager student could get started. "You're attending the university on scholarship, aren't you?" Phelps didn't know how he knew that about Axpier, but somehow he did. He also felt a headache begin to creep into his throbbing brain.

"Yes, Professor," said Axpier, his drab length quivering and his lumpy features beaming. "If my parents had money, they would have sent me to Boston University." A gray hand indicated his Boston U T-shirt. "But I am an indigent."

"Excellent," Phelps said before he could catch himself. "And you're pretty good at math too, I hear?" Phelps was starting to get a stomachache now, but it was possibly hunger since he hadn't eaten that day.

"I hope so, Professor Phelps."

“Well then, I’m prepared to grant you admission into my seminars starting next fall on one condition: you must prove Flarbaqil’s Method and post your solution online. I will help you, should you need assistance.” Phelps smiled broadly, feeling gloriously Midwestern and magnanimous as he said this. Naturally he realized that with Axpier in his seminars, he would not only be disturbed by the young student’s breakfast-like appearance, but suffer annoying physical distress from his strange rays without better defensive garments than the cheap and ineffective foil cap he now wore. Moreover, he would likely suffer from these causes for two years, since it was only after that period of time that he planned to retire.

“Are you by any chance familiar with Flarbaqil’s Method?” he asked Axpier. “I believe the originator is a native of your world.”

“Oh yes, Professor,” said Axpier. “There is a statue of the great mathematician in my former hometown, where I lived before my parents and I moved to Earth to take advantage of open-admissions universities and the warming. It’s always cold where I come from, and many of my townspeople are uneducated chefs and flight attendants.”

“Nevertheless,” said Phelps, annoyed despite himself by Axpier’s allusions to a humble origin, a reputation Axpier had taken care to advance in Phelps’s hearing once or twice in the halls of the math department, and that now sounded a tad ingratiating, “Flarbaqil’s method is in your

genes, and all you need to do is bring it out.”

Phelps opened his laptop and showed Axpier the posted problem and its hints for solution on *TheoremsandNumbers.com*.

“But Professor,” said Axpier after a moment, a worried look on his glistening, mealy face as he studied the computer screen. “Shouldn’t I consult Dr. Throbeck about this first? He after all is my faculty advisor at this time.”

“Forget Throbeck, my young friend,” said Phelps. “All he’s good for is making coffee.”

#

The midnight December 31 deadline for the proof of Flarbaqil’s Method came and went with no post of the solution on *TheoremsandNumbers.com*, nor anywhere else in the cosmos. Nor had Phelps posted any notice on the website concerning the cause of the delay. But he was still working with Axpier so that the young student could at least grasp the fundamentals of the solution, before he allowed Axpier to claim sole authorship of it online. The Midwesterner in him demanded at least that much honesty of himself in the duplicitous affair. Only after the advanced date of January 10 had arrived, fully ten days after the announced deadline of December 31, did Phelps act. Finding Axpier, though a quick study, still struggling with the background material, Phelps posted the solution himself, under both their names. Six weeks later he summoned Axpier to his office at noon.

“Congratulations, young scholar,” he

said as he motioned the gray bulk topped by its gelatinous head in its customary Boston U T-shirt to take a seat across from him at his desk. Already his happiness was dimmed by the beginnings of a headache, which none of the metal hats he had tried in Axpier's presence had fended off. His current model, perched atop his broad brow, resembled a miniature sailboat. Still, he refused to allow the expanding pain to spoil the moment. "Our co-authored work has been peer-reviewed and found successful, and I hereby admit you to my seminars beginning this coming fall. Moreover," he added before a trembling Axpier could recover his composure, scooting a rectangular piece of paper across the desk toward his latest student, "here is your check for a million dollars. More exactly, you'll notice it's made out to both of us. You will now allow me to treat you to lunch at a nice restaurant—I know just the place—where you will agree to a fifty-fifty division of our spoils. You'll find that..." and here Phelps stuttered to a brief halt, realizing for the first time that the Scotty, though still of considerable value, would at the current rate of inflation be worth only a fraction of what it was when he won it forty years ago... "that today," he continued, "half a million should just about see you through a few years of graduate school, provided of course that you are wise enough not to bankroll anyone's harebrained idea of a restaurant combined with an investment firm. The dual forces brought to bear upon you by Kravits and Stobald will be strong, not to say irresistible, but you must be

immovable."

"But Professor," stammered Axpier, his oaten features contorting. The two were now seated across from each other at a table at Phelps's favorite pancake house. "It would be fairer if you took all the money, or nearly all," the sticky gray face continued. "I did next to nothing with the proof, in fact nothing at all."

"Nonsense, said Phelps. "You absorbed it admirably, or at least you have made a good start. And there's nothing I'd rather spend the money on than the education of a promising mathematician. Even my wife would approve."

This was not the unadulterated truth. Axpier had demonstrated uncommon skills at calculation, particularly in his handling of tensors, and he would make a mediocre if not respectable mathematician one day. As for Phelps's wife...the pancakes here really were delicious, especially with raspberry syrup. ❖

“THE MYRIAD CONSEQUENCES OF UNHINGED DOORS & WOMEN”

by ELOISE CORVO

Part 1: Behind Closed Doors

6:07 PM Somewhere Over Mid-Michigan

“Folks, this is your captain speaking. We’ve reached cruising altitude and are on track for a safe flight from Traverse City to Detroit. Remember to keep your seatbelts fastened when seated and enjoy the short flight. Thank you for flying Sabel Air, generously funded by our new Chief of State, Silas Sabel. Praise Silas, our savior.”

“Praise Silas, our savior,” Julie Bryne and the other seventy-nine passengers aboard the puddle-jumper droned half-heartedly, mostly busy reading or streaming a movie on their phones. The cabin lights were dim to allow folks to sleep; all was well. Until it wasn’t.

Everyone plugged into their device had their distractions interrupted by Silas’s booming voice. “It is time, my Michiganders! I am delivering on my promise to vanquish all sin. There will be no more closed-door policies, I am your sovereign!” In his month or so in office, Silas did this fairly often. He was always posting his “sermons,” always hijacking people’s internet connections with his self-indulgent live streams, always talking about ending all sin. Nobody was alarmed. In

fact, many rolled their eyes. Life was already a living hell, what else could he do to make it worse?

Julie, taking her state-issued daily vitamin before returning to her riveting book on innovations in sniper rifle technology, didn’t even notice Silas. She leaned over to her travel companion, Mrs. Martin, whom she had just recently met, and assured the nervous woman that all would be well shortly. They had to get out of town for a while, that’s all. No need to fret. She’d be safe now that the wretched man was gone. Julie made sure of it.

As Silas droned on, his voice cracking with the excitement of a thunderstorm, the six doors of the small aircraft violently wrenched open and passengers flew out, plummeting like massive, squirming, red raindrops onto the dairy farm below. Everyone on that plane, and all planes in Michigan’s airspace, died on impact.

Should she have witnessed the aftermath, Julie would’ve most certainly asked, ‘What’s black and white and red all over?’ Unfortunately, as she was part of the ‘red all over,’ now a blood smear on the dairy farm below, Julie didn’t have the opportunity to make this off-color joke. At least her companion, Mrs. Poppy Martin, would be free of abuse evermore.

#

6:07 PM in Detroit, Michigan

Nadine was proud of herself. She just killed three known drug traffickers all in one go and found herself alone in a dilapidated home that was used to store a whole host of illegal and controlled drugs.

She fussed about, making sure it looked like they killed one another, wiping off weapons, and tossing around what little furniture was in the structure and found herself surprised at what substances were actually being stored here. It looked like there was a little bit of cocaine and heroin left, but the room was filled to the brim with Prozac and tranquilizers. How odd. Not thinking much of it, her attention turned when she came across a large, metal safe that was staunchly locked hidden in a closet.

Usually she felt accomplished and satisfied after doing a good deed like ridding her city of horrible gangsters, but a pang of guilt struck her as she broke her promise to her colleagues. She and her team promised to go on hiatus for a while, to give Silas Sabel time to figure out his political platform. He promised some pretty insane things during his campaign, but who knows, maybe he'd backpedal on his own and turn out not to be a psychopathic zealot. Why risk getting hurt or arrested unless absolutely certain their intervention was necessary? Silas was only about one month into his reign, but Nadine just couldn't help herself. Her colleagues would understand.

"Jackpot," she whispered, eyeing the safe, unsuccessfully trying to pry open the hefty door. "A little for me, and the rest for the cause. Maybe even some for Adelaide if she can take her head out of her ass," she grunted, trying to yank the door open.

She spent a few minutes searching for the code to the safe written down somewhere, to no avail. She even tried listening to the clicking as she turned the knob like they did in the movies, but it all sounded the same to her.

"It is time to be saved, my Michiganders! I am delivering on my promise to vanquish all sin. There will be no more closed-door policies, I am your sovereign!" Nadine's smartwatch screen lit up the dark, dusty house, causing her to jump.

"Jesus Christ, Silas." She turned down the watch's volume and returned to the safe.

Her bushy brows furrowed, unable to leave what she assumed was a pile of perfectly good drug money sitting there, when the safe's door miraculously popped open on its own and hung ajar, begging to be pilfered.

"What the hell?" she whispered to herself. She heard a couple of other creaks from the old house as cupboards, drawers, and other doors popped open simultaneously. She looked around, keeping her senses on high alert, ready for another fight. With no other strange sounds, she looted the safe, bagged almost \$300,000, snatched a handful of official-looking documents, and ran through the

wide-open front door into the absurd chaos of a doorless downtown Detroit.

#

6:07 PM on the highway just outside of Lansing, Michigan

Adelaide was happily rocking out in her rusty Pontiac driving down I-96, until Silas Sabel took over preaching, yet again. “Ugh, will that man ever shut up?” She sighed, bummed that her personal concert ended, turned off the old-school radio in frustration, and sorely missed her old BMW’s phenomenal sound system.

Adelaide spent the day in the whirring hustle and bustle of Lansing interviewing for “gender-appropriate” jobs. She fumed, furious she could no longer practice law, and even more furious that the entire judiciary system was thrown out the window. She couldn’t believe that she was actually entertaining the proposition that Silas’s head housekeeper gave her today.

She headed back to her rural town (human population: 1,000, bovine population: 7,300 that’s still red all over) with an official offer letter to be one of Silas Sabel’s secretaries in the passenger seat keeping her mother’s ever-growing pile of medical bills company. Was she deeply offended that her law degree and subsequent years as a top criminal defense attorney boiled down to a fast typing speed and ability to spell long words correctly? Yes. Did she have any other high-paying options? Unfortunately, no. Did she need money to pay for her mom’s surgery? Very

much yes. Maybe it was getting time to accept Nadine’s offer. Or maybe not quite yet. Maybe scribing for Silas wouldn’t be as bad as she thought.

She neared home, fondly reminiscing about her six-figure salary like the love who got away, and worrying about her drained bank account having paid for her mom’s cancer bills for the last year. She sighed and put on her blinker to take the exit off the freeway. It was still rush hour, and traffic was heavy. People flew down I-96 like a Formula One racetrack, and Adelaide was no exception.

Crash! Bang! Woosh! rang out from behind her, the squeals of horns, screams, crunching metal, and breaking glass overloading her senses. She instinctively slammed on her brakes and pulled onto the shoulder. All at once, her car doors were yanked open as if deathly allergic to their frames. She turned back to look at the origin of the deafening sounds and saw a thirty-car pileup on the road behind her, all with open (or violently ripped off) doors as well. Contract pages and medical bills flew out of the Pontiac and swirled around her like an oppressive tornado.

“What the hell?”

#

6:07 PM at the Ingham County Morgue

“So what do you think, Jo? Have you seen anything like this before?”

Josephine Ratcher, a reluctantly retired detective, stood in the Ingham County Morgue in the basement of the local

hospital with her arms crossed and her feet wide. She learned to stand like this from all of her male counterparts, even though it's now extremely frowned upon for a lady to take such a garish stance. She looked down at the body of Senator Martin who was lying face up on a metal table, and felt conflicted.

"Carl, I'm retired. You know people like me can't be on the force anymore. This man looks dead. You should let us both get some rest, it's late." She shook her head, annoyed to be asked to come in at this hour (but thrilled to be asked to come in at all). She was also annoyed that she knew precisely what happened to this particular dead man. *Goddammit, Julie. Our Chief of State's right-hand man? Really? You just couldn't help yourself, could you? What about our agreed-upon hiatus? We were going to give it time. Things could sort themselves out.*

"I know, I'm sorry Jo. You're the cream of the crop, retired or not." Carl, the wiry pathologist, was visibly smitten with the ex-homicide detective, and playfully nudged her arm, smiling up at her. She was almost six inches taller than the man.

"You're just trying to butter me up." She smiled back, loving the compliment. Especially since she spent most of her career covering up Nadine and Julie's technically-illegal-but-well-intended crimes rather than doing actual police work. "I thought this was ruled a suicide. What changed? Why am I standing here?"

"Well, nothing. It's still technically a suicide, but I've convinced a friend of mine to keep poking around. I have a hunch..."

"A hunch, eh? Playing detective now, Carl?" She nudged him back.

"Hear me out!" He adjusted his glasses, leaned over the dead body, and covered Senator Martin with a crisp, white sheet. "As a standalone case, I'd rule it a suicide, open and shut. He had been drinking, took too many sleeping pills, and died. The pill bottle was found on his person."

"Alright." Josephine nodded along and got a little nervous about where this conversation was headed. She wiped her gloved hands on her pressed khaki pants and shoved them into her jacket pockets.

"But, the weird thing is that this is the fourth case just like this I've seen in the last couple of years. They had all been drinking, and they all overdosed on sleeping pills. Plus, I have reason to believe they all abused the women in their lives. Each of the men had an open case against them with the proper authorities, meaning those women reported them. It seems to be too much of a coincidence. Not only that, but Senator Martin was a powerful man. He was just elected, and second in command for the entire state. Why would someone in that position off himself?"

They both stared at the lump underneath the sheet that used to be a wickedly potent man, both lost in their own (completely different) thoughts.

"I don't know Carl, I—" Jo was about to try to throw the pathologist off of Julie's scent as she'd done a dozen times before, but at that very moment the two dozen body lockers in the wall in front of them, unlatched and flung open. The doors to

the cabinetry that held tools, medical equipment, and patient files to their left were thrown open too, challenging their weak hinges. Bodies covered in white sheets flung off their tables like Halloween ghosts.

“What the hell?” Jo yelled, ducking for cover. She drew her gun that was concealed in her purse and ushered Carl back upstairs to the main floor of the hospital.

They climbed the stairs and found themselves in a swirling chaos of code calls, alarms, and fast-moving staff. Quarantined rooms had been breached, releasing contagious diseases into main areas. Frozen organs, medicines, and IVF embryos were thawing, the massive freezer doors pried wide open, unable to shut. She looked around, unsure how to help or where to go. She was lost in the panic.

#

11:03 PM at the Chief of State’s Manor

From the safety of Chief of State Manor, Silas Sabel sat in bed watching the headlines roll in on a massive television screen mounted to his bedroom wall. “I warned you all. God warned you all.” He calmly sipped a warm cup of green tea and gave his wife a satisfied nod. She quietly winced to herself and wrapped her hands in their nightly bandages, hoping she wouldn’t stain the comforter again. He hated it when she stained the comforter. Silas gently tucked the railroad spikes, coated in Mrs. Sabel’s velvety blood, and accompanying mallet into his bedside table

to be used again tomorrow.

“Thank you, my husband and savior, for the opportunity to be closer to God, and to you.” She recited emotionless as she did every night, making herself as small as possible. He didn’t bother responding, reveling in his glory.

He was pleased with himself; he did a good thing today. With the ability to sin behind closed doors no longer a possibility, his state will live the lives of *true* followers, and ascend to heaven. His police force can go anywhere they please now. *You could never hide from God, but now you can’t hide from me either.*

The newscasters on the television droned on in the background. “Three million unworthy people were banished to Hell today as Our Savior, Silas Sabel, instituted his promised open-door policy with the help of new technology that will now prevent every door in the State of Michigan from ever fully shutting. Worthy citizens remain on Earth and are blessed by the heavens for living holy lives. That being said, a few heathen stragglers remain, as we have confirmed at least four assassination attempts at the Chief of State Manor today, but none have been successful. We have been assured that our leader has ample protection and is taking care of these faithless citizens as we speak. Praise Silas.”

Three million heretic scum, he convinced himself. *Three million insubordinate demon spawn.*

“I am rich in good deeds,” he mused to himself as he got out of bed and left his

wife alone in their bedroom, locking her inside behind him. How nice it was, he thought, to hear the click of the latch.

He snuck down the hall and into his study, from where he did all of his live-streamed sermons. Stopping briefly to check his security system from the desktop computer, he then climbed up to the third floor, pushed lightly on the white door with his hairy knuckles, and walked into the small room. He locked the door behind him, snorted a line of cocaine off of a family photo from last year's vacation to Jacksonville, FL (back when the states were united), and hopped into bed where his housekeeper waited patiently for him.

###

Part 2: Opportunity Knocks

As Nadine walked into the same diner as most Sunday mornings prior (except for the last six weeks with their promised hiatus), she chuckled at the rigging the owners concocted to keep the door from hanging wide open and letting in the chilled November air. Only thinly cracked, she unwrapped a rope tied around the doorknob from a nail in the doorframe and let the vinyl barrier swing wide open with a squeak.

She took a seat in their usual booth, put a coin in the tabletop jukebox, and was dismayed to find only psalms available now. Gone were the days of publicly jamming out to My Chemical Romance while eating pancakes at seven o'clock in the morning. She hit the button to return

her coin and grinned, seeing the little metal flap covering the coin slot perpetually hanging open, defying gravity. Not even a one-inch square door could avoid Silas's tirade.

It was not long before Josephine and Adelaide joined her. Adelaide was in full country maiden garb like a good little sunflower sprouting up from the garden. She must be tired of living out in the middle of nowhere. Maybe one of these days she'll be humble enough to take a handout and bring her mom into the city. She's been taking care of the sick woman for over a year. She must be getting tired of it. Josephine yanked off her N-95 mask and scooched in next to Adelaide.

"A mask? Really Jo?" Nadine jibbed.

"Hey, I was at the hospital when the doors opened. I saw what was going on in there. Didn't you see that meningitis strain was spreading in Detroit? That stuff is no joke." She pulled her turtleneck up over her mouth and shivered at the thought.

After a cup of coffee and the obligatory small talk, Nadine pulled the packet of papers she found in the safe from her bag and slid them across the table to her esteemed colleagues.

"Anyways," Nadine sipped her coffee. "Thanks for meeting me, you guys. I know it's been a minute since we last connected, and that we were supposed to be on hiatus for a while, but I couldn't help myself. I found something."

She flipped through the papers and pulled what looked like a contract or business memo out on top. "Get a load of

this.” She took a moment to let them both skim the letter.

Jo tilted her head, “I’m confused. What am I looking at?”

“You are looking at an agreement between a drug ring in Lansing and Silas Sabel’s right-hand man, Senator Martin. From what I can tell, he was paying them to package up a super-depressant drug cocktail and begin distributing them in the city. Look at this bit,” Nadine ran her finger down the page. “And I quote, ‘To be packaged to look like vitamin capsules and targeted towards women. Use tactics like weight loss, mood stabilizers, etc.’ Isn’t that disgusting? I, uh, ‘took care of them’ before they could do this. It looked like all of the drugs were still in the house when I got there. Who knows how long it’ll take to replace those guys though.”

Adelaide shuffled in her seat uncomfortably, gazing into the diner wall absentmindedly. “This is horrifying...”

“Totally,” Nadine sighed through her teeth. She flipped to another page and showed them the depressant cocktail that Silas and Senator Martin signed off on.

Josephine crunched on a home fry, desperately wishing it was a slice of bacon. Ever since the doors opened, livestock have been hard to wrangle.

“These documents say that Silas Sabel, through his crony Senator Martin, is responsible for shipping these drugs into the state, and is planning on coupling their release into the world with a government-issued mandate that women take ‘female vitamins.’ Look, here’s a draft copy. It’s all

marked up in pen. He’s trying to subdue us into complacency. It says he’s a maniacal James Bond villain. That’s what it says.” Nadine leaned back and crossed her arms, waiting for a response.

“Well, I guess he’s living up to his potential.” Adelaide leaned back too, mimicking Nadine. “Did I tell you guys his head housekeeper offered me a secretarial job?” Adelaide rolled her eyes. “But hey, it pays better than anything else I can get right now.”

“Ew, gross. You were one of the top defense lawyers in the state. You got me and Julie out of trouble more than once. How is this what you’re doing right now?” Josephine asked with equal parts intrigue and disgust in her eyes.

“What choice do I have? Mom needs surgery to remove her tumor. Unless you can rewind time one year when we had access to health insurance and were able to work, I don’t see what choice I have,” Adelaide retorted.

“I don’t know how many times I can offer you money, Adelaide. It’s yours if you want it.” Nadine sipped her black coffee, irrationally mad at Adelaide’s hard-headedness. “You know just because I’m the one that usually takes it, doesn’t mean it’s not technically all of ours. We’re a team,” she gestured around the booth.

Adelaide slumped in her chair and uncrossed her arms, deflated. “Look, I love what we do. I love righting wrongs that nobody else will touch. I love spreading the wealth, so to speak. But my part was always just keeping you daredevils out of jail, not

getting my hands dirty. I don't want your drug money."

"Can we get to more pressing matters? I don't know how many times I need to hear you two squabble over this," Jo asked, still frustrated at the lack of bacon.

"More pressing than our Chief of State planning to brainwash an entire gender?" Nadine asked, sarcastically.

"Fine, equally pressing, then," Jo grunted, then lowered her tone to a raspy whisper. "Julie killed Senator Martin. Before she died, before the doors opened. She killed him."

"What?" Adelaide whispered, leaning forward. "So much for the agreed-upon hiatus." She gave Nadine side-eye, noting her solo drug bust also violated their team agreement.

"I was at the coroner's office when all the doors opened. Carl, the pathologist, was getting too close for comfort and starting to pick up on Julie's MO."

"Well, at least she can't get arrested." Their faces all fell, mourning the death of their team member.

"Do you think she knew about the senator's involvement with this?" Nadine pointed again to the stack of incriminating paperwork.

"No, I don't think so. Carl knew that the Senator had a history of domestic violence. As usual, I'm guessing that's what Julie was after him for. I did a little digging and his wife, Mrs. Martin, was on the plane with Julie when the doors opened. I'd bet money that she was trying to get her to safety..." Jo ran her hands through her

hair.

"To Julie," Nadine raised her mug and toasted their fallen comrade. "She was the absolute best at what she did and had a heart bigger than what was good for her."

"You guys know what all this means, right?" Jo's thin, pursed lips scrunched tightly.

"This has gotten out of hand. We have to stop Silas Sabel. Before those drugs get unleashed." Adelaide sighed, stirring another packet of sugar into her cup. "For Julie."

"You're right. And this means that you need to take that secretarial job. For Julie," Nadine confirmed. The other simply nodded.

###

Part 3: Hell Hath No Fury

"You have *got* to be kidding me. He can't be serious," Adelaide donned the secretary "uniform" that'd be appropriate costuming for an early 2000s-era porno. Silas's head housekeeper smirked as she chopped vegetables and tossed the green pieces into a boiling pot on the stove.

"I know, isn't he something else? One thing you'll learn quickly is that what that man says and what he does are two very different things," she said with disdain, but also a twinge of admiration. "You know, you'll be number twenty. I can't keep track of how many we have in-house right now, maybe three? Four? I swear he's trying to take over all social media. But hey, I convinced him we could understand how

to use computers, so you won't have to dictate by hand."

"I'll count my blessings," Adelaide rolled her eyes, tugging her curly, ruddy blonde hair into a tight ponytail. "So what do I do now? Hang out here until he tells me to write something down?"

"Yep, basically. You can help me around the house if you'd like to stay busy, but no pressure. I'm sure Mrs. Sabel would enjoy some company, too. Silas has been coming down hard on her since he took office. He's been a bit stressed. I'm sure she'd welcome a friendly face."

"She doesn't mind having a rotating crop of half-naked women in her house all of the time?" Adelaide tied the button-down crop top around her waist and sat down at the marble kitchen island, grabbing a carrot to snack on.

"She doesn't seem to mind much of anything, as long as it's what Silas wants. He's molded her into the perfect, little companion. Anyways, look at me being a chatterbox," the housekeeper brushes herself off, embarrassed at her over-share. "Here's a key to his study, where he does all of his business and films his sermons and prayers. It also requires a fingerprint scan, but I've already got you in the system. Silas likes attentive secretaries, so if you see him head into the study, you are to pop in and ask if he needs your assistance. If he declines, I can find something for you to do. My room is on the third floor with the white door if you can't find me down here. Silas is out right now, do you need help trying to find tasks to keep you busy this

morning?"

Adelaide nudged her fake glasses up a bit higher on her nose.

"I actually have a thought on how to keep myself busy. May I familiarize myself with his study? Since that's where I'll be primarily working?" She smiled to herself, daydreaming of staging a well-organized coup.

#

Nadine and her team had close friends in high places before Silas Sabel imprisoned half the state's workforce in their own homes or those of the rich. Now, searching for their old friends who were once doctors, engineers, politicians, and the like, only required peeking inside their houses through their wide-open front doors and simply walking inside. And to no one's surprise, every single woman they approached was more than willing to lend their time or expertise to this little venture.

Now a month Post-Door, a dozen assassination attempts have been made on Silas, but nobody has yet to finish the deed. With their party assembled, sadly missing Julie's reckless and ruthless wit (and weapons collection), they set their plan in motion. Perhaps the thirteenth time would be the charm.

#

Knock, knock, knock. Nadine, taken aback by how long it's been since she'd been physically blocked by a door, since she'd heard the sound of knuckles on resistant wood, since having to ask *permission* to enter a premises, stood in front of the looming, emerald green

entrance to Silas Sabel's home. She saw cameras panning them up and down, heard dogs barking in the backyard, and was confronted with a dozen or so locks, deadbolts, and chains bolstering the barricade in front of her.

Josephine stood slightly behind her, a handful of their recruited friends pooled behind them both. Instead of their usual attire, the small group of women were all done up in floral, floor-length sundresses and shawls around their shoulders, something like their grandmothers would've worn. They had sewn a patch on the front of the dresses, depicting an open door frame (that somehow looks slightly vulvic) with a yellowish-white light emanating from within. All were visibly uncomfortable by their outward appearance but looked the part.

"When in Rome, right Josephine?" Nadine joked.

"I think you mean, when in Troy, dear. We're mimicking the Trojans, not the Romans. History is important, you know. Ignoring it is how society got to where we are today."

Nadine gruffed and knocked again. "Smile, ladies. It's showtime. Remember, well-behaved women rarely make history."

With a stack of Bibles in their hands, and innocently furtive looks on their faces, the floral-patchworked Trojan Horse pushed forward into the gargantuan, stone manor.

"Hello, we're the Worshipers of the Open Gate, here for a private Bible study session with Sir Silas Sabel. We have an

appointment." Nadine batted her eyelashes at the housekeeper before her, who simply sighed at Nadine's cheerfulness and let them in after checking a calendar near the door confirming the meeting.

"He's in the family room waiting for you all. Go on ahead." She waved the group forward, pointing them towards the back right corner of the house.

Nadine and Josephine, taking in the opulence of the house but truly overwhelmed and amazed by actual *closed* doors all around (nobody's banging their shins on cupboards!), shuffled forward towards a space adorned with old paintings of Christ, rosaries, and even a massive spool of rusted, barbed wire used as a coffee table. They followed their noses toward the sweet smells of freshly baked cookies, eyes widening with each step.

Adelaide stood meekly next to the staircase, incredibly embarrassed by her outfit or lack thereof, and watched her teammates flock through the house. Jennifer, one of their friends and ex-ER doctor, snuck a glass vial and a capped syringe into the waistband of Adelaide's plaid skirt as she passed by. The secretary quickly tucked it out of sight and started up the stairs.

As the pastel flower patch wandered back into the family room, one little flower, like a dandelion carried by the breeze, flitted up the stairs following Adelaide into her small quarters to exchange one horse costume for another.

The rest of the flowers greeted Silas warmly, kneeling before him and singing

some misogynistic diatribe masked as prayer. The tray of cookies sitting atop the barbed wire spool was devoured within minutes. What a luxury! Without oven doors properly closing, baked cookies have practically gone extinct.

Now dressed in Adelaide's spare secretarial uniform, Nadine crept from her friend's room across the hall and into Silas's personal study, Adelaide's key in hand. With a quick fingerprint from the dutiful employee, Adelaide and Nadine entered the room. Nadine splayed the incriminating paperwork on his desk, while Adelaide grabbed a handful more from a lower desk drawer. Two weeks in this house provided plenty of time to snoop. Taking a few minutes to settle herself and read Adelaide's additions, Nadine settled herself comfortably on his comically large, leather wingback chair and began setting up his desktop to livestream. Adelaide scurried back downstairs before anyone would notice her absence.

"I'm sorry to interrupt Sir, but the Chief of State from Ohio has started a "prayer-off" on X and tagged you and the other Midwest Chiefs. I'll happily respond for you if you'd tell me what prayer you'd like to post," Adelaide sauntered up next to Silas who condescendingly read a Bible passage in front of Jo and the others. She bent over him with a clipboard in hand and a few prayers typed up for him to choose from.

"Again? He's been on a role this week. Yes, of course." While he was occupied reviewing prayer options, trying to one-up

his neighbor to the south, Adelaide grabbed the syringe from her skirt that she had pre-filled with the contents of the little glass vial.

As Silas turned away, Daphne, an ex-robotics engineer, unleashed two, small creations constructed from her children's remote-control cars and a video game console, coated in her cat's gray fur.

"A mouse! A mouse!" Josephine screamed pointing at the small, roving hairballs, triggering the rest of the women to shriek and throw their Bibles around the room (a few non-discreetly right at Silas). The commotion pulled his attention as Adelaide quickly jabbed the small hypodermic needle into his arm. Between the bludgeoning bibles and adrenaline spike, he didn't feel a thing.

Under the guise of commotion, Adelaide and Josephine slipped out of the room and up towards Silas's study but didn't escape the spying glare of the head housekeeper. Adelaide waved at her innocently as they passed by and tried to look like everything was normal. She even hiked up her skirt a little more in a display of loyalty.

With the three teammates convened in the maroon and mahogany space, Adelaide lined up the camera as she'd done many times in the past two weeks. She signaled, "Three, Two, One, Go." Nadine, still dressed as a half-naked secretary, hijacked every screen in the state. She had the full attention of the masses.

"Michiganders! I don't have much time." She paced within the frame and

frantically waved the papers around. “Silas Sabel is an absolute monster. His regime is planning on drugging us into submission! Look, I have proof. It’s a deal with a drug ring in Lansing to distribute Prozac laced with other nasty depressants. It has his signature and everything! There’s also a draft bill that will require us to take what’s called “female vitamins” which are what’s written in this drug contract. Tell me, do you think that’s Christian of him? He’s trying to keep us down!”

The door slammed open as Silas, escorted by his narc of a housekeeper, stumbled forward. He saw the camera and instantly changed his demeanor. He dusted himself off and pushed Nadine out of the livestream. She yelled, “Down with Sabel!” as she flew out of frame. The incriminating documents fluttered down to the floor like ominous confetti.

“That woman is a demon and is not to be trusted,” he barked, making direct eye contact with the camera lens. “Do not worry, faithful followers. She, and the other witches, will rot in hell where they belong. I will dedicate an extra prayer to each and every one of you good, pious people tonight.”

He signaled to his housekeeper to turn off the camera, but she stood there motionless.

“Sir, is it true?” Her horrified look said it all.

“Of course not, now come on. Help me.” She jumped to and turned off the recording.

Silas moved stiffly and was sweating

profusely. Whatever Adelaide gave him had some effect, but not enough to knock the beast out.

Silas stumbled to a picture of crucified Jesus on his wall and lifted the frame to reveal an old-school revolver sitting proudly in a hole in the drywall. He cocked it and pointed it at Nadine.

Offended by this violence, the housekeeper flew out of the room, wailing for help. With a sharp bang that ripped through the atmosphere, his bullet pierced Nadine’s shoulder at close range.

“Silas, stop! This is getting ridiculous.” Mrs. Sabel, with her black hair and snarled lip, loomed in the open doorway like one of the angry Dobermans in her backyard. “Enough is enough. I was behind you for the ‘no doors’ thing, but going after *good* people, Silas? Really? What would Jesus think of you, Silas?”

He swiveled, the gun now pointed at his spouse, and paused. “It had to be done. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, *I* wouldn’t understand.” She sauntered forward into the room, arms crossed, and head tilted in exasperation. “Me? Your wife whom you ‘punish’ for her sins every night? Of course, how could I possibly understand? It’s not like I’ve been behind you even after I found out you’ve been sleeping with the housekeeper and after you chose these Hooters uniforms for your staff. You’re pathetic.”

Mrs. Sabel uncrossed her arms and raised her hands, revealing two, raw holes in her palms that go all the way through, like gaping, scabbed, earring piercings. She

walked with the confidence of someone who had nothing left to lose. Josephine winced at the sight.

Adelaide inched closer and closer to the tyrant until she was just a few feet away from him and steadied herself with his desk. Silas's attention remained on his wife, who radiated a long, pent-up fury. As the domestic dispute escalated, Adelaide took one more opportunity to stab him again with her needle then ducked down to conceal herself behind the desk.

This time he felt the poke and reactively shot the gun, missing Adelaide by just a hair. She stayed down, waiting patiently. It can't be long now.

Silas began sputtering, fingers and face muscles twitching, until the extra dose brought the large man to his knees, convulsing relentlessly.

Josephine ran and grabbed the gun away from his spasming hand, worried a finger spasm might fire it accidentally. Mrs. Sabel chillingly sauntered out of the room and fetched the black and white comforter from their bed. She wrapped the writhing, convulsing monster in it with an emotionless face. It took the three of them to drag the man down the stairs and onto his lush, green front yard for all to see. Nadine stayed behind, what with the pesky hole in her shoulder but Jennifer, their ex-Doctor accomplice, was already at work patching her up.

Mrs. Sabel, after unfurling her

husband on the lawn, rushed back inside. "I'll be right back, keep an eye on him, will you?" She nodded to Adelaide and Jo, who dutifully nodded back.

Nadine's live-streamed call to action worked. Hundreds of people amassed on the street in front of the Chief of State's Manor. An uproar of chants rang as Mrs. Sabel walked back outside and stood over her husband as the convulsing slowly subsided. Silas's mallet and railroad spikes gleamed in the sun.

She took a deep breath, privately asked for salvation, and drove those rusted nails through his arms, pinning into the earth. Mixed uproar rolled in off the street, as supporters of Silas screamed slurs and prayers, while his opposition celebrated his public execution.

Mrs. Sabel stood up, and wiped her bloodied hands on the nearby comforter, no longer worried about stains. She took a modest bow in front of the crowd in the street before her, who were all kept at bay behind a massive rod-iron fence.

"Atta girl," Josephine said to Mrs. Sabel, clapping the stoic woman on the back. "You remind me of a friend we recently lost. We could use somebody like you."

"Happily," Mrs. Sabel replied. "But first, we must clean up this mess." She tossed the comforter over her dead husband and watched in relief as the black and white turned red all over. ❖

END TRANSMISSION