

Take Two

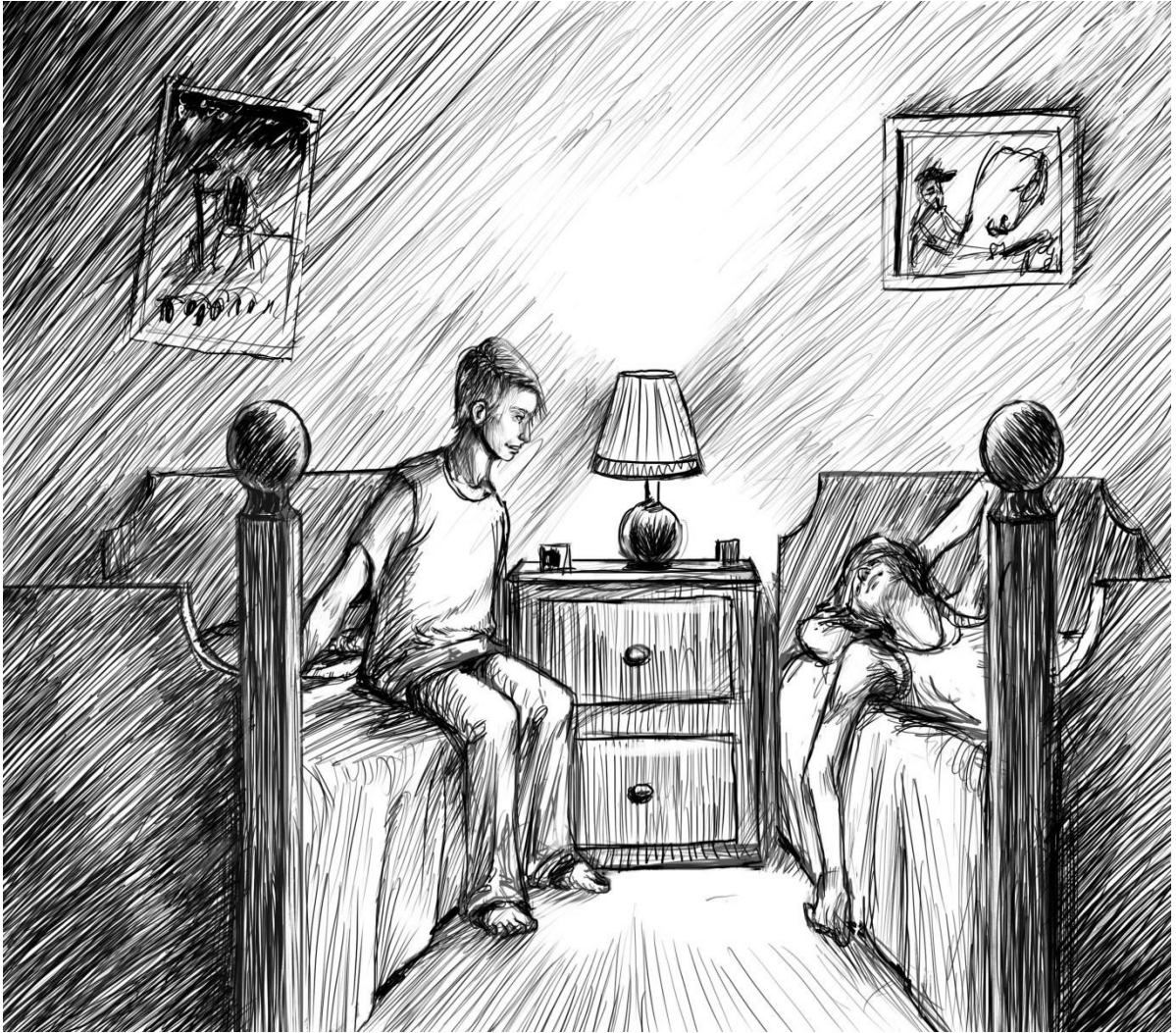
Acknowledgments

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For Katherine

Part 1

1. Dylan and Lou



The day wasn't done until we talked it over.

“Um.”

I let him have a moment. Everyone is in such a rush to be so certain, maybe the world would be better if instead people were in a rush to be less certain. I gave him a smile of encouragement.

One deep breath for composure and off he goes, “Grande half-caf soy macchiato.”

Take Two

“On it.” Ordinarily he’d lose points for using the Starbucks’ sizing term but, hey, any port in the storm. We’re tucked away in a corner of Seattle so obscure it’s miles from the nearest Starbucks. Every customer that makes their way here is a minor miracle. We’re might have a geographic monopoly, but it doesn’t exactly pay the bills. The surprise isn’t the indecision of the customers we get; it’s that we get any customers at all.

So, I’m grateful for the business. Against all odds he somehow found his way here. And how did I find my way here, you might ask? It’s a story of wrong turns, hasty decisions, and poorly thought-out choices. So, pull up a chair, friend. To get at the whole truth we’ll have to back up a little. For one thing, I was born second.

The first arrived STAT; almost beat the doctor to the operating table. He popped out screaming bloody murder. That was my brother Dylan. The second snuck out all but unnoticed once the coast was clear. And immediately went back to sleep. That was me. Lleu. Lleu Mulligan. And, yes, our folks are very into their Welsh Irish heritage. Call me Lou.

Let me start by disabusing you of any theories you might have about identical twins. We’ve all heard them: look alike; dress alike; talk alike; think alike. We were the other kind. For instance, Dylan was perpetually early, and I was perpetually late. Family photos were often just blurs on both ends; Dylan exiting stage left while I’m arriving stage right. More Sasquatch sightings that verifiable proof of twins.

If we weren’t typical twins, we were typical brothers – on an endless quest to make each other’s life miserable. We didn’t always succeed, except in exasperating Mom. I’m not seeing much Purgatory in her future.

Sometimes it escalated to the point where adults had to step in. In fifth grade the principal called in Mom for a special visitation. We were invited as well.

Mrs. Nelson, our principal, kicked it off. “If I have the chronology right, I believe this started when Dylan ate Lou’s homework.” There was a lot of context to add to that but I took it rhetorically. It was math class, and I was sitting in the back of our row (as usual) while Dylan was in the front (as usual). Mr. Glyzewski had us pass our homework to the front. When he got to our row the homework count was one short. He gave our row a quick glance to see if

someone wanted to clear that detail up and then just shrugged and proceeded to the next row. Dylan then turned around and pointed to his mouth. He was chewing on my homework. How did Mrs. Nelson find out? There's a rat among us.

"Then Mr. Glyzewski found some profanity written on the sidebar of Dylan's homework." Again, Cliff Notes version but not entirely incorrect. The night before I had taken the liberty of looking up some Polish swear words on the Internet and sprinkling them into Dylan's homework before we went to bed. I had a hunch Mr. Glyzewski would be a connoisseur.

"Later that afternoon, Lou couldn't complete his history assignment because he didn't have his textbook. It had been replaced in his book bag by a dictionary." Had to admit, her intel was pretty good. Meanwhile Mom was silent but the steam was rising.

"Finally, at the end of the day Dylan had to leave his bike at school because someone had let the air out of both tires." Okay, that one is completely outside her jurisdiction. Did not happen at school. But I decided that maybe this wasn't the time or place to correct her.

Besides, the sad truth was that these events were a specific Monday but could've just as well been any Monday.

We spent a lot of our intellectual capacity on these forays. And while our grades didn't suffer, they didn't exactly flourish either.

Mom had a theory about our grades. With Dylan, ideas tended to explode out of his head - five or six of them racing to the end of a sentence. Mine were more like a solitary butterfly, floating randomly on the breeze to their final destination. Our grades were more a reflection on how the teacher preferred their facts rather than the rightness or wrongness of what we were presenting. Some like Dylan's energy; some liked my introspection. Taken as a whole we both spent most of our schooling smack dab in the middle of the bell curve. Our one exception was standardized tests; we both measured off the charts on them. This never worked to our advantage - the school just used it to prove we needed to work harder; to exert ourselves.

For all our histrionics, the end of the day would bring peace to the valley. There in our bedroom Dylan and I would lay in our beds, stare at the ceiling, and recount the day. The day

wasn't done until we talked it over. Dylan getting a glimpse at life in three quarter time while I got a chance to see what was happening around the corner. Eventually Mom would plead for us to please, please go to sleep. And we would. But for those few moments we were something else. Not brothers up in arms but brothers in arms. Come morning though, we'd be right back at it again.

Occasionally fate would pair us up - often to even more disastrous results. Like the first day of our Christmas break when we were twelve. As usual we were off doing our own thing. Dylan was in the alley, having gotten it into his head that if he built a snowbank high enough and close enough to our neighbor's garage, he'd be able to climb onto the pile, jump off and dunk a basketball on their garage rim. After a few failures he finally built the bank high enough and, sure enough, the plan worked. Such as it was. He had skipped the part about getting back down. Five-foot-three-inch sixth graders do not have much experience dunking basketballs. Luckily Mother Nature had a plan for just this very contingency. Gravity. This would have worked fine if she had just gently whispered into Dylan's ear to let go of the rim. But she hadn't. Down came baby, rim, and all. Dylan hit the ground butt first, followed shortly by the rim still in his right hand - which promptly bonked him on the head. He sat there quietly, waiting for the cobwebs to clear.

Our neighbor Greg was two years older than us. To this day I only remember three things about Greg: big, dumb, and mean. The bully trifecta. He must've been inside watching TV, but he immediately stepped outside when he heard all the commotion. He looked at Dylan; Dylan looked at him. "Hi Greg," Dylan mumbled. With that the cobwebs cleared, he let go of the rim, rolled over and hit the ground running. Greg, sans coat, shoes and the little common-sense God gave him, lit out after him.

Meanwhile I was working on vacation plans of my own. I was in our back yard building the snow tunnel to end all snow tunnels. Dylan turned the corner, gave me a quick glance, and ducked into one end of the tunnel. Greg turned the corner, pushed me aside, and darted into the tunnel after Dylan. Dylan popped out the other end and looked at me. I looked at him. We both shrugged. A plan emerged.

I smashed down the front end of the tunnel while Dylan did the same to the back end. We paused a moment to admire our handiwork and then took off up the alley. In the background we could hear Greg sputtering and muttering as he made his way out of the avalanche.

Ordinarily that would've been the end of the chase. Kids rule their neighborhood, and we were no exception. We knew every fenced-in dead end yard, every dog (mean, mad, or indifferent) and every house with no one home until dark. No adult could match the knowledge accumulated over hours and hours of scouting the terrain. Ordinarily anyone chasing us would have given up in short order. However, that advantage is moot when you're being chased by another kid from the block. And as we were running, I couldn't help but notice that for a big guy with no shoes Greg was pretty quick on his feet.

Desperate times call for desperate measures and I had a brainstorm while Dylan and I serpented up and down the alleys, yards, and streets of our neighborhood. I gave Dylan a quick whistle as we approached the Zeidler house. Dylan turned just in time to see me duck into the Zeidler backyard. He screeched to a stop, retraced his steps, and continued into the yard after me. We knew Greg wouldn't dare follow us there.

Every neighborhood has one and our neighborhood had the Zeidler's. Oh, it was haunted all right. Though deserted for years, lights would appear upstairs in nights with a full moon. What else would you expect from a house owned by gangsters, complete with secret escape tunnels that led from the basement into the alley? Didn't do the Zeidlers any good though -it was well known they were murdered in their beds in a violent gangland slaying. Left to remain in the house until their murders could be avenged. No self-respecting kid would ever set foot near that yard - heck we were ten before we stopped crossing the street to avoid the block altogether.

Now I'm not sure if it was just the heat of the moment or the rare occurrence of me leading, but I tripped as we approached the house. Dylan bent over and tried grabbing for me without sacrificing any of his own forward momentum. I made it back to my feet but at that same instant Dylan stumbled. Soon we were both ass over tea kettle. We rolled up to the house and slammed right into and through a rotted storm cellar door. We then proceeded to tumble down the stairs and into the Zeidler basement.

Years spent avoiding the general vicinity and suddenly we were in the actual house, rolling around the concrete floor of the basement. Details get a little sketchy at this point, but I know what I know. I came to – although I knew enough not to open my eyes – in the dank silence of the Zeidler house. The first living person in that house in years.

But someone, or something, was raking scrawny skeleton fingers across my face. While someone, or something, was wrapping its legs around my legs, slowly drawing me in. I knew instinctively that I had only one chance to escape. One chance, or I was dead. Without opening my eyes, I reached out and grabbed hold of whatever it was in front of me. I grabbed what felt like hair. And at that exact instant someone, or something, grabbed a handful of my hair. I bolted upright and screamed.

Screamed in stereo. I opened my eyes to see a face not inches from mine, bug-eyed and screaming for all it was worth. It was Dylan. I had a handful of his hair in my hand, holding his head like a head-hunter's trophy. And he had a handful of my hair in his hand, holding my head like a head-hunter's trophy. Seeing our own hands holding up what looked like our own heads, we both let out another scream.

With that Dylan let go and was up the stairs and out the broken cellar door in a flash. I followed only moments behind. Back in my customary trailing position, I snuck one last glance behind me. Truth be told, it had already started morphing into an ordinary basement, full of old mops, shovels, and rakes. It had lost its magic. But not before it served one last purpose, saving us from the wrath of Greg.

Mom came and stood in the doorway of our bedroom. "Listen up. There will be no punishment for this episode. I have no idea what you were thinking, I don't care to know what you were thinking, and I don't care who did what. Three things. Your father is at the sporting goods store picking out a new basketball rim. The money comes out of your allowance. Tomorrow you'll help him put it up on Greg's garage. You'll apologize to Greg in the morning as well. And finally, your father has a project in mind for that cellar door. Consider this my final word on the matter." And with that she walked away.

I couldn't help but wonder what we were in store for. Dylan, on the other hand, just wondered how Mom knew we were hiding under our beds. One thing for sure: when Mom said it was the final word, it was the final word.

2. Let the punishment fit the crime



Into the immediate future we would spend Saturday mornings fixing up the Zeidel house.

Our first assignment was to replace the broken cellar door. The plan Dad came up with was simple. Into the immediate future we would spend Saturday mornings fixing up the Zeidel house. Our first assignment was to replace the broken cellar door. Our first stop was the lumberyard.

Dad was not handy by nature, but he was stubborn, and he could work things out methodically. First, he walked us through examining the original door until we understood the mechanics, and then we took the door off its hinges, cleared off the remaining wood

fragments, attached our new hinges, and hung the new door we had just bought. All three of us were surprised when the new door closed properly, and we were able to lock it! We were all feeling pretty smug—two hours before we had known nothing about storm doors, and now we had built one. Dad snapped a few pictures with his phone, and we were all set to call it a successful day.

Well, two of us anyway. Instead of heading home, Dad piled us into the car and drove us to the nursing home about a mile or so away. Dad said we were off to talk to Mr. Zeidel. I looked over at Dylan. Dylan looked over at me. The Godfather was alive? What about the gangland slayings? We were both on high alert.

Dad parked the car, and we walked up the stairs of the nursing home and signed in at the foyer. Uncharted territory for Dylan and me. What hits you first is the odor, subtle but undeniable. There were five or six old people just dozing in wheelchairs in the hallway. It wasn't Zeidel-house scary, but it was close. We made our way through to the stairs and walked up to the third floor.

Mr. Zeidel's room was dark when we entered. He had the bed by the window, so we made our way past his dozing roommate. There, propped up in bed, was a very old man in a pair of very old pajamas. He had a gray stubble, and his hair was damped down. It looked as if he hadn't been out of bed in months.

"Joe, it's Jeff. Jeff Mulligan. I'm here with the boys to show you our progress."

The old man replied without opening his eyes. "So, these are the criminals."

Dad laughed and showed him the pictures, causing him to open his eyes ever so slightly. Dad also showed him the receipt from the lumberyard.

It quickly became apparent he had little interest in our project. Instead, he was more interested in talking. "You know, boys, I was living in that house twenty years before your parents even moved in. And it was part of my garbage route. If your mom threw away any of your nappies, I'd have been the one to take them away." He chuckled at the thought. In the meantime, thoughts of gangland slayings, hidden tunnels, and the Godfather evaporated from our heads.

That being said, the old man had some great stories. Turns out he had broken his hip jumping off his truck and arthritis had settled in, and that's what landed him in the nursing home. That very first day, he told us how the garbagemen were responsible for disposing of the ashes from the old coal-burning houses, and how they converted the trucks to snowplows in the winter—sometimes working sixteen-hour days. All the time with his eyes mostly closed, like he was back there on the truck.

The next Saturday, we cleaned up the rest of the basement. Dylan and I were pretty sure most of what we swept up was older than us. There was an old stereo system there with both an attached record player and tape deck, and some kind of filing system of nuts and bolts contained in shelf after shelf of empty peanut butter jars. Crazy. Dad popped for lunch at McDonald's on our way to the nursing home.

This time Mr. Zeidel was shaved and dressed and sitting in his easy chair. Dad told him of our accomplishments. He smiled when we mentioned the nuts and bolts jars. They were his pride and joy. He went into great detail on the filing system—the jars were positioned by usage not size — and that he didn't much use for metric sizes, which were relegated to the top unpopular row. Dad didn't mention that we had just thrown it all out.

Then out of the blue, as if he had been prepping all week, he started telling us more garbageman tales. "Proud member of Local Sixty-One, retired." He then launched into rat stories. Rats fearlessly challenging him in the alley; rats jumping out of trash cans as he bent down to open a trash can; poisoned rats going round and round in circles in the alley. Catnip to two twelve-year-olds. When Mr. Zeidel finally ran out of energy, Dad made our apologies and escorted us out. "You'll be back next Saturday?" Mr. Zeidel said. Last out as usual, I gave him a quick thumbs up.

After the basement, we tackled the kitchen. It was fine structurally but really needed a good cleaning. We spent a whole Saturday just scrubbing the floor. It went from dingy yellow, to kind of a bored gray, to a go-ahead-and-eat-off-of-it slate color. There's something satisfying about cleaning when the progress is so measurable. Dad took yet another picture, and we headed to the nursing home.

This time Mr. Zeidel greeted us in the foyer. He had been waiting for us. We showed him the picture, but he was more intent on some garbageman stories he had remembered during the week. He told us of his coworkers and how they would race through their routes to see who could finish the earliest. And since they only had those specific responsibilities, it also meant they were through for the day. They would just have to kill time at one of the parks until the end of the day.

We ate up the stories. We'd take it all in and then repeat them to Mom as she was making dinner. I loved the crazy nicknames of the other garbagemen—"One-Eyed" Johnson, "Big Man" Adamczyk. Straight out of *Treasure Island*, I was expecting Billy Bones any time now.

The winter progressed. As the house started taking shape, so did Mr. Zeidel. Every week stronger: the unshaven man sleeping in his bed in the middle of the day became a distant memory.

The first Saturday in March was one of those rare Milwaukee winter days. It was in the forties, and everyone was walking around in shorts and T-shirts like summer had arrived. We even opened the windows as we worked on the upstairs rooms. This was our first trip upstairs. Dylan and I almost had simultaneous heart attacks when we opened up one of the bedroom doors and a couple of mice scurried out. Dad just laughed. Mr. Zeidel might be death to all rats, but mice seemed immune. We put out some traps and cleaned up the droppings as best we could.

When we got to the nursing home, Mr. Zeidel was waiting for us on the front porch. Dad told him of our progress, but once again Mr. Zeidel was more interested in his agenda. But instead of starting in on tales of days gone by, he surprised us. "Jeff, on Saturdays it has been a long tradition that the retired members of the Local Sixty-One meet at the George Webb's for lunch. I've missed them for quite a while, but I'm feeling up to going again. I'd love to take the boys too."

Dad paused. "Let me ask the boss and get back to you, Joe," he said diplomatically. Mr. Zeidel seemed satisfied with that answer and led us back to his room, where he continued telling us of his exploits. He got his name in the paper once by foiling a robbery. He had to admit, though, that he had mistaken the thief for the man of the family and had given him a

friendly wave, which the robber misinterpreted and ran off. The story in the paper had conveniently switched the wave to an angry fist pump. Still, a hero is a hero.

Dylan stated his decision as soon as we got back to the car. “Count me out.”

As we drove back home, Dad looked at us through the rearview mirror. “The decision is totally yours, but I want you to give it some thought first. Then let me know. Just make sure you’re deciding between right and wrong and not between easy and hard. Now, let’s go home and sweet-talk your mom into some junk food!”

I looked over at Dylan. He looked over at me. We both shrugged. You had to watch Dad like a hawk. Right when you least expected it, he’d sneak in a life lesson. And then sweeten it with something special. We were defeated.

As we drove to the nursing home that next Saturday, he asked whether we had made a decision. It was nice of him not to acknowledge that the decision had already been made. We told Dad we decided it was a good idea to go to the diner.

“Great, Joe will be happy.” Dad wasn’t a big talker, but he didn’t lose too many arguments either.

Mr. Zeidel met us in the foyer with his jacket on. We both jumped into the backseat and let him ride shotgun. When we got to the George Webb, Dad let us all out but then said he had to run some errands and would pick us up in an hour. We both gave him a look, but he just ignored us.

The three of us walked into the diner and toward a table of old men. “Unser Choe! Long time no see!” A couple of the men noticed us. “Bring your grandkids?”

“Nah, just a couple of friends.”

The first thing I noticed was inappropriate hair: it was everywhere—ears, noses, eyebrows. Not so much on heads though. We both quietly sat down and took it all in. They let us order chocolate shakes with our burgers, though, so we were placated.

Other than “One-Eyed” Johnson, it was hard to figure out who was who based on the nicknames. For instance, “Big Man” Adamczyk certainly wasn’t anymore. It took us about

halfway through lunch before we started to realize that these guys were a hoot. This was a table full of people throwing shade. We did blanch a bit when they tried to pass the check to us. We must've passed the test—we were made honorary members of Local 61, retired. My guess is the average age went down a decade or so.

Dylan loved the Local 61 stories, but he would get antsy. The stories kind of moved at my pace. So, for once I was home and Dylan was the visiting tourist.

So that was our punishment: spend Saturday mornings putzing around the old house with Dad and Saturday afternoons getting regaled with the glamorous life of a garbageman. Sometimes we'd be so motivated we'd go back to the house and put a couple of extra hours in. We'd get home late, often after supper, but Mom would make our favorite quick meal—Denver sandwiches and chocolate malts—for dinner. Scrambled eggs, green peppers, and bacon on toast. Good stuff.

Over the course of the summer, we slowly whipped the house into shape. The house lost its magic along the way, but it gave us something back too. As we headed into the seventh grade, it just became a given that if you saw Dylan, well, then there was Lou.

Local 61, retired, gave us some useful lessons. If you want to make friends, you have to put in the time. Friends can come in unexpected packages.

Meanwhile, Dylan was onto his next big plan.

3. Incident at the Mulqueen



She shuffled and dealt the cards just as she had a dozen times before, but when she looked at the results, there was a pause.

As a rule, Mom didn't have much time for our shenanigans. She worked as the pastry chef at the old Mulqueen Hotel in downtown Milwaukee. She oversaw lunch, and then afterward she'd bake the desserts and get the soup started for dinner. As soon as we were old enough to take the city bus on our own, we would head downtown after school and do our homework in the kitchen while Mom finished up at work. Then we'd all go home together.

The Mulqueen was a lady of faded glory by that point. People who learned that our mom worked there went out of their way to tell us the place was legendary. We quickly came to the

opinion that the more legendary someone thought the Mulqueen was, the less likely it was that they had ever stepped through the doors. It was equal parts of too small hotel rooms, too cold marble floors, too old mattresses, and too often malfunctioning electrical wiring, all served up with a faint smell of mildew and cleaning products.

If anything was legendary at the Mulqueen, it may have very well have been Mom. She was a chef of the one-for-the-pot variety. Whatever she baked, she baked extra. And everyone downtown knew it; the kitchen had a steady stream of people coming in to share conversation and steal a piece of Irish bread. From the mayor to the downtown homeless, eventually they all found their way to the Mulqueen's kitchen. Not sure the bakery ever made the Mulqueen money, but it did serve as the currency for the usual downtown kickbacks. It was probably the safest block in downtown Milwaukee—at any given moment there were one or two cops loitering in the kitchen, often right alongside the shady guys they would be chasing later that evening. It was like the DMZ. That's why everyone would go the extra mile if the Mulqueen was involved. Thanks to Mom.

The kitchen was the size of a small warehouse, with huge ovens and a ceiling covered with hanging pots and pans of every shape and size. We probably did 90 percent of our middle school homework there. To this day, the smell of scones baking in an oven recalls the night I memorized the Gettysburg Address. And while our study habits in the quiet of a school room often fell short, we were somehow able to apply ourselves amid the hustle and bustle of a professional kitchen.

I can close my eyes today and see us sitting around the huge butcher-block worktable in the kitchen at the Mulqueen, the room toasty from the heat of the ovens, and Mom brushing flour out of her hair, quizzing us on our assignments and prodding us about our day. Our own little family cocoon.

“Dylan, capitol of South Dakota? Lou, did you try out for the play?” Mom asked.

“No, I got to the sign-up sheet too late. I'll work the lights instead.”

“Pierre?”

“Pier, dear. There's no pea-air in South Dakota!”

If we finished our homework early, Mom would release us to roam the hotel. We'd set out to explore every nook and cranny. First, we'd go over and shine some shoes with Mr. Johnson (everyone called him Johnny, but Mom insisted we call him Mr. Johnson. After all, he was easily seventy years our senior), and then we'd ride up and down in the dumbwaiter, maybe help the staff fold the napkins for dinner, eyeball the lobby for suspicious characters, and run to make change for the front desk. We kind of had the run of the place. Invariably we'd end up at the conference center, checking out the seminars and conventions that were perpetual at the Mulqueen. It was our favorite hobby.

This was borderline given Mom's repeated warnings no interaction with the guests, but the way we looked at it, a lot of the attendees weren't, strictly speaking, hotel guests. Besides, nothing is more invisible in a business meeting than two tweens. Of course, on the flip side, few things are more boring to two tweens than business meetings. But occasionally we'd get rewarded—maybe a divorce settlement seminar, a get-rich-quick real estate technique, or a lose-pounds-without-leaving-the-couch exercise plan. Truth be told, mostly we were just out looking for trouble. With Dylan in the lead, we usually found it.

One day, we were doing our usual roaming, and we happened upon a new-age convention, psychics training future psychics. We wondered whether there was anything like the magicians' code of ethics involved—don't ask, don't tell. Clearly this had some potential. We were encouraged when we got to the door and saw they were charging for tickets. Entry fees were worth bonus points in our formula—people who can take your money just to let you into the room to hear how they can take more of your money—these, my friends, are the professionals.

Dylan had developed a foolproof way to get us in whenever tickets were required. It took a combination of nerve and suspended disbelief, but I'd never known it to fail. We'd go over to the exit, turn around, and walk in the exit backward. This had almost universal applications—sneaking into carnival freak shows, high school football games, or, as in this case, hotel conventions. Most times there was no one at the door, so it was just an exercise. Probably just as well since we never figured out how we would explain ourselves if caught. Spontaneous backward walking? Dylan enjoyed it even more when there was someone watching the door. Sometimes he'd even wave hello (goodbye?) as we walked in (out?) the door.

Once in we had two objectives. The first was to blend in—not an easy task depending on the seminar. The second was to determine as quickly as possible whether it held any interest to us. This one had some potential. Of course, they all followed the same general strategy—the cascading waterfall of purchases. The seminar was to convince you to buy the book, the book to buy the CD, the CD to attend the retreat. Upward cascading payments must be the key to all self-improvement—from losing ten pounds to looking ten years younger to, in this case, telling the future.

The person in charge was a heavysset older lady, all bangles, beads, and baubles, with a giant babushka framing her face. She was accompanied by a younger girl with long black hair, smoke-gray eyes, and skin the color of custard. They were definitely mother and daughter—one only had to squint at the older woman to see the shadow of the attractive girl she had once been. Couldn't swear they were Roma, but they were certainly Roma-like. The talk was on the tools of the trade, specifically how to read tarot cards. When the talk ended, the women split off to two tables and began telling fortunes. Dylan and I immediately snuck up to the front and just off to the side, close enough to hear the fortunes.

The two women worked the room, each relying on her strengths. The old lady relied on mystique and a Romanian accent to captivate her customers; the young girl used a gentle touch on the hand and a shy smile. They both emanated that glow one only gets from helping troubled people part with their money. And this was indeed a room of troubled people: there were outstanding family issues with the recently departed, loves lost or left unresolved, and opportunities to come into significant money. No Nigerian princes in sight, but they would not have felt out of place.

Solutions stayed remarkably consistent from person to person. Every fortune revealed dark issues requiring candles and the need for future readings. I was starting to get bored, but when I turned toward the door, Dylan was no longer there. Instead, he was in line and about to try his luck. This really could put us in hot water with Mom, but, even at that age, Dylan was not one to pass up an adventure or a pretty woman. I served as the lookout in case someone from the Mulqueen came in and recognized us.

Dylan's reading started out the same as all the others. The girl gave Dylan a smile and gently touched his elbow as she signaled him to sit. She shuffled and dealt the cards just as she had a dozen times before, but when she looked at the results, there was a pause. I wouldn't even have noticed if the lady next to me hadn't let out a little whoop.

The young girl quickly scooped up the cards, shuffled, and redealt. Again, those same cards. I was willing to chalk it up to sleight of hand except the girl was looking down at the cards as if they were playing tricks on her.

She went through the process again. Same results. By this time there was murmuring in the room. It turned quiet when the old lady walked over to the table. She gave Dylan a glare, looked down at the cards, and spoke to the girl in some Eastern European dialect. The girl answered back in a harried voice. The old lady paused and decided to change tack. She looked over at Dylan. "Are you a paying customer, son?"

I could see Dylan had hunched over like he always did right when he was about to start an argument. I was resigned to a good talking-to once we got back to the kitchen.

And then it happened. A burst of adrenaline hit, and a sour taste filled my mouth. It drew all the blood out of my head and extremities, like I was on a plane rapidly losing altitude. I had to get out of that room. I looked over at Dylan, but the old lady had his full attention. I got up and grabbed his arm. One look and he could tell something was wrong. As we headed for the exit the young girl grabbed my arm. I turned to her, and our eyes met. It looked like she wanted to say something, but whatever it was remained unsaid. We made our way past the throng.

Dylan led the way back to the kitchen. "Man, you look terrible. I thought you were going to heave right there in the room."

"Shut up."

I had no idea what had happened to me in that convention room or what the girl was about to tell me. But looking back, I'd say that was the first time. The first time I experienced an irrevocable moment. That instant when everything changes.

4. High School



Our high school was a maze of corridors

We sailed into our junior year in high school. We both had come into some money; Mr. Zeidel sold his house and gave us each a \$5K for our work. I bought a camera with mine; Dylan bought a car. We still occasionally visited Mr. Zeidel at the nursing home and, of course, continued to meet up at the diner for the Local 61, retired, meetings.

I was into school activities. I was on the stage crew for the plays and was the photographer for the school paper and the yearbook. Dylan had a pretty serious girlfriend, Mary Hogan. We still had a touch of trust-but-verify but we had a couple of classes together and always rode back and forth to school in Dylan's car. And we still talked things over every night before falling asleep. We even doubled up for prom; Mary set me up with her friend Phyllis - my strong silent-type persona had yet to catch on with the masses.

Take Two

Late in our Junior year Dylan got stuck on a prank. Our high school was a maze of corridors. He felt we needed to streak the music room. A tribute to the seventies.. The music room was in the basement of the school and had two doors, one leading back into the school hall and the other leading to a stairwell and an exit door to the outside. Dylan had coerced our friend Andy to wait for us in the lot with car running; and our friend Steve agreed to hang out in the hall and take our clothes. Neither of us took music classes so the teacher didn't know us, and the class was mostly female. We even did a couple of dry runs after school; we had it down to a minute, tops. Despite all the planning it took days of cajoling to get me to finally say yes. Hours of badgering for one minute of adrenaline.

The day of we were in the hall. We checked that the other door was open and texted Andy to make sure he was waiting in the parking lot. My head was still screaming NO as we undressed and handed our clothes to Steve. Really the odds of anything going wrong were infinitesimal.

That is, until you account for Mr. Perpetually Early and Mr. Perpetually Late. Sure enough, Dylan was through the door and halfway across the room before I was ready. I took a deep breath and followed, already hearing the whoops and hollers coming from the music class. You know all those eyewitness accounts that turn out to be so flawed? My guess is those studies don't take into account a second perpetrator, a naked second perpetrator, an anatomically identical naked second perpetrator, repeating the crime moments after the first. And then Dylan had to go throw in a Dylan moment. He was out the door (and safe) when he paused and closed the door. When I finally got to the door and gave it a tug, nothing. Our eyes met through the window. Dylan got what he came for, a look of sheer terror on my part, and finally let go of the outside door handle. I managed to make it out the door just before the music teacher reached me.

However, our success quickly turned into the school's worst-kept secret. It didn't help that the school vice principal was Mr. Glyzewski (he had followed us up from elementary school). We were able to reach a nolo contendere plea with him and he never did tell our parents, but we did agree to sweep up the halls for the remainder of the school year.

The school had a robot device that would mop the hallways, but it first needed someone to clear the hallway of any flotsam or jetsam. One night I was sweeping near the music room and

peered in. There, above the exit door, someone had fashioned a sign reading “Mulligans’ Run.” And our urban legend had begun!

We found our summer job between our junior and senior years with yet another Dylan prank. He noticed that the local park manager would leave the keys in his county vehicle when we would stop for a quick lunchtime nip at the bar at the end of our street. Dylan thought it would be funny if we started the car and then locked the keys in. That would leave the manager no choice but to call his supervisor to get a second set of keys. And then he would have to explain how the car came to be started, locked, and in the parking lot of the bar during working hours.

Unfortunately, on D Day, the park manager surprised us by coming back to his car early. Dylan was already flagrante delicto—in the started car, desperately trying to get out—but I was still twenty yards away. I opted for discretion over valor and hid behind a set of garbage cans. Dylan could have made good his escape, but he was obsessed with finishing the mission. He got nabbed just as he was trying to get out—sitting in the driver’s seat with the car running. He had trouble explaining how he ended up there; the park manager was understandably suspicious, but since he had been drinking, he wasn’t on the thickest of ice either. He decided not to press charges. Dylan and I mowed the cemetery grounds at minimum wage for the rest of that summer. Somehow, we managed to keep that one from the folks as well.

I spent the summer working with my camera. I wasn’t skilled but I was persistent and occasionally I’d come up with some good shots. I got to thinking maybe this was something I could pursue into the future. Dylan never talked much about the future; he was just as happy spending maximum amounts of time with Mary. We both agreed we were headed for a helluva senior year. We were both right.

...

It was early in our senior year when I was called out of American Lit. It was Mr. Glyzewski. “Your brother passed out in gym class.” He followed that up with a look that could only have meant, “If this is another one of your pranks, so help me God.” I gave him my best “Who, me?” look in return.

That changed when I got to the nurse's office. Dylan looked terrible. They had called Mom, and she was going to meet us at the hospital. The EMTs were on their way. Dylan looked up but didn't say anything. I jotted a quick note to Mary and handed it to the nurse. It was probably already minutes behind the high school gossip telegraph, but at least she'd know sooner rather than later. The EMTs didn't want me in the ambulance, so Mr. Glyzewski drove me to the hospital. I was grateful, so I didn't say anything about his car blasting Katy Perry. I did, however, file it away for possible use at a later date.

Hospitals are not the fount of information, but they had yet to deal with the tsunami that was Mom. Mr. Glyzewski and I were sitting in the waiting room when Mom showed up. She immediately stormed to the front desk and eyeballed the emergency room attendant. The attendant paused, reflected on her pay scale, and let me and Mom into the inner sanctum. Mom turned and told Mr. Glyzewski that he didn't have to wait, ending it with a "thanks, Tom." They were friends at this point.

Dylan was resting comfortably when we got to his station. He was hooked up to every device imaginable. The lead nurse told us he was stable and they were waiting for the on-call heart specialist. Dylan said he was fine, but he still was a pale you wouldn't ordinarily associate with a human being.

The cardiologist came in and was all business. He listened to Dylan's heart and ordered an EKG and an ultrasound. Dylan was carted off for his tests, and Mom and I made our way to the hospital room they had assigned to him.

We waited there for the better part of two hours. Mom shot me a skeptical look or two—she wasn't entirely convinced that something wasn't afoot. Heck, even I wasn't entirely convinced.

When they finally brought Dylan back to the room, I was relieved that he now had some better color. The cardiologist showed up a half hour later. Dylan had experienced a heart episode. Everything seemed calm now, but the EKG did reveal an abnormality. He wanted to keep Dylan overnight. Once again, he miscalculated Mom's resolve. We compromised by scheduling the MRI for the following Tuesday, and they cut us loose. We got home just around ten. Mom made Denver sandwiches.

I could tell Dylan was trying to take it easy at school, and that the effort was killing him. He had his fifteen minutes of fame but that quickly came to an end when a freshman accidentally set fire to the chemistry lab. On Tuesday Mom let Dylan skip school for the MRI test, but no such luck for me.

We attended the post-MRI appointment as a team, Dad included. Turns out Dylan had been reassigned to a cardiac specialist. He sat us down and explained Dylan had hypertrophic cardiomyopathy or HCM. Then he further explained that hypertrophic means the hardening of the heart muscle and cardiomyopathy means a malfunctioning heart without an apparent cause. We all waited for the other shoe to drop.

He went on to explain that it was a genetic disorder that could affect how the heart muscle developed. And that it ran a wide spectrum from inconsequential to life threatening. And in case we didn't make the jump with him, he further mentioned it was the most likely cause of unexpected death in high school athletes. Meanwhile, he was eyeing me like the last slice of pizza at a Monday night football game party. Twins, one with a genetic disease.

Finally, he suggested a series of extra tests for Dylan and recommended I go through all those and the ones previously done as well. Mom and Dad agreed—turned out they loved their second born too.

The tests did nothing to slow down the Nobel Prize train. The stress test, the Holter monitor, the EKG, and the MRI were all negative for me and positive for Dylan.

So, I was unbroken, but Dylan had HCM pretty good. Apparently, this was a known feature of identical twins with HCM, often referred to as discordant clinical features. Between us, I had won the post-genetic pool. The cardiologist recommended keeping a close eye on it with monthly appointments. He also told Dylan that he needed to slow everything down—don't take the stairs when there's an elevator, don't run when you can walk, don't stand when you can sit. This man did not know Dylan.

Dylan took it all in stride. I think he even made a sincere effort for about a week, but then he gave into his better nature. He gladly played the get-out-of-gym card, but for everything else, it was full speed ahead. It wasn't long before we all forgot that he even had it. The only one in

the family that even came close to a heart attack was Dad when the bills came due. And as homecoming rolled around, HCM became just another story that Dylan loved to tell. That is, until the flu.

It was just one of those flus that spread through a school like a wildfire. Everyone gets it, everyone gets over it. Of course, Dylan was one of the early adopters. This was fairly status quo for him; often he'd be sick and well again before anyone else in the family even started feeling bad.

But in this case his HCM knocked him for a loop. The flu kept him congested, and his heart had trouble clearing his lungs. It kind of cascaded from there—no energy, so he quit eating; no energy, so he started missing a lot of school; no energy, so his breathing sounded like a freight train. The cardiologist prescribed warfarin to help Dylan clear his lungs, but nothing seemed to help. The flu passed through the rest of us like a blip. Dylan stayed sick.

It was around then the family closed ranks. Oh sure, at first kids would stop me in the hall at school for updates, and people were genuinely concerned when they stopped at the house to ask after Dylan. But it didn't take too long to become yesterday's news. After a while people stopped asking. Mary Hogan was the last but at some point, even she quit coming around. It was just us.

Dylan and I still shared a room. Nights were the worst; Dylan's breathing was physically painful to hear, almost like fingernails on a chalk board. So I developed a technique to help Dylan fall asleep. First, we'd talk until he was about exhausted, and then in the silence, I'd breathe deeply, slowly in and slowly out. Eventually his breathing would sync up with mine, and he would fall asleep, leaving me staring at the ceiling, breathing for the both of us.

Sometime in the middle of every night, Dylan would wake me up. Dylan, who had no energy during the day, would be thrashing in bed, sweating, and muttering to himself. We assumed it was a byproduct of his drugs; it always reminded me of a dog chasing rabbits in its sleep. I would sit on my bed and listen to my brother. Eventually Mom and Dad would make their way into our bedroom, and the three of us would watch over Dylan as he tossed and turned like he was fighting his way back from somewhere. Looks were exchanged, but words were never spoken. It was one of those moments both terrible and wonderful, a room full of

terribly wrong but full of love and empathy too. The three of us would watch over Dylan until he calmed down and fell back asleep. Mom and Dad would filter out of the room. I would go back to bed.

In the morning we would all dither. Was last night worse than the night before? Should we do something? We were always dreading that next trip to the emergency room. And when we finally did decide it was time to go, I would insist on taking him. The only thing I could envision that would be worse than me sitting in the waiting room was the thought of Mom sitting there. Sometimes they'd let me go into the ICU with Dylan. I appreciated the gesture, but I found the experience depressing—the staff had a way of talking directly to me as if Dylan was some inanimate object. Pulling up to our house on the trip home was hard too; even though they never mentioned it, I couldn't help but notice my folks watching out of the kitchen window to see whether I was alone. Invariably I was. Dylan never complained, but with every return home from the hospital, a little bit more of him stayed behind.

For a while I tutored Dylan to keep up on schoolwork, but by late November, we had put that pretense to rest. It was all Dylan could do to get out of bed and keep some soup down. If he did eat something, he would start to run a temperature and have to lie down. He got so thin that he couldn't keep his jeans from drooping off—he took to wearing pajamas all day, like a teenage Hugh Hefner. He started using an oxygen tank.

Take Thanksgiving for instance. Dylan had a plate of food in front of him—but it was just for show. The table was full of that background noise of a dozen relatives keeping up six conversations. After the meal someone noticed that the valve on Dylan's portable oxygen tank was broken. Oxygen was seeping out. The family got quiet. Even though he wasn't sick enough to warrant it, this meant one more trip to the ER. Dad decided to take Dylan this time. Mom and I did the Thanksgiving dishes by hand just for something to do. Then we sat in the darkened living room with the TV on but the sound off and waited.

Early in the morning Dad returned home. With Dylan. Dad had convinced them to jerry-rig the valve so as to not have to admit Dylan just for faulty equipment. Dylan was sky-high. We all were. For that one night, the spark was back in his eyes. Mom made us a midnight snack of turkey BLTs. Dylan even had seconds. Best Thanksgiving ever.

That experience seemed to buoy Dylan, and he took a significant turn for the better. I'd still breathe him to sleep at night, and the family would still come around in the early hours, but his appetite increased. He started wearing clothes again. There was even talk of returning to school after the Christmas break.

* * *

One night in late December, after Christmas but before New Year's, I felt a recurrence of that weird adrenaline rush. The metallic taste in my mouth, my hands and feet feeling numb, a knot in the pit of my stomach, and a cold sweat. Like I was on a plane losing altitude. I couldn't help but think back to the young girl at The Mulqueen. Eventually it settled down, but it left me unsettled.

"Lou, remember when we used to stay up all night and talk? Let's do one," Dylan said that night as he rested on his side, facing me in the bed across the room.

"Dude, it never happened. You were always sawing logs by midnight," I said.

"This time I'm good for the duration."

"No can do, Dylan. I'm beat." That adrenaline rush had long worn off and left me beaten and battered.

He used what he thought was his ace in the hole. "I'll tell you what really happened between me and Mary last Fourth of July."

There was one slight flaw in this logic. It was well-known throughout school that absolutely nothing had happened between Mary Hogan and Dylan on the Fourth of July. Hell, I probably knew more about that night than Dylan did.

I rolled over to find a comfortable position in the bed. "Tell you what Dylan, you talk. I'll listen." But I started my slow rhythmic breathing for two. He went into his story, but it wasn't long before his eyes shut, and he started in with his raspy breaths. And so I took over. Inhale.

Exhale. I watched the car headlights from the street across our bedroom window light up the wall behind Dylan's bed, waiting for him to fall asleep. Eventually, he did.

But that night was different. I didn't wake up to stand guard. Mom and Dad didn't file in. For once, we all slept straight through.

And sometime in that night, my twin brother, as was his custom, slipped off ahead without me.

5. Neither Here nor There



Not sure I did the in-memoriam page justice, but I was glad I tried.

There was a huge snowstorm on the Sunday night before Christmas break ended and Monday ended up being an extra day of Christmas vacation. It was probably just for the best anyway; I was having a terrible time sleeping. I'm not one to remember dreams but I would often wake up in a cold sweat. I'd swing my legs around and sit up on the bed until I got my bearings.

Take Two

More often than not, Mom and Dad would come in the room and sit on my bed as well. Old habits die hard.

School restarted but I stayed stuck in neutral. Can't say I invented sluffing off the last semester of your high school senior year, but I'd like to think I added to the genre. I attended just enough classes to stay off Mr. Glyzewski's radar; I handed in half-hearted homework; I took tests without cracking open the textbook; I was a walking, talking bare minimum. I did fulfill all my requirements for the yearbook, so I went to a lot of sports / social events with my camera. I'm sure for the rest of the senior class it was just Lou as usual. Spent most of my spare time in the library. Got pretty good at computer chess.

I did keep up with Mr. Zeidel and Local 61. Teenagers are uncomfortable around death – so being around my peers took a lot of energy avoiding that elephant in the room. The old guys had much more experience with death and seemed to know when I wanted to talk and when I didn't. Kind of weird, I wouldn't even know these people if Dylan hadn't gotten it into his head to try dunking a basketball, and now they're the ones I'm most comfortable with. At some point I started sleeping through the nights. Sometimes I would still stir awake to find Mom sitting on Dylan's bed. We still didn't talk much about it much. We'd reminisce about Dylan, but grief was still a silent, solitary exercise within the family.

I was in charge of the In Memoriam page of the yearbook. I went out of my way to make sure it wasn't all about Dylan. Instead, I wanted it to be more about the ones that lost their way during high school. Kids that went through cancer or had a family member that did; kids from a recent divorce; kids that think way too much about suicide. The community of the troubled fringe. Words weren't spoken but you knew who was in and who was out. It was something around the eyes. Not sure I did the in-memoriam page justice, but I was glad I tried.

My first post-high school plan was not met with universal approval. I wanted to take a gap year. Mom and Dad quickly vetoed that idea – they knew I was in a fog and were sure another year of the same would be to no one's benefit. My second plan was to get out of Dodge. I applied to schools as far from Milwaukee as possible. My grades weren't spectacular but, as I do, I had aced the SAT test. That combined with a strong recommendation from Mr. Glyzewski (he praised my perseverance, God bless him), got me into the University of Washington. It was

going to be expensive, but I still had some Mr. Zeidel money left over, I had all my cemetery mowing money and then, out of the blue, I scored a modest scholarship. So, after one more summer mowing lawns at the cemetery, it was goodbye Milwaukee and hello Seattle.

* * *

I was determined to hit restart when I got to college. Nothing unique to me, reinvention is a common theme among incoming freshmen. And it didn't hurt that I didn't know anyone for fifteen hundred miles.

My roommate was from Walla Walla, one of those towns you heard of but were kind of sure it was made up, Washington's version of Sheboygan. We bonded almost immediately, mostly over alcohol. The drinking age in Washington is 21 but that doesn't seem to stop anyone. Our first night in the dorm he opened up his suitcase and showed me a bottle of tequila. We skipped the lime and salt tradition and just drank from the bottle. In return I taught him the old walk backwards through the exit technique and we subsequently used that to get into bars and frat parties. He also had a convertible. Not the recommended vehicle in cold and damp Seattle but it sure beat mass transit. My reinvention had begun. We were proud members of U Dub.

School started well too. I had dropped out of all my AP classes after Dylan died, so a lot of my freshman classes were just do-overs. Probably just as well as my lifestyle wasn't conducive to morning classes, so I ended up cutting a lot. I didn't crush exams, but I was getting by.

My roommate unexpectedly dropped out in late October. His hometown girlfriend wooed him back to Walla Walla. My second roommate was the football manager. We barely spoke to each other. When he wasn't on the road with the team, he was right there laying on his bed. I took to spending a lot of time in the library.

University libraries are different. Lots of students burn the midnight oil at the tables, but no one uses the library as a library. I'm not even sure if it's possible to check out a book from a university library. The Suzallo library at U Dub is huge. I tended to frequent the obscure parts. In the basement there were shelves and shelves of untouched resources - the island of misfit books. "Wheat Production in the Soviet Union, 1957-1960." Someone wrote it;

someone published it; at some point it was someone's pride and joy. Now the spine hadn't been cracked for sixty some years. I spent my time on the island playing computer chess and reading the few chess books that library had. I started leaving those books tucked away on the island; I figured the Soviets wouldn't mind.

At some point classes fell by the wayside. Nothing dramatic caused it, I just gradually went less and less until I wasn't going at all. Don't go blaming Dylan either; maybe I just wasn't made for college. Instead, I'd wake up, grab breakfast, shoot some buckets at the health center, walk around campus, and then kill the evening on misfit island.

Originally my walks were just around the campus but as I had more available time they got more adventurous. I took to roaming around the city. I'd make my way through campus, past the small industrial buffer area and the large park that surrounded it and then to the city center. A couple of miles and several urban personalities apart. The campus was full of books and bikes and students on the go. Just beyond the outskirts of the campus, the residences would change from the unkempt student housing to the only slightly better teacher housing to more traditional family homes. Slowly bikes abandoned on the front lawns would be replaced by trikes abandoned on the front lawns. Then, just as slowly, these houses would give way to condos. No more abandoned toys - instead it was all so antiseptic it looked like rows of model homes. Occasionally, you'd hit the hustle and bustle of the mini business district mixed into the neighborhood. And then, finally, downtown.

What interested me about downtown was the subterranean culture. The people existed off the radar. Of course, there were the businesspeople, overdressed and in a hurry, rushing to their next successes. But there was another whole set of people—the couple that ran the fruit stand, the man selling hotdogs from the cart, the checkout lady at Walgreens. A third set was the homeless and the beggars. These types interacted but never really acknowledged each other, like the wrasse fish that makes its living eating bacteria off shark's teeth.

I wish I had a better explanation for my mindset during this period. At school I felt like a character out of the book *Flatland*. Two dimensional. You could slide me in right under the dorm room door. But as I got farther and farther away from the campus, I start to feel three dimensional again. When I circled back and headed home, it'd be flatland all over.

One day my walk took a particularly serpentine route, and I came across a ragtag coffee house called Java Jive. I had to take a picture of the street corner with my phone - I wasn't sure I could find it again without Google Maps. Tucked in an alley well off the beaten path, it didn't have the look of a place people started out for; instead, it looked more like a place where somehow people just ended up. A little worse for wear, of questionable repute, Java Jive had seen better days. But it did have one thing that piqued my interest. A help wanted sign in the window.

6. Java Jive



The second J jangled in the wind as I walked through the door of Java Jive.

The second J jangled in the wind as I walked through the door of Java Jive. The inside wasn't any more impressive than the outside but there was a decent crowd for three o'clock in the afternoon. I ordered a latte. The barista looked suitably bored, but she did a nice job with the

swirl. I went and sat down at one of the long tables. Took out my phone and started playing myself in chess.

A wizened old man plopped down across from me. I looked up and smiled; by this time, I was resigned to being an old man magnet. He watched me make a move, flip my phone 180 degrees, and make another move. After a while he asked “Winning?” I looked up again “Yes and losing.” He stopped to consider. “That happens sometimes.”

I finished my coffee and went back up to the counter and asked the barista about the help wanted poster. She smiled and said that’s perpetual. If I wanted to talk to the manager, he was usually there in the mid-mornings. I thanked her and headed back to campus.

I was right, Google did know a more direct route. Turns out Java Jive wasn’t all that far off campus. And, since my mid-mornings were free, I made my way back the next day.

I was met with a blank stare when I asked the manager about the help wanted sign. Apparently, on any given day the specific help wanted might vary. He signaled me to come into his office. Once there, he checked the calendar. “Our only opening is as the open-up person Tuesdays-Thursdays.”

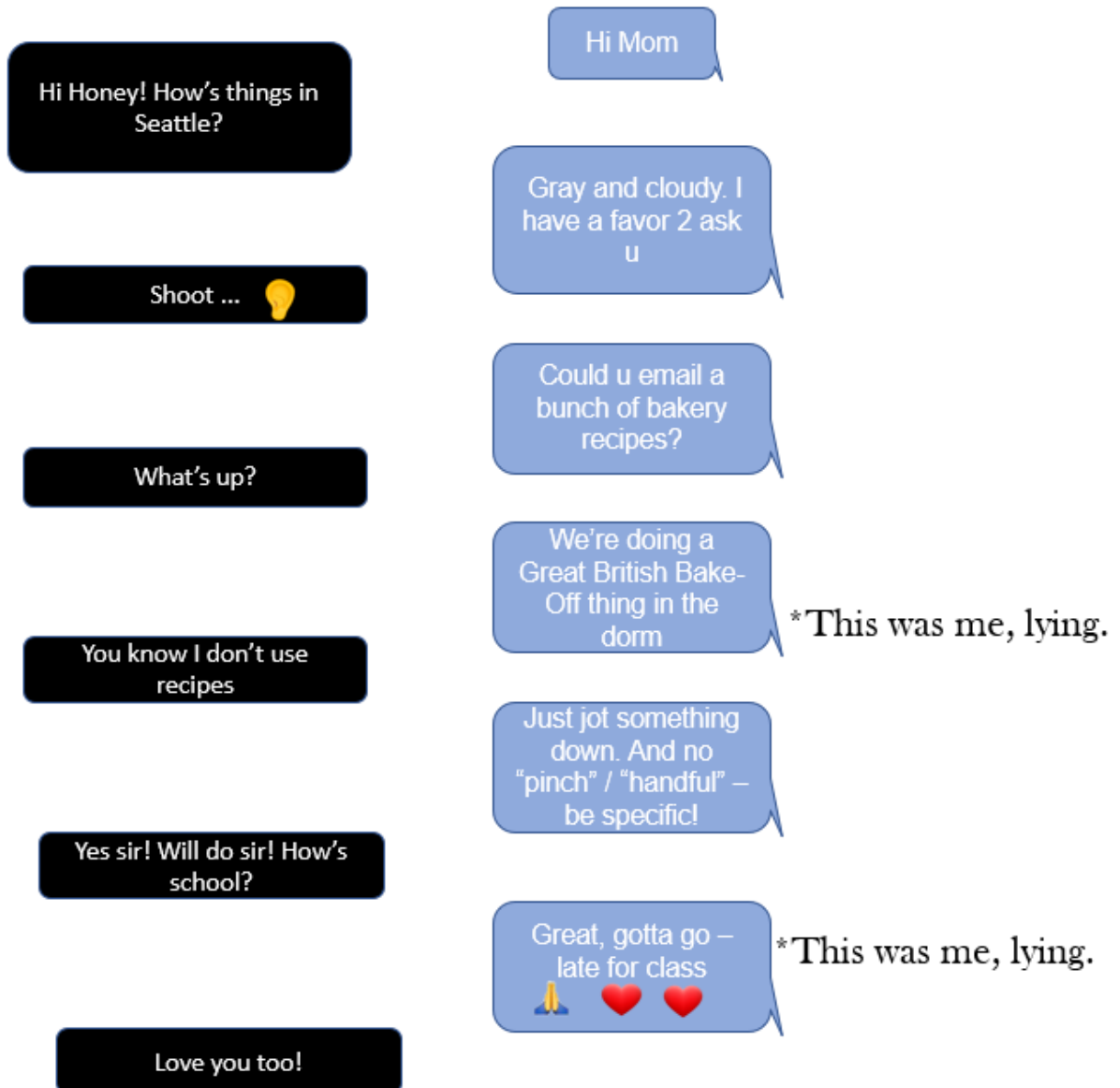
“Sounds good,” I said, having no idea what an open-up person did.

“Any kitchen experience?” With this I detected we had moved into the interview portion of our discussion.

“I grew up in a hotel kitchen.” *This was me, lying, mostly.

He considered that for a while. I think his need for a Tuesday-Thursday open-up person may have allowed him to look past how infeasible it was that an eighteen-year-old “grew up” in a hotel kitchen. “Tell you what, meet me here tomorrow at 5:00 am and I’ll walk you through the job.”

Great! That gave me about twenty hours to learn my way around a coffee shop kitchen. Since they only sold bakery, I had a hunch what I might be called upon to know. Luckily, I knew a guy. As soon as I walked out of the coffee shop, I texted Mom.



Mom came through. She sent some idiot-proof recipes (cranberry scones, sour cream chocolate muffins, lemon bundt cake, banana bread); one classic recipe (cinnamon rolls); and one God-bless-her-if-she-thinks-I-can-make-this recipe (Kouign Amann). Mostly I was concerned with talking the talk, so I committed this to memory and met up with the manager early the next morning. Worrying about walking the walk was for another day.

I may have over-estimated the rigor of this application process. I think attendance was enough to get me the job. He walked me through the kitchen, showed me how to deactivate the night alarm and had me start up the coffee urns. The job was mine.

My roommate was none too pleased when my alarm went off at 4:15. Get used to it, brother. I was out the door and at Java Jive by 4:50. Started with a success: I was able to turn off the alarm before it kicked in. I surveyed the pantry and decided to take a stab at the cranberry scones, chocolate muffins, and cinnamon rolls.

I was kneading the cinnamon roll load (Mom was still a firm believer in kneading) when I noticed a man pacing outside the shop, nervously puffing a cigarette. He finished that one and lit another. Finished that one and then he walked into Java Jive. He wasn't smoking anymore but the smoke still followed him like wisps from a steam locomotive. He made his way to the coffeepot and poured himself a cup; hung up his jacket and started into a long-winded story about visiting his sister over the weekend and having car trouble on the way back and then forgetting to turn his alarm back on and that's why his schedule was so messed up. He paused, took a breath, and gave me a once-over. "You're not Darren," he said.

I just shrugged.

That reply appeared to be good enough for him. He walked over to the sink and rinsed out his coffee cup. He looked over his shoulder back at me as he was walking out. "Anyway, nice to see my sister but nice to be home too." He glanced down at my cinnamon rolls. "Good luck with those." And with that, he was gone.

Can't tell you what he saw with my cinnamon rolls, but he was right. They came out as a cross between rolls and hockey pucks. They tasted like what I could only assume Civil War hardtack tasted. Maybe they'll appeal if some re-enactors come into the shop. The scones and muffins came out a little more respectable - I'm not sure what you'd have to do to screw up a scone recipe. But, most importantly, they were done. And with that, I was officially the Java Jive open-up person, Tuesday-Thursday.

My cinnamon rolls didn't particularly improve, and I had yet to take a stab at the Kouign Amann but by my second Thursday I was at least starting to feel comfortable around the kitchen. After my morning shift, I fell into the habit of grabbing a free cup of coffee and doing some reading, lounging on one of the sofas. Turns out you could check books out of the university library and, since I was ostensibly still a student in good standing, I would grab the occasional chess or computer book out of the library. I'd read until I was sure it was late

enough for my roommate to be off to class, and then I'd make my way back to the dorm and catch up on some sleep.

It didn't take long to realize that mornings brought in the same set of about half a dozen customers. I called them the Irregulars: they were an eccentric bunch. The old man who had walked into the kitchen on my first day was named Roger. He wasn't employed at Java Jive, but he served as kind of the universal handyman. If something needed fixing, he'd fix it. In return, free coffee. If the place got crowded, he'd just step back behind the counter and start pouring. He often would show up just after I opened and shoot the shit while I butchered the cinnamon rolls.

One customer was even more irregular than the others. He wasn't ugly exactly; more mismatched. Along the lines of a platypus. He had red bushy hair and a red bushy beard, but the hair ended just above his ears and from there on he was clean as a baby up top. It kind of gave him a Woolly Willy look. His most prominent feature, though, was his nose. It was big. Babe Ruth big. Almost looked like he had, mere moments ago, gotten punched. Possibly his most eccentric trait? He was eating my hardtack cinnamon rolls. I had taken to buying one just so they would show some activity, but he not only was buying one - he was eating it as well.

That second Thursday I was reading a chess book when he sat down at the table next to me. He then pulled out a chess board and set up the pieces. He kicked the guest chair in my direction and grabbed the Queens and put them behind his back.

I moved over to his table and tapped his left hand, ending up with black. He opened with Nf3. When you're playing an unknown opponent you can try it two ways. Super conservative until you figured out how good they are or super aggressive and try to force an early mistake. If he had opened with the Queen's pawn, I would have tried the Englund Gambit - it is probably the most widely known opening that will often flummox a less skilled player. Instead, I moved Nf6, mimicking Bobby Fisher's move in what was probably the most famous chess game ever played, Fisher-Donald Byrne, when Fisher was only thirteen. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was important to me to impress old Woolly Willy.

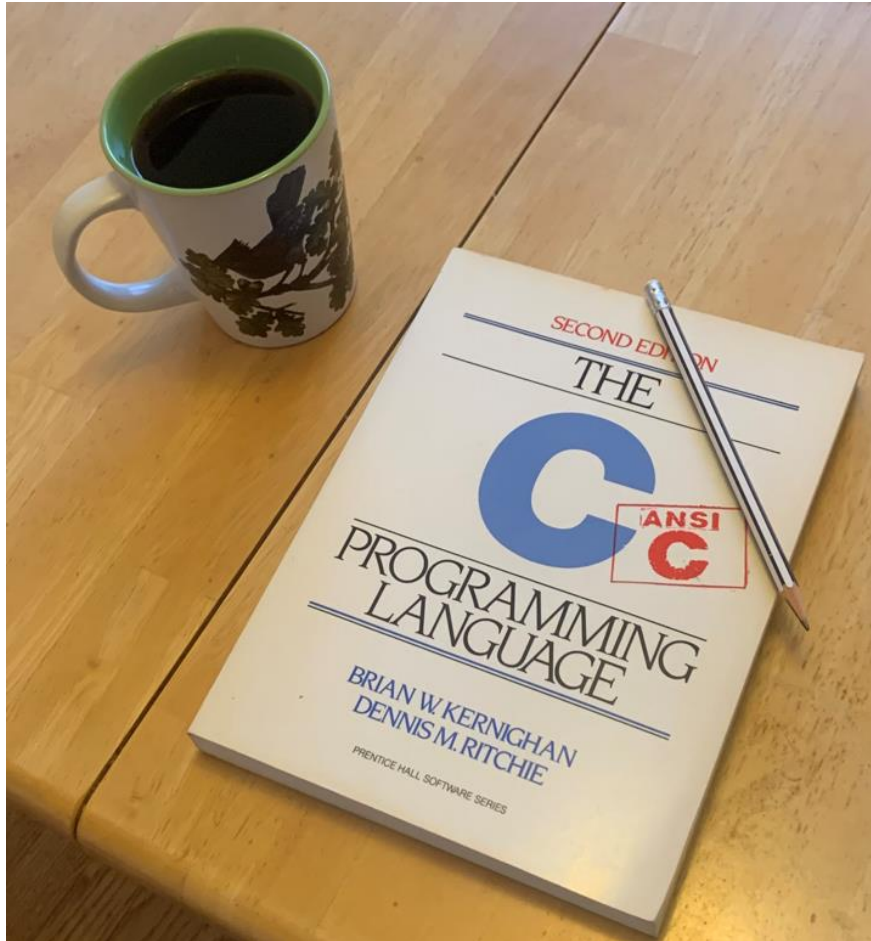
We continued down the Fisher-Byrne path until move seven, when he veered from Byrne's moves. I glanced up at him and he gave me a wink and a smile, taking another bite out of his

cinnamon roll. Once I was cut adrift, He pushed me around the board, albeit gently. At move twenty I surrendered. He looked at me and said “Tyr Heimdall.” I assumed it was some kind of funky chess tradition until I realized he was introducing himself.

I started to speak, and he held up his hand. “No need. Your reputation precedes you. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lou.”

You never know, do you? I had just met my mentor.

7. Life at the Coffee Shop



"Yeah, for a class," I said, the lie rolling easy off my tongue.

My days started taking shape. I'd show up at Java Jive before 5:00 am, open up, and start in on the rolls. Roger would stop in at 5:30 or so for a chat. Invariably around 6:00 there would be a knock at the door and Jabari, the guy that cleaned the strip club down the street, would ask if he could get a cup and some bakery before he went home. He claimed there were no coffee shops where he lived but, this being Seattle, I had my doubts. Still, I'm not about to begrudge someone who willingly eats my pastries! Most of his stories centered around his kids since, with his night shift hours, he was home with them after school. Just as well since any cleaning the strip club stories would soon deteriorate into way too much information!

I'd often see the early crew strippers reporting for duty when I left for home. A bunch of very tired, very big breasted women.

Ally, the morning barista at Java Jive that first served me weeks ago, was neither. She was tiny but tireless and would come in early for her shift for a quick cup with the team. Her work uniform consisted of what we called in Milwaukee a wife-beater T-shirt. It afforded a wonderful view of half her serpent tattoo as it wound from her back and down her left arm. Her stories usually involved running a marathon or biking a century ride or some such craziness. The baristas all split their tips evenly, but everyone knew it was Ally that brought in the money. Lita, the other morning barista, would sometimes stop in although she was just as likely to be late for work as early. She had kind of a dreamy demeanor and did less well with tips, but she pushed the pastry so she was okay by me.

And as such our morning would pass. Jabari would head home, and Ally and Lita would open up the shop. Roger and I would grab one more cup and take in the morning. Outside if the weather permitted, so Roger could smoke.

Roger's stories tended to revolve around his youth in Minnesota ("Grew up in Duluth. In the summer, for fun we'd go down to the highway and watch the cars on their way to the North Woods. Over and over—Illinois, Illinois, Illinois.") The next one might be about death-defying rides on the backs of the Duluth Electric trolley cars. I'd pitch in with a story or two about me and Dylan. Sometimes I'd throw in a Local 61, retired story as well. Roger would fit right in with that bunch. And when Roger told me his wife of 54 years had passed last year, I told him about Dylan. I had told plenty of Dylan stories to the morning crew, but Roger was the first one that I told about Dylan's HCM and death. He had a way of drawing you out.

Sometimes, if the morning crowd was particularly madding, I'd pitch in and take orders and Ally and Lita would concentrate on making the drinks. This did not particularly help the tip situation. If it got really bad Roger would jump in as well. This did not particularly help the Java Jive revenue situation. Roger worked entirely on the barter system and would spend his time trading coffee orders for future favors.

Eventually the crowd would thin, Roger would move onto his next stop, and I would settle in with a book. Not without noticing who had ordered pastry and who had not. My cinnamon

rolls had improved to a point where people other than me and Tyr were ordering them. Mom had sent me a few extra recipes too; I can only imagine what she thought was going on in my dormitory. As always, she was right about measurements. The day I stopped measuring ingredients was the first day my baking even approached hers. “If it needs more, add more” pretty much works for anything.

About ten or so Tyr would show up and plop down across from me. Often, we would play a game. Sometimes he would comment on the book I was reading. “For a class?” he asked when he saw I was reading *C Programming Language* by Kernighan and Richies. For some reason, although I avoided them like the plague when I was a student, as a dropout I couldn’t get enough of textbooks. I loved the logic and clear thinking that textbooks provided—no mysteries. Particularly these books that were there for the beginning “Yeah, for a class,” I said, the lie rolling easy off my tongue. Once you’ve lied to your mother, well ...

“Hmm.” He seemed to take it in for a while. “Interesting choice,” he said as he moved one of his rooks. “Garde.” I looked up at him, and he shrugged—it was a polite but little used chess warning that my queen was in danger. Tyr was nothing if not a traditionalist, and he was always looking for a way to engineer a win for me. I had buyer’s remorse on that lie. “Actually, I’m just reading this recreationally. I’ve never programmed in C but it is the forefather of so many languages.”

Tyr closed in for the chess kill as he finished his cinnamon roll. “I have some books you might be interested in.”

The next day the first thing Tyr did when he walked in was hand me a textbook. Knuth’s third book on the art of computer programming. It might help to understand the theory before you jump into the bits and bytes. This one is the best. It’s about sorting and searching.”

He took me by surprise. Not that he wouldn’t know this stuff; he was clearly a smart guy. I just assumed he was a professor. What else would explain all this leisure time? “Thanks, but that’s not necessary, Mr. Heimdall.”

He looked at me like I had just sucker-punched him. He thought about it for a while. “Of course, it’s not necessary. It’s just what friends do for friends.” And with that, he left the book and turned to walk away. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, “And, Lou, the name’s Tyr.”

It occurred to me that I had no idea what Tyr did for a living. So I googled him.

The screenshot shows the Wikipedia article for Tyr Heimdall. The article text reads: "Tyr Heimdall, (hɪm-dal) is a Norwegian software entrepreneur. He is the founder of the Fortune 500 company Trident, where he previously served as principal shareholder, president and CEO. When he sold his shares, he was reputed to be the wealthiest Norwegian with an estimated worth of US\$500 million. Born in Trondheim, Norway, on June 23, 1964, Mr. Heimdall moved to the United States as a child. He received his PhD from MIT¹ and started his first software company soon afterward. Then in rapid succession, he started three other companies and sold them all before ever going public or ever selling any software. These companies varied across the spectrum of computer software, including some early forays into cloud computing and data analysis. He was an early proponent of the FAIR² (findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) approach to data. His fourth company was Trident Software³, which created software used to analyze MRI results. He stayed with this company until 2015 when he sold it reportedly due to deteriorating health. He then stayed active in Seattle civic projects but did not create another startup until Heimdall Research⁴ in 2020. There have been no announcements regarding the Heimdall Research product line. Tyr had been reclusive since selling Trident, rarely seen in public."

On the right side of the article, there is a sketch of Tyr Heimdall and a biographical table:

Heimdall at a Seattle Mariners game, 201	
Born	Jeffrey Preston Jorgensen
	June 23, 1964 (age 58) Trondheim, Norway
Education	MIT (PHD)
Occupation	•Entrepreneur •philanthropist

The next morning, I was reading Knuth and waiting for my yeast to rise as Roger came in. He tousled my hair on his way to the coffeepot.

“Morning, Lou.”

“Morning, Roger.”

He took a sip out of his cup and looked at what I was reading. Then he looked over to the pot of warm water where I had the yeast mixing. Then back at Knuth. Finally, he looked me in the

Take Two

eye as if to reconsider. He pointed at the pot with the yeast. “I hear tell that adding a little bit of sugar improves the process.” And with that he started in on another of his stories. He told me about his first job in high school as a short-order cook. The very first person on his first day came in and ordered a grilled cheese sandwich. So, he dutifully put the bread in the toaster and started grilling the cheese. Then he rinsed out his cup and smiled at me as he made his way out the door. “Can’t stay today, Lou, promised to help a friend.”

The Knuth book piqued my interest. I really like it when you can feel the author’s enthusiasm. And Knuth was enthusiastic. By the time he got to the drier details of the mathematical underpinnings of various sort techniques, he already had you. I was just washing my scone down with a cup of coffee and finishing the last chapter of Knuth when Tyr came up behind me. “Well, what did you think?”

I told Tyr that I enjoyed the book and proceeded to ramble on about the parts that caught my interest. Tyr just chuckled. “Sorting isn’t a spectator sport, Lou. Roll up your sleeves and program a couple of the examples. You write them, I’ll read them.” I looked up, and he was giving me that come hither look again. Still, there was no denying it. I had just been issued an assignment, and it wasn’t from someone who particularly took no as an answer. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d better scurry over to the line if I hope to grab me one of those delicious cinnamon rolls before they disappear.” And without a hint of sarcasm; the guy was goofy but sincere.

He had me pegged pretty well too. I had three things going for me: I had an infinite amount of spare time and access to the university computer system, and, when needs be, I could be damn stubborn. So, I rolled up my sleeves and took Tyr’s challenge. I picked up Knuth and coded up the algorithms that struck my fancy and then ran some numbers through them to verify I was indeed ending up with sorted results.

Computer programming is a funny thing. I was probably the millionth person to code these things up, but I was still the first to do it my own unique way. And even though when all is said and done you have absolutely nothing to hold in your hands, like you might in a woodworking or an art class, there is no denying the feeling of accomplishment.

Later that week I was playing chess with Tyr when I took a flash drive that I had put my program and results on and slid it across to his side of the table. Equally wordlessly he took it and stuck it in his briefcase.

And that began my after-school specials with Tyr. He answered every question with a question. He had no interest in what I told him—he was more interested in having me show him. I called it the Socratic-Missouri method. “How do you think it works? Don’t tell me, show me.” It was no never mind to me, but to humor him, I’d write up and test the programs he suggested. And just when I was sure we had exhausted his expertise, he’d bring in another book. Funny, I can’t ever remember a negative word, but he made it clear whenever I did something that didn’t quite meet his expectations.

Tyr was a hard guy to figure out. I was grateful he befriended me, but I could never quite get what was in it for him. And even though he was about the goofiest person you’d ever be likely to come across, he had presence. Not just with me either—he’d walk into Java Jive, and it would be undeniable. Somehow everything and everyone in the room seemed to rotate around him. It was not so much gravity as gravitas, although the effect was about the same.

That day, helping Ally and Lita at the counter, I had my first interaction with one of the other irregulars. Lydia. Exact Change Lydia. She ordered a twelve-ounce decaf drip. I gave her a nod and turned around to pour one. It was hard to pinpoint her age. North of sixty would be my guess—she had smile crinkles at the edges of her eyes—but, if you just glanced at her, you could make out the ghost of the young girl she once was.

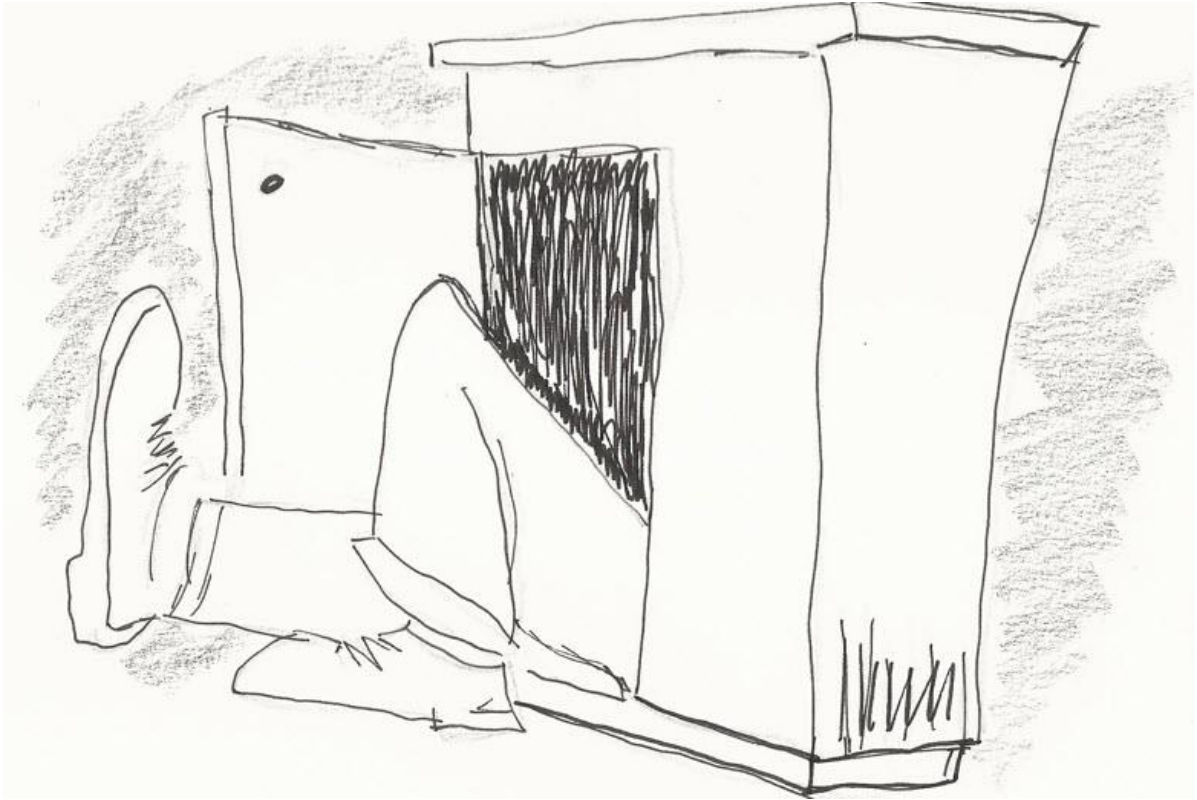
“Here you go. Three sixty-eight.” I rang it up. Now, no one paid in cash. It was all card or Apple Pay. But Lydia reached into her jacket pocket and grabbed some bills and change. She handed it to me without a thought. Sure enough, \$3.68 on the noggin. I gave her a thumbs up. Her eyes lit up with pleasure and she made her way to a table.

* * *

This all sounds cheery, but winter was coming. Every student is a student until the grades come in. And the house of cards that was my pseudo student standing (and my room and board) would fall to pieces. Not to mention the disappointment from my folks when I finally told them. It's going to be a problem.

Optimists say there is a solution for every problem. But this time what showed up was yet another problem.

8. A decision



"Our espresso machine has run out of steam," I motioned to Roger's legs sticking out of the machine. "As has our repairman."

It started out as just another week. Roger came in Tuesday morning, grabbed a cup of coffee, and watched me work on the cinnamon rolls. "You know, I've seen people use a whisk to stir the margarine and the eggs. I think it makes the rolls lighter." Then he looked at me like the cat that ate the canary. He could've mentioned that weeks ago.

Later that day it got busy enough so that I was tending the cash register. Exact Change Lydia came in and ordered an Americano. I was the bearer of bad news. "Sorry, Lydia. Our espresso machine has run out of steam," I motioned to Roger's legs sticking out of the machine. "As has our repairman."

Lydia proceeded to flush from the tips of her toenails to the ends of her hair. A complete body blush. She took a deep breath and was about to say something, but instead put her money back into her pocket and walked away. That day, Exact Change Lydia wasn't.

I looked at Roger's legs and waited patiently for the rest of our man about town to appear. After a while, he peered out and gave me a sheepish look. I just waited.

Roger chuckled as he slowly rose to his feet. "Your espresso machine is back on life support. Treat it gently." As he walked away, he glanced back at me with a shrug. "I guess I'm just mad, bad, and dangerous to know." He gave me a salute and continued on his way.

I was more than ready for that Wednesday. For one thing, I had a rash of grief to give Roger for going out and having a social life behind my back.

But when he came in that morning, he was even more agitated than usual. The trail of smoke followed him in, but he didn't pour his customary coffee; instead, he just sat down, rubbed his eyes, and muttered a world-weary, "Ho hum." And then he started in on one of his stories.

"I grew up poor. My dad passed when I was six and the war boom eluded my mom. We had to fend for ourselves. We lived in some of the sorriest houses in some of the sorriest parts of Duluth. My mom wasn't one to put up with a lot of grief, so we were constantly on the move. She didn't drive, so we did all our moves using my coaster. We had so little that, even with the coaster, we didn't have to make a lot of trips. She'd get into an argument with the landlord over the heat or maybe fall behind in the rent, and she'd come home with a look on her face. Next thing I knew, we'd load up the coaster, and we were off to a new place.

"When I grew up and moved out, I swore the next move would be my last." With that he got up and finally poured himself his morning cup of coffee. I just waited.

"After the army, Sheila and I married in 1963, and we bought a house. We stayed in that house and raised our three kids. We didn't move out of that house until her health deteriorated, and she could no longer get up and down the stairs. We moved into our apartment in 2005—my first move since I was eighteen.

“Sheila died in that apartment almost exactly a year ago, but I’ve continued to live there. With only one social security check, I had trouble reaching the rent, but I came to an agreement with the landlord—I worked as the apartment complex handyman, and he would cut some slack on my rent.” He got up and rinsed out his coffee cup.

“They’re throwing me out, Lou,” he said. His landlord had finally sold his building for condos, and Roger was unable to reach a similar agreement with the new owner. He couldn’t afford to live there anymore. He patted me on the back on his way out the door. “Later, Lou—guess I better track down that old coaster.”

Even if you’ve only known someone for a short time, you can be in their debt. I had spent the last few weeks watching Roger jiggle, duct-tape, tighten, and loosen as applicable to get the Java Jive’s equipment to grumble into starting. And that’s not even including his baking hints along the way. Or the fact that, for no particular reason, he had befriended a lonely eighteen-year-old.

But until that Tuesday, I hadn’t considered that maybe he had a life outside of those thirty minutes he spent with me every day; and until that Wednesday, I had never considered that maybe that life came with potholes.

Tyr showed up early that morning and gave me a nod as he stood in line to place his order. Then he walked over to the sofa where I was sitting with my eyes closed. “You look a little preoccupied,” he said.

Well, I knew Tyr and Roger were familiar with each other from the Irregulars, so I launched into Roger’s story and how helpful he had been to me while I was getting the hang of the place and about his troubles now and how I felt pretty useless.

Tyr thought about it for a while. “Lou, I’m probably not the right person to ask. I don’t have much in the way of a philosophy but one I’m fond of is that out beats in.” Tyr had a way of circumnavigating before he hit on the heart of the matter, so I waited from him to continue. “That goes for almost anything. If you haven’t told someone what they mean to you, do it. If you’re worried about someone, let them

know. If you're angry at someone, tell them why you're angry. Until it's out, it's just internal churn. Once out, then you can deal with it. Don't let things fester."

I wasn't exactly sure we were still talking about Roger, so instead I switched topics. "Tyr, I googled you. I know about Trident and Heimdall Research. What's that about?"

Tyr smiled. "Well, the primary mission of Heimdall Research came from my wife, and that was to get me out of the house. But we have an office over on Dexter and six employees sitting around thinking great thoughts."

"And that pays the bills?" I asked.

"Not hardly. But we have high hopes! Here's that book on Hadoop I promised you." Tyr got up. "I'm a firm believer in intuition. When you hit on a right solution, you'll know it." He tapped me on the shoulder as he walked away.

I was distracted on my walk home that day. I walked past the early shift strippers reporting for duty without a nod, passed the cell phone soldiers waiting for the walk signs downtown without even noticing them, and I cut through the county grounds like I always did only this time the inside county workers leaning on their brooms watching the outside county workers leaning on their rakes didn't even register in my consciousness. And when I made it back on campus, I didn't stop in for a late breakfast at the dining hall. I went directly to my dorm room and called my folks.

"Lou! What a nice surprise, let me go get your dad. I'm going to put you on speaker phone." There's a pause as my mom yells over to my dad. I picture her in the kitchen and him gently dozing in his chair.

"Hey. I called to -" "I need to tell you something," "It's about school. It isn't going like I hoped it would," that was me, lying.

"What's the problem?" Mom asked.

“Well, I hit some snags early in the semester. It looks like when the grades come out, I might have flunked out.”

There was a significant pause. Once again, I had buyer’s remorse on a lie. “Mom, dad - I dropped out. I haven’t been going to classes for weeks. I tried, I really thought I could. But I was wrong. I failed.”

“Honey. No one failed anything. Maybe we just need a reset. Maybe we all need a reset.”

I thought about it for a while. “I thought I could outrun Dylan. Turned out I ran to Seattle but then I just kept running.”

“What have you been doing?” That was Dad.

So, I explained, as best as I could, how I came upon Java Jive and that I was the morning cook three days a week. I winced as my lie to mom came back to me, but I heard her chuckle in the background.

“When can you come home?” Mom again.

“Don’t know. I can’t explain it, but I don’t think I’m done with Seattle yet.” I didn’t quite have a plan, but I kind of had a plan for a plan.

“Lou, we’re all still working through what happened to Dylan. Your father and I have been seeing a grief counselor. If you come home, I think she could help you too.”

She went on to explain that they tried to ignore grief, thinking that, over time, it would go away. But it didn’t and putting your life on hold while you wait doesn’t solve anything. Instead of ignoring it, thinking that somehow that would prevent Dylan from leaving, they’ve just now started working through the grief. Then she said it again “Come home and let’s work on this together.”

I thought for a moment. In some ways it was reassuring to hear that I wasn’t the only one floundering. “Maybe I’ll come home for Christmas. How does that sound?”

“Great. If you stay in Seattle, what about housing? What about money?”

“I have some irons in the fire, Mom.”

Anyway, that’s how I ended up with a 75-year-old roommate.

9. Gainful employment



I was totally okay if the elevator doors chose never to open

This new roommate arrangement improved my standing in the Java Jive community. Ally greeted me in the morning with a hug; Lita gave me a slow thumbs up and agreed to shift to afternoons so I could get some hours as a morning barista; even Jabari, who didn't particularly have a horse in the race, thought it was pretty cool. And Lydia, exact change Lydia, was now my new best friend. Still didn't tip but she gave me a big smile as she ordered. Hadn't heard from Tyr, seemed he was off somewhere doing something for Heimdall Research.

Of course, there was one catch. Our apartment was virtual; we didn't have a place. And this was Seattle, an apartment wasteland. And between my Java Jive paycheck and Roger's social security - well, it wasn't good. But that was tomorrow's problem. Today's problem was I had to vacate by the end of semester. Since Roger's eviction wasn't until the end of January, I moved all my belongings (okay, it was clothes, just clothes) to Roger's place before I went on my Milwaukee trip.

My visit home was a success in every possible way. As mom, dad and I talked it over, we realized that we had all handled Dylan's death the exact same way. The last six months of his life he was so sick that, rightfully, he occupied all our attention. But now, twelve months after his death, my parents and I were just emerging from the fog. We had the opportunity to move on but not the knowledge how. Instead, all three of us were stuck in limbo, spending all our energy avoiding the elephant in the room. Stuck between the bargaining and depression stages of grief. I met with the grief counselor three times, once with my folks and twice alone. I'd like to think she helped me reach acceptance, but only time is proof of that.

I also spent some time in the kitchen at the Mulqueen. Mom walked me through making Kouign Amman. It killed me to watch. For all the blood, sweat and tears I expend in my baking, she doesn't even pay attention! Kouign Amman is tricky - you have to let the dough sit three times in the process. She would just cover them and set them aside, no clock or anything, just continuing whatever discussion was going on. At one point she forgot an ingredient, so she just added it later! I had visions of a meeting of equals, cook to cook. Instead, I got a healthy dose of 'this is what it looks like when you're really good at it'.

The good karma I generated with Roger continued when I met up with Local 61, retired, at George Webb's. They got a kick out of my various Seattle failures and then I mentioned my quest to find an apartment with my new 75-year-old roommate. Big Man Adamczyk casually mentioned he had a nephew that owned some apartments in Seattle. I jumped all over it and right after lunch I called Roger with the contact information. I drove home feeling like we had won the lottery!

Roger took it from there. He talked to the nephew, found an apartment we could afford, and even convinced him to allow the custodian discount. It turned out the apartment was open now so Roger and some of the Irregulars moved all our stuff in. All I had to do was show up.

Of course, there were some compromises. It was advertised as a two bedroom but, when I got there, my bedroom didn't have a closet. Technically I don't think you can advertise it as a bedroom if it doesn't have a closet. The room was small enough that I vacillated between was it a bedroom lacking a closet or a closet in need of a bedroom. But having a room to my own was reward enough for me. Being the roommate of the custodian also had kind of a cobbler's kids' aspect to it; our appliances always just barely worked. Roger didn't see a problem with "just leave the frozen pizza in the oven for an extra twenty minutes" strategy.

We still weren't out of the woods by a long shot. Neither of us bothered with a budget, but it was clear the combination of my meager income, the little bit of Zeidel money remaining, Roger's social security and Roger's minuscule savings were not going to pay for this apartment for very long. I decided to look for other employment. I certainly had the time, if not the skills, for another job. But then I had *posuered* my way into Java Jive; maybe finding a job with no discernible skills was my skill?

The first revenue generating activity I found was very low hanging fruit. I started selling my plasma at the blood bank. Turns out my blood type is AB negative and that corresponds to "universal" plasma. It's just a once-a-month process and it doesn't generate much revenue, but the only skill required is an hour of your time. They take the blood, remove the plasma, and give you the red blood cells back. If this was a real bank, it would be a deposit and a withdrawal in one visit. Probably psychological but the process always seemed to knock me for a loop. Almost like Dylan, a little less of me came home each time.

I had just done my plasma bit for February and was sitting in Java Jive when Tyr walked in. Hadn't seen him in quite a while. He stopped and asked for a moment of my time. He had a story for me.

"Lou, when I was a younger man, I started a software company called Trident Software with a close friend. Some of our ideas caught fire, and we were eventually bought off by a much

larger software company. I was set for life. But lately the bug bit again and coupled with my wife's strong desire to get me out of the house, I started another company."

"Huh," was all I said. Tyr knew I knew this story; we'd had this conversation before. Plus, Tyr was noticeably nervous; I had known him now for five months and had never seen him nervous.

Tyr was still standing there, fidgeting. "Anyway, we currently have a handful of employees, a third of a software product, and not one red cent of revenue. It's all kind of exciting." And then, finally, he sat down.

"Cool," I said.

Tyr smiled and took an envelope out of his jacket. He handed it to me. "I was hoping you'd consider coming aboard. I think you might find the work interesting. And we'd love to have you. It might be another sailing of the Titanic, but you should think it over. Here's what we could offer you as a starting salary."

I opened the envelope, looked at the letter, then at Tyr and then back at the letter. I got that adrenaline shock that comes with a life changing moment. "I'm not quite sure what to say."

"Tut, tut." Only Tyr could get away with using the word "tut." He was clearly uncomfortable with uttering or even acknowledging the amount. "I believe the traditional response is yes." Tyr reached out and shook my hand.

I was nineteen and without a college degree. "You do remember that I dropped out of college as a freshman, right?"

Tyr patted me on the back. "You provide the enthusiasm; we'll provide the rest. Trust me, Lou: you are a man of great expectations!"

I had to ask. "What prompted this?"

Tyr glanced over at Roger, who was talking with Lydia. He then stood up and headed towards the coffee counter. He looked over his shoulder back at me. "Lou, the very first time you handed me a flash drive with your work I was confident in your technical ability. Anyway, skill can be learned; character is innate."

Still stunned, I got up and walked over to Roger. We were officially living within our means. Went into the manager and gave my two-week notice. Two weeks to find another me. Shouldn't be much of a problem.

Then I went home and called my folks. I had told them about Tyr but only into the context of being one of the quirky Java Jive people. They were skeptical, possibly even more skeptical than I was, but elated. I texted Tyr to accept (in the excitement I never actually said yes) and we agreed on the first Monday in March as my start date.

“And started me on Monday So I had a bath on Sunday.” Well, okay that's from a Squeeze song. We didn't have a bathtub anyway, just a sorry excuse for a shower. Roger offered his car, but I decided to walk. From the apartment to Heimdall's building was shorter than from the dorm to Java Jive and I needed to clear my head.

Nervous wouldn't really do me justice. I had bluffed my way into the University of Washington and bluffed my way into Java Jive, but this bluff felt different. This one had repercussions. This one, certainly as much a bluff as the others, mattered to other people - Roger and Tyr. It'd kill me to disappoint either of them.

With those thoughts, I made it to the building, a non-descript three stories, one of hundreds in Seattle. Got into the elevator and pressed three. I was totally okay if the elevator doors chose never to open. But, like death and taxes, the elevator made its way to the third floor and the doors opened. I got off and, to my right, was the door marked Heimdall Research. What the heck, you never know. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

10. Unmitigated



The room was a mass of cables; the cable to human ratio was almost disconcerting.

On the other side of the door was a tall English woman behind a desk, speaking on a headset. She motioned for me to take a seat. When she got off the phone, she asked how may she help. I told her I was Lou Mulligan here for Tyr Heimdall. She paused, just for a beat.

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In that pause I was back in the safe confines of the elevator; back to Java Jive to ask for my old job; back telling Roger our plans were once again on life support. Then she said, “Let me get Priam for you.” She pressed a button on her phone system and told the person on the other end there was someone here for Tyr.

A very large Indian man entered the foyer and introduced himself as Priam Lahd. Maybe very large isn’t the best description; maybe disproportionate is better. Tall and slender except for a signature stomach – protruding enough to make an appearance in the room before the rest of him turned the corner. He was very happy to see me.

“I am so sorry, Lou; we were all excited when Tyr had told us all about you, but he neglected to mention your starting date. And he is out of the office until Thursday. Please, follow me.” And as I walked alongside him, Priam reached out and patted me on the shoulder. Not what I was expecting but it relaxed me. As his stomach turned the corner, Priam peered back to the receptionist. “Alice, may you get the insurance forms ready and bring them to my office?”

We sat in silence for a moment. Priam waited patiently. He was in no hurry, and I appreciated it. Finally, he asked, “Did Tyr brief you on the work?”

“Not particularly.” That was an understatement—even the Internet knew nothing about Heimdall Research. “Did he tell you about me?” I asked. Priam was handling it well, but I wasn’t entirely convinced he was expecting me.

Priam chuckled. “Yes, your background was mentioned. I am sure you are most concerned but let me reassure you that Tyr has a sixth sense about such things. Talented people seem to come to him. Yes, we are working on a software product that enhances pattern matching. But believe me, you will know so much more about that in a month that there is no need to rush into it. At this juncture, let me tell you about our setup. Congratulations, Lou, you are employee number nine. Tyr and I work in offices, but only because of the time we spend on the phone. Of course, everyone is allowed to work from wherever they want to, but most tend to come in every day. Other than Alice, whom you have already met, everyone else shares a giant workspace in the back. Come, let us go meet them.”

He took me to the back of the office. There, in a large room with about a half dozen tables, sat three men intent at their PC's. The room was a mass of cables; the cable to human ratio was almost disconcerting. Chaos reigned throughout the room, except for an oasis of neatness around one desk tucked away in the far corner.

Priam then took me around to meet the other employees. The first was Cameron Bradley. He was the second newest employee, having started a month ago. He had Roy Orbison-thick glasses and when he looked up at you couldn't quite tell if he was looking at you or towards you. He was also working furiously on twiddling the cowlick at the back of his head. We skipped the handshake.

The next employee was considerably calmer. A rotund guy with a burly mustache and a nasty bruise on the side of his face. "Please excuse Jonathan. Injured by, I believe, an 1816 flintlock smoothbore at the Battle of Vicksburg," Priam said.

"Hmm," I said.

Without looking up Jonathan said, "Civil War reenactment," as he worked on a bag of Cheetos (it was nine in the morning). I waited to see if he wanted to shake hands but instead he proceeded to turn to me and give the nastiest stink eye this side of first grade.

Priam brought me to the last person in the room and the first person in the room that seemed willing to converse with me. "And at this point, I am about to leave you with Dan. Dan will help you get started. He will clear up all things cloudy."

Dan was an older man, but he seemed to carry all the energy of the room along with him. He directed me to an empty desk and showed me how to get logged on to the system. "I just created a user ID for you on the network. Have they discussed your duties yet? The product is moving along nicely. We've really opened the sluices, and now we're hitting on all cylinders," he said.

"Actually, Dan, no one has explained anything to me yet."

"No problem." A feeling of relief washed over me, although it was somewhat distracting to see the devilish grin on Jonathan's face. "It's fairly straightforward. We take in the input and the

actual desired output and develop a paradigm to coordinate the pairs to provide for maximum results in a minimum time. Voila, money comes in,” Dan said.

“Um, okay.”

“Exactly. We envision empowering external products to tap into expertise and leverage the results to our customer’s advantage. One stop shopping. Meets all needs.” I didn’t believe it was possible, but at that moment, I was certain I knew less than when I had walked off the elevator.

I decided the best strategy was to stand my ground and keep quiet, and hope that Priam was right in that I would pick it all up in due course. So, I just watched over Dan’s shoulder as he did whatever he was doing. After all, I didn’t want to peak too soon—heck it was only nine thirty, and here I was fitting in so nicely.

I spent the rest of the morning being as quiet as a church mouse. I filled in my insurance forms so Dan could do some work. Late in the morning, another employee made the scene and changed the entire ambience of the room, at least for a moment. A tall blond woman. Striking wouldn’t do her justice. It felt like the fluorescent lights gently angled towards her so as to provide the most flattering lighting. She came up to me and held out her hand for an introduction. This time I was the one lost for words. She introduced herself as Maet Heimdall but for the life of me I couldn’t seem to remember my name. Jonathan, of all people, came to my rescue. “This is Lou your dad’s coffee buddy.”

You could have given me a lot of guesses. Tyr’s wife must be packing some stellar genes. Maet noticed my raised eyebrow, and with a smile, she placed her hand on my shoulder as if to steady me. “I work as a tech writer on the hours I can get away from school.” She pulled some pages off one of the printers. “Pleasure to meet you, Lou. Welcome to the Dogface Patch!” And with that, she was out the door. The room dimmed and the fluorescents resumed their normal positions. I was left slightly dazed. Welcome to the what?

Jonathan turned his attention back to his computer. “She’s used to it.”

I could've spent my lunch hour crying in my car, but I had walked to work. Instead, I just walked around the neighborhood. Seemed like a little haven for software companies; lots of familiar names on the building marquees.

When I came back from lunch Priam was helping Cam with some work. He smiled as I came in but was more intent on looking over Cam's shoulder. I noticed he was also gently bumping Cam with his stomach as he pointed things out on the PC. Cam didn't seem to notice, although he was working his cowlick something fierce. At some point they were able to pinpoint the problem and both the cowlick turning and the stomach bumping came to a halt.

Priam then turned his attention to me. "Lou! Thanks to you for coming back. I apologize for ignoring you. This afternoon I have a conference call, but tomorrow we shall spend the day together. Meanwhile should Dan require any assistance, I've asked Jonathan to provide."

Was it just me, or was just the mention of Jonathan enough to invoke a wince from Cam?

As Priam left the room, Cam gestured over to me. "Don't worry; the first couple of days are the worst. Any questions I can help you with?"

I appreciated the gesture. "Priam mentioned I was employee number nine. I only count eight." I wondered what delightful eccentric I had missed.

"Nope, just the eight of us. I think there was another employee, but he left early on. Not much talk about him." Cam quickly fell silent as Jonathan returned from lunch.

"If the newbie can get back logged on, I'll set up his development environment."

I assumed this was directed toward me. Everyone loves being referred to in the third person. It's so personable. Jonathan was clearly not big into eye contact. Unless you count the stink eye, I hadn't seen him meet anyone's gaze yet this morning. Instead, he kind of tossed directions into the ether and waited patiently for them to reach their destination. Heck, I wasn't complaining though. My training at Java Jive had given me experience working with the peculiarities of peculiar people.

It was about two thirty when I got a sneak preview of full Jonathan. He exploded at Cam. I wasn't exactly sure of the circumstances, but apparently Jonathan was testing some of his code

and came across some of Cam's code that was misbehaving. Jonathan started with a low grumble, like a ten-second warning before a tsunami. Then he pulled out some printout and waddled over to Cam's desk. "You can't do this," he said, pointing out some code snippet. Cam feverishly twirled his hair as he valiantly scanned the code, trying to get some context from the printout. "What made you think you could do this?" This time was a little louder. "I can't believe you even tried to do this!" Jonathan was in full gale force by now. I wasn't exactly sure how he had taken a hit between the eyes with that Civil War rifle butt, but whoever did it, I liked them. Meanwhile I just sat there trying to make myself invisible. Finally, Dan took pity and came over to make the peace. Jonathan settled down, and the three of them decided on a course of action. Jonathan was still muttering as he walked back to his desk. "Palookas, Dan, I'm working with palookas."

And so my first day at work slowly ticked its way to a halt. I hadn't stared at a clock so hard since grade school. Just when I thought I had finally emerged victorious over the day, Priam stuck his head in the room. "Lou, I have Tyr on the line. Why don't you take it in my office?" Just when my friend the elevator was beckoning.

We walked over to Priam's office. He showed me how to pick up the line and then left, closing the door behind. "Hey, Mr. H."

"Hi, Lou, how goes the battle?"

"Well, I don't think I took anyone's breath away," I said as I sat down.

Tyr laughed. "You didn't shut the company down either. Just remember Rome wasn't...you know. I meant to talk to you once more before you started, but time slipped away. Lots of egos and elbows in the Dogface Patch, but they're all good people. And if it all sounds confusing, I've asked Priam to set some time aside tomorrow. Believe me there's light at the end of that tunnel."

Again with the "dogface patch." But I had to admit I felt a lot better. I wouldn't have been surprised if that had turned into a we-made-a-great-mistake type conversation. As I went back to pick up my jacket, I bumped into Dan in the hall. "Tomorrow we'll pick 'em up and put 'em down and get you started in on the fun."

“Right.”

So, somewhere between the abuse and the gibberish, the day finally called it a day. I went home, wrote a note to Roger telling him to shake me when he got home (I’m sure he was at Lydia’s), and went to bed.

I let loose when Roger finally came home and woke me up. I told him how all the employees were freaks, either not speaking or not making sense, and forget about even being polite. Then I proceeded to tell him how far in over my head I was, and that I had spent the day in total fear over doing or asking something totally stupid. And how this was a crazy idea, and what made me think I could pull it off.

Roger thought awhile as he dipped a tea bag into a cup of hot water. “So, we can safely expect that tomorrow should go better.” Roger was the king of half full.

11. We happy few



That is Ganesh, the God of all beginnings. It is so wise to invoke him at the start of any undertaking. He removes obstacles.

Slowly, as all things do, my job started to take shape. Dan started me with simple tasks, like isolating our error messages so they could be made international. Eventually they gave me my tiny little piece of the software pie. Dan explained (metaphorically, of course) what was expected of me, and Cam and I stood like lambs waiting for the slaughter anytime we fell under Jonathan's considerable shadow. Tyr was rarely in the office; Maet came in not nearly enough. And somehow, without anyone noticing his influence, Priam managed to keep everyone happy and the ship moving in the right direction. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.

Take Two

I didn't have a clear understanding of what we were working on. Not being modest there, I mean I literally wasn't sure. I vacillated between exposing my ignorance and satisfying my curiosity. And I still had the issue with not understanding a single thing Dan said. He was much better at show-me rather than tell-me but it sure complicated my learning the whole system.

My best understanding is that Pandemonium, the project name we were using - after the shadow show from Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, is a spider that traverses an organization's data and, optionally, appends external information from the web. It then takes all that data through a cleansing process to ensure the data is what's known as FAIR. FAIR refers to making data *findable* (providing a clear definition the data contents); *accessible* (both software and humans can easily access the data); *interoperable* (use broadly accepted software concepts so the data is available to all programs); and *reusable* (clear licensing and provenance). Now an outsider might think that all data already passes these tests; in reality very little to no data does. Finally, if desired, Pandemonium can provide summary analyses of the incorporated data.

The theory is a site could use Pandemonium just on internal data as a way of standardizing all the data in their shop. Or they could allow Pandemonium to enhance their data as well by incorporating external data. Consider an insurance company that was interested in renewal rates - with Pandemonium they could incorporate claim information, help desk call logs, weather information, current event information to help determine why a specific customer does or doesn't renew. And now they'd have all that data available to all other programs because it would be FAIR.

Tyr's second idea was that of *verticality*. Because Pandemonium offers a significant competitive advantage, he felt it was important that it reside within a company's firewall, as opposed to running as a service. He felt services were for tools that provide little or no competitive advantage (like payroll or word processing) and if you move tools that do provide competitive advantage to run as a service then you run the risk of them becoming unavailable at critical times.

As far as division of labor, all four programmers worked on everything, but each had their area of expertise. Jonathan oversaw the neural network that did the analysis; Dan was in charge of the data cleansing to meet the FAIR criteria; Cam managed the data cache, since the analysis used the data over and over, we wanted it easily accessible; and I was in charge of acquiring the data (both internal and external data). So the path: I got the data, Dan cleaned it up, Cam stored it, and Jonathan used it to form assumptions. Priam jumped in when someone was struggling to ensure schedules were being met. Tyr provided moral support but in truth he spent most of his time searching for venture capitalist money. Maet was working on both her masters and the marketing collateral to help explain our rather fuzzy product. And so it went.

Of course, the other aspect to software development was the dynamics within the team. Having a specific responsibility helped me feel like part of the team, but it took a special incident to know I was accepted. Looking back at Java Jive, the moment I had felt accepted was when I started rooming with Roger. At Heimdall, it wasn't so much an action as an attitude. Dan was arguing with Jonathan and said something like "there is no *i* in team," to which Jonathan said, "But there is in idiot." I laughed and added, "Hey, wait a minute; I see two!" Jonathan glanced at me without the usual stink eye, almost with grudging respect. It might be better to give than to receive, but at Heimdall, to give as good as you got was an absolute necessity.

Jonathan had a long memory and could bide his time to get even. Later that same week, I was in the room, and Dan was riding Jonathan about some mistake he had made. "That's why God gave you two ears and only one mouth. Listen more than speak," Dan said.

Jonathan thought awhile. "That still doesn't explain why I'm sitting here with two assholes!" he said.

Ah, life in the Dogface Patch.

Jonathan was a classic computer programmer—obsessed with all things computer but decidedly cavalier about other things like nutrition, fashion, and hygiene. He served as our walking calendar; you knew what day of the week it was based on which T-shirt he was wearing. And you knew whether it was morning or afternoon by the number of stains on the shirt.

To Jonathan programming was competitive—he was the shining light and not the least bit interested in keeping it under a basket. It was communal as well—he never tired of announcing his progress as it occurred and pointing out other’s problems as they popped up. The fact that he was rarely wrong didn’t make it any less unappealing. It was a good day if I could do my work without having to tap Jonathan on the shoulder for help. It was a bad day if I had to ask for help. And it was a really bad day if he had a chance to offer some unsolicited help.

Dan, on the other hand, was much more a surrealist. He truly enjoyed his work. And everything else. Including, it was hard not to notice, ganja. It was never spoken of, but Dan was considerably more productive in the morning hours. He would disappear for lunch and his afternoons were mostly spent in quiet contemplation. I always thought Dan as an idiot savant. Ask him a question, and his reply would be nonsensical; his code, however, was spectacular. His code required constant interaction with Jonathan since their logic had to stay synchronized—Pandemonium-wise, synchronicity was the key. And it all hinged on Dan and Jonathan. They had an interesting relationship. Dan stoutly maintained he was the yin to Jonathan’s yang. Not only did Dan have Jonathan’s professional respect, but he also had an innate ability to unnerve him. Dan was the only one of us that didn’t mind working with Jonathan. My theory was Dan would often be intentionally vague just to get Jonathan’s dander up. Dan would reply with one of his crooked responses—“At this point, we have to check whether the data is flowing through the pipe at different speeds or else we’ll introduce a backup”—just to watch Jonathan get so mad his walrus mustache would start to quiver. I enjoyed working with Dan, mostly for the experience. I would look over his shoulder at his code: concise, detailed, documented, and correct. And then I would hear him describe the same in such meandering nonsense that I couldn’t believe both came from one person.

Cam was an interesting case. Not including me, he was by far the youngest person of the group and his background was not dissimilar to mine. His wife had worked with Tyr at his last startup, and Tyr was impressed by her work ethic, and, when she approached him about Cam, Tyr immediately went with the idea. And while some programmers were good because they were cocky, Cam was good because he was cautious. He was a classic measure-twice-cut-once type of programmer, perfect for his assignment. But the same deadline pressures that Jonathan relished, Cam dreaded.

Cam and I went to lunch together most days. It was at lunch that I learned of Cam's hobby. He loved investing. He researched mutual fund companies for fun. When he talked about stocks, all signs of nervousness would leave. He would stop twirling his cowlick, his body language would relax, and his voice would drop down an octave. It was Cam that got me involved with establishing a 401(k) and investing my money. Before Cam stepped in and once Roger and I had enough to cover rent, I had become casual about my finances. Often paychecks would accumulate on my nightstand. Cam had me set up automatic payroll deposit and start an investment plan. If I have money when I'm Roger's age, it will be due to Cam Bradley. He was a stockbroker stuck in a computer programmer's job. And while he was good at what he did, I'd have a hard time coming up with another person that got less enjoyment from their job.

One Thursday Maet surprised me by asking me to lunch. Of course, I accepted. I gave Cam a glance as the two of us walked out. He just shrugged.

Turns out she was worried about her father, and she knew that I had been friends with him prior to starting at Heimdall. Apparently, Tyr hadn't been completely forthcoming with me. He didn't quit his first software company out of boredom—his health went bad. And now Maet was worried that he was starting down the same track with Pandemonium. She charted his weight loss as proof of how the stress was eating him up.

I wasn't much help though. Truth was I rarely saw Tyr anymore. He seemed to be constantly on the go.

We both enjoyed lunch, though, and started going out to lunch about once a week. The lights still angled to her advantage, and everyone sat up a little straighter when she walked into a room. And she was still oblivious to her effects. Plus, she was just so damn pleasant. She had a habit of gentle body contact. In line at the deli, she'd rest her hand on your shoulder. In the car, she might cross her legs and let her foot jostle against your knee. Trust me, this worked. She probably didn't even notice, but it gave me a jolt every time. And she was so attractive I was always hoping to bump into someone from my high school. Sure, those people were thousands of miles away, but Seattle's a big town, right?

When I got back to work from these lunches, Alice the receptionist liked to tease me. “I think if you asked her out, she just might not say no.”

Finally, I explained my hesitation. “Alice, have you ever noticed when Maet smiles, the crinkles around her eyes are exactly like Tyr’s?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, I have.” Still, I found it amusing that someone thought Maet would even consider me.

And then there was Priam. Priam had simultaneously the most ambiguous task and the hardest job. The team was equal parts one for all and every man for himself. And like the blind guys describing the elephant—each of us saw Pandemonium through the lens of our own assignment; we were each convinced that our part was the crux of the product. Amid this, Priam was the product owner responsible for deadlines and interactions. He had to keep us all on speaking terms and make sure no one fell too far off schedule. Often, that meant rolling up his sleeves and programming. Invariably, this involved helping me. I was by far the weakest coder, so Priam spent most of his time with me. After the workday, Priam would sit down with me and my section of Pandemonium, but, truthfully, we spent most of the time on the philosophy of coding, usually using code segments from Dan’s routines. It was the best of both worlds—Dan would write the code, and Priam would explain it. Not only was Priam spending extra hours at work just to help me, but he would often drag me home for dinner as well.

When you’re working with people for eight to ten hours a day, it’s easy to forget they have normal lives outside of work. Priam had a wife and child. His wife, Hasu, was a tiny, tiny woman who always dressed in traditional Hindi garb. They had a two-year-old daughter, Sharan, the apple of her father’s eye. As in all good homes, people congregated in the kitchen. Priam would teach me Indian cooking while simultaneously entertaining Sharan. Hasu was an excellent cook. An excellent mom too.

“Priam went to Penn State University for graduate school, and from he there was offered a job at Corse Bank. He started as an application programmer and was soon elevated to be the manager of one of the application groups,” Hasu said to me.

“And how did he find his way to Heimdall Research?” I asked, watching her add saffron to the rice.

“Against my will!” Hasu laughed. “Corse Bank was just establishing some overseas development and had Priam in mind to run that department. It would have been ideal in that it would have allowed us to travel back to India twice a year. However, Corse was one of the early implementers of Tyr’s first software product. Priam became enamored with Tyr at that point, and when offered a job, Priam jumped at the chance.”

“And you weren’t exactly onboard?”

“So much pressure,” she said, shaking her head. “Priam works sixty hours a week and often sneaks online on the weekends besides. And the funding is so tight, and the deadlines are so inexorable.”

Hasu was right. We were working under tremendous pressure. The venture capitalist funding that Tyr had obtained was due to run out at the end of the year. This was compounded by the rumor that a large software company was about to announce a product roughly similar to ours. As Dan put it, “In the world of software, it’s not the better mousetrap; it’s the first mousetrap.” We were under the gun.

Hasu was my introduction to all things Hindi as well. “And what is the elephant on Priam’s desk?”

“Lou, so many questions!” Hasu said, teasing. “That is not an elephant. That is Ganesh, the God of all beginnings. It is so wise to invoke him at the start of any undertaking. He removes obstacles.

“That works. But why the elephant head?”

Hasu gently tapped me on the arm as a reminder to stir the curry stew. “Well, there is a story about that. Be aware Hinduism is equal parts reality and metaphor. Think of it instead as an incomprehensible reality.” She opened a drawer and took out a picture of Ganesh. It looked to be the same as the statue. “Priam and I are not, strictly speaking, Ganapatyas. However, we both grew up in the same town where this very statue is,” she said, pointing to the picture. For

a moment she was lost in her memories. Then she turned back to me. “So, we are most admiring of Ganesh because of his gifts and because he brings us back home just for a moment.”

At that moment, Sharan tottered in and clasped onto my leg. “Dinner,” she said.

Hasu was still looking at the photograph, lost in thought. I could empathize; I knew how homesickness could catch you at the oddest moments. And I was only miles away from home; she was oceans away.

Food came in waves at the Lahd house. Apparently Indian meals just came this way. At first I thought it was just for my benefit, but then I realized Priam didn’t really preannounce my arrival. The meals certainly went a long way toward explaining his bowl full of jelly stomach. But I was a beneficiary as well; it was rare for me to head home with less than a couple of meals worth of leftovers. I suspected Hasu had a clear notion of my peanut-butter-sandwich-and-Cheerios dinners when she wasn’t cooking. Sharan also had very specific plans when I stayed for dinner. I always had to sit on her right, and she was always after me to eat the things off her plate that she didn’t like. In Sharan’s world, I was the house dog waiting patiently under the table for snacks. And in this house, Sharan ruled!

At the end of one evening, I asked Priam about our funding. “Right now things are a little up in the air. That is why Tyr has been gone so often lately. But he is well-known in the industry and should have no trouble obtaining a second round of funding,” he said.

“And if he doesn’t?”

“That would be a problem.”

“Good thing we have Ganesh on our side,” I said as I put on my jacket. Priam smiled, handed me some of Hasu’s leftovers, and gently pushed me out the door.

12. Outlook good



At that moment, I felt the three of us could accomplish anything.

I was still walking to work. Roger had a car, but I had gotten used to getting up early and walking while at Java Jive, so I just continued. It gave me some time to myself as well—to clear my head before work and lick my wounds afterwards.

It resurrected one of Dylan and my superstitions as well. When Dylan and I were in grade school, we had to cross one very busy street. For all those years, there was one crossing guard assigned to that crosswalk. She was good at her job but not particularly social. Dylan decided if we could get her to smile in the morning, that would mean it was going to be a good day. Of course, being who we were, that quickly morphed into a morning competition. From a smile, then she had to smile and wave. Then she had to smile, wave, and pat you on the back. We called her the Determinator, and the objective quickly became to both get the necessary

response and to ensure the other twin didn't. Quite possibly, she was the one person most grateful when we finally graduated to middle school.

My morning walks to Heimdall were too early to come upon much foot traffic, just the occasional jogger, dog walker, or insomniac. The early morning joggers were blessed with an abundance of dedication but lacked any indication of enjoyment. The same was true of the dog walkers. The dogs were another matter. They were ecstatic about the smorgasbord of early morning smells. I always wondered what the dogs made of the plastic poop bags though. What conclusion would you come to if someone rushed to pick up your shit after every bowel movement?

Anyway, over time I did have one dog walker that caught my attention. He was a very tall, gaunt old man, always in a brown leather jacket regardless of the weather. His dog was an equally elderly (although quite a bit stouter) bulldog. I could just imagine this relationship back when the dog was a puppy straining at the leash. But the magic of dog years had brought the pair equanimity: they moved exactly in sync—neither too fast nor too slow for the other—Ichabod Crane and Winston Churchill ambling slowly throughout the neighborhood at a mutually agreed upon pace. I adopted them as the new Determinator. Just spotting them proved too easy (they were very dependable), so I included some eye contact from either Ichabod the man or Winston the dog. Usually, it was Winston. Despite their gruff exterior, bulldogs are a friendly breed. It portended a bad day if neither acknowledged me, a good day if Winston did, and a great day if Ichabod did. Just to summarize, I spent my morning walks stalking an elderly man and his dog.

* * *

Pandemonium was experiencing good days and bad days as well. Every two weeks we had to get it pseudo-functioning so we could show it off. Often Tyr would recruit some private equity firms to come in and watch the reviews. We were never sure what they made of it though. Truth was, even when it was working, Pandemonium didn't do much.

Rumors about impending financial doom spread throughout the Dogface Patch. Everyone was heads down, coding six days a week. The only reason it wasn't seven was Tyr ordered the doors locked on Sundays. His philosophy was, "I want everyone to look forward to Mondays...and Fridays too," but our sluggish progress caused us to bleed into Saturdays as well. And when I got home from work, I couldn't seem to stop the tingling in my hands. They hummed like tuning forks. I took to wearing splints to bed. Too much typing.

One break from coding came on Tuesdays when we would have our sprint design reviews—an attempt to make sure the actual code didn't veer too far from the design. These meetings, held in the morning (maybe Priam noticed Dan's afternoon tendencies), were vital but not always pleasant. It reminded me of the United Nations. Ostensibly we were there to make decisions for the good of the whole, but usually it deteriorated into each of us protecting our own little fiefdoms. Jonathan and Dan would go at it tooth and nail. It's interesting in arguments how both sides stick with what they are best at. Jonathan understood Pandemonium the best and would often use extreme examples as a way of proving his arguments. Dan, however, was the best coder and would often use the lack of bugs in his section for his argument. Regardless, Priam would digest all these points and summarize it in such a way that everyone could agree and give us a go forward strategy. Tyr tried to attend these meetings, usually videoconferencing in, just to dispense encouragement and thank us all for the hard work. And maybe minimize the bloodshed.

The constant pressure and massive work hours sometimes revealed themselves in peculiar forms of gallows humor. Jonathan had always kept a running commentary on his progress, but at some point, he had taken to cussing at his computer. Often. Loudly. Colorfully. The first time he did it, Cam and I just gaped at him—we both assumed he was swearing at Dan. But when we looked over, Dan was just ignoring him. It got so bad Alice, the receptionist, pulled me aside and asked me to talk to Jonathan. Ooh—not a subject one would want to broach with Jonathan. Instead, Dan and I concocted a plan. Dan brought in a small recorder and recorded a couple of outbursts. Then when Jonathan was at lunch, we also recorded his voice mail greeting and then dubbed the two. We then rerecorded his greeting. It started out ordinarily enough—"Hi, this is Jonathan. I am either on the phone or away from my desk. Please..." But

then it got a little rough. Like a sailor with Tourette's. Jonathan never mentioned it, but he did quit swearing.

Our dysfunctional family—I couldn't help but wonder what people like those in the Dogface Patch had done before computers. Could there have been a need for this many clerks? Accountants? Actuaries? Drowned at birth?

Another break was Thursday evenings when Priam would walk through the office at seven o'clock, turn off all the lights, and we would hit happy hour at the closest bar, Charlie's Cabaret. More than slightly misnamed, there wasn't a Charlie, and it definitely wasn't a cabaret. Instead, it was a basement bar that still smelled of cigarettes from years gone by, with peanut shells on the floor, a bad cover band, and, inexplicably, three bowling lanes in the back. The team would have to sneak me in (I was still south of the drinking age), and we would generally meet up with the people from the real estate firm that shared our floor in the building. It was a welcome respite for both groups—a chance to talk about something other than work for a spell. Although with Dan, work and life discussions always sounded remarkably similar, in that slightly skewed kind of way.

“Dan, how is your lawn these days?”

“Unbelievable. There's no looking back, and it's Katie bar the door.”

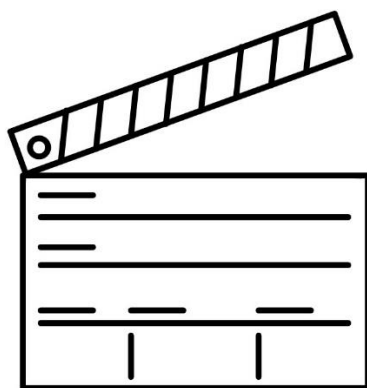
Thursday was about the only day I'd be out later than Roger, who was now spending every available moment with Lydia. The man was a player.

At work I wasn't floundering so much as I was just grinding it out, still waiting for my muse. On the plus side, my lack of progress was not affecting Pandemonium—everyone was able to work around me. But at the end of the day, Pandemonium would rely on my code to meet its performance requirements. I was having trouble hitting on the right algorithm. I had searched textbooks and tried most of the traditional approaches. One technique would be wickedly fast and produce bad output, while the next one would be achingly slow but produce the right output. No luck. Dan noticed my frustration one day on his way out to lunch and said, “The first thing you do when you're in a hole—quit digging!”

I must have scoffed because Jonathan chuckled without looking up from his computer. “Scary isn’t it—that first time when Dan makes sense.”

That night Priam and I, as usual, were the only ones left at work—working on one of my remedial coding lessons. Tyr showed up unexpectedly. He was elated. He had finally secured extra financing. It looked like we now had enough to complete Pandemonium and maybe have some leftover to woo some potential customers. Tyr looked like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He was literally dancing around the room. Right at that point, I saw the flaw in my most recent lookup attempt. “Man, did I fuck this up!” I said.

Tyr mussed my hair. “That’s the great thing about software, Lou. It’s not cast in marble. It’s not a five-ton bridge. If you screw up, you get a do-over. Remember the good, forget the bad! Wipe the slate!” He smacked his hands together like a Hollywood clapboard. “Take two.”



At that moment, I felt the three of us together could accomplish anything.

* * *

The extra funding lifted everyone’s spirits. In rapid order, Tyr hired two extra people to help us finish Pandemonium—Wei-Chang and Penelope. And not a moment too soon—Pandemonium was beginning to morph into shape, but we were starved for data, particularly anything resembling real data. It was one thing for our code to pass all of its unit tests, but did it actually do what needed to be done?

Heimdall Research soon became a vacuum for all things Internet. Wei-Chang and Penelope would gobble up information and then put it behind a firewall to simulate a “company”. We would then run Pandemonium through that data and make sure the result was FAIR-reliant

and that we were adding value to it with relevant data from outside that firewall. It was an exciting time, even when Pandemonium misbehaved. And I'd be lying if I didn't say that quite a bit of our data involved pornography ... but then so the Internet.

Truth be told, we couldn't have cared less—we were each obsessed with our little worlds of code. Dan was happy if he could correlate the input request with the output result; Jonathan was only concerned with calculating when the output needed to be refreshed; I only cared that the right information was located in the cache. And Cam? Well, Cam worried about it all, he was a professional worrier. If I close my eyes, I can still see where everyone was standing in the Dogface Patch the first time Pandemonium produced desired results. First there was a delay before we realized what had happened; then we all just looked at each other. Not a word was spoken. It was a moment-in-time moment; software that only existing as the output from these eight people from all those months of work. I don't think I'll ever forget that moment. For the life of me, I can't hardly remember any of the failures.

Wei-Chang and Penelope wrote the test drivers to push data through Pandemonium. This was perfect work for new people—they weren't tainted with Pandemonium prejudice like the rest of us. And it ensured that Maet's technical directions would, once followed, produce something functional. Plus, it allowed them to be instantly useful.

Wei-Chang gave me valuable insight into my own internal biases. He was Taiwanese and his English was not great. Often, he would explain something to me, and I would just chalk it up as him as being wrong and not understanding. Then he would repeat it slower, and I would realize I was the one that was both wrong and not understanding. Wei-Chang didn't take it personal though, he was the definition of unflappable. He often got a similar reaction from the other Dogface Patch residents, but he just kept keeping on.

Penelope (she preferred Penn), on the other hand, was quite a bit more excitable. She provided the enthusiasm for all those late-into-the-evening tests. And while she couldn't seem to coerce her hair into staying where it was intended to be and inevitably her hands would be stained from some pen that had recently exploded, she had a confidence very similar to Wei-Chang's. And she didn't back down when the elbows came out. When the test drivers finally

started returning valid results, we all felt the warm glow of satisfaction. But it was left to Penn to issue the yahoo! that put the exclamation point to our feelings.

Timing is a funny thing. We never would have gotten to the finish line without those two. And somehow, they had arrived at exactly the right moment. It was hard not to believe Priam when he spoke about Tyr's prescience.

It was a month before Penn and Wei-Chang found their way down to a Charlie's Cabaret Thursday. I remember I had some errands to run and arrived late, so I ended up sitting at the far end of the table across from Penn. Through the vestiges of the long-ago smoke and the band tuning, I asked her how her first month had gone.

"It was fun, mostly. That big programming room takes some getting used to though."

"The Dogface Patch," I said.

"Plus, the group is, well, a tad eccentric," she said under her breath.

"Guess I never noticed."

She smiled. "Guess you wouldn't."

"Hey, wait a minute!" I had always thought myself the exception to the rule.

Since I was so much younger than the rest of the Patch, she was curious about my work history. Not that I had much to tell, but it didn't matter. The lady was one ardent listener, leaning in, hanging on every word. Her eyes bored in on you. It could be a little disconcerting, and not just because of how penetrating her eyes were.

It reminded me of when Dylan and I were kids. Our house had an old woodburning stove in the basement. In the winter after sledding or skating, we'd make hot chocolate and sit by the fire. If you stared long enough, the flames would take you away. Some flames would reach out as if to touch you, only to dissipate at the last moment. Others would flare up and then roll back and disappear in the embers. Dylan and I could stare at the fire for an hour, each of us seeing our own stories unfold as the flames roiled around in the base of the stove. That's how green her eyes were.

Later I asked her where she had worked previously. Turns out she was like me—this was her first job. Her father had fought cancer from the time she entered high school. Penn had helped raise the rest of her siblings along with her mom. She had managed to go away to a state school when her dad had gone into remission. She had a job offer lined up with IBM but then her father had taken a turn for the worse and passed away. She declined the IBM job and went back home to help her mom sort things out. Turns out Tyr was a longtime friend of the family and when they met at the funeral, he had immediately offered her a job.

I then told her my convoluted trail—Java Jive and Roger and how I ended up at Heimdall. And since our stories kind of coincided, I told her about Dylan. Since I had left home, I had only told Tyr and Roger. But this was another time when it felt right.

Finally, she stood up. “Enough of these sad stories. Let’s dance.”

I explained that no one from our table ever danced.

She grabbed my hand and headed out to the floor. “Things are about to change!”

End of Part 1

13. Distraction



*The Seattle Outdoor Cinema was showing **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid**. Any activity that would associate me with Paul Newman and Robert Redford could only be a good thing.*

Penn was furious. She was in the parking lot as I walked into the building. We decided to take a few laps around the building.

Jonathan had gotten under her skin as only Jonathan could. She proceeded to tell me what happened. Repeating the story just made her angrier and angrier. I gave her my most sympathetic nod and waited for her to cool down.

One thing I learned about Jonathan was that he didn't vary. Jonathan yesterday, today, and tomorrow. What could change was how you reacted to him; and with that you could denude him of his powers. But time and place, so I postponed that talk for later. When Penn finally eased up on the pedal and looked over to me, I said instead "If it's any consolation, I believe

Jonathan dies this weekend.” I knew his Civil War re-enactors were doing the battle of Fredericksburg and he was part of the forlorn hope, the Michigan Seventh.

“Not nearly soon enough,” Penn said. Then she looked over at me, thought awhile and said, “And why are you coming in so late?”

Last night Roger was there when I got home from Charlie’s. He told me Java Jive was closing, sold to a new owner who was going to keep it as a coffee shop and reopen it as Just a Cuppa’ Joes. He didn’t think that portended any great changes and didn’t seem all that worried. Of course, he didn’t have a paycheck riding on it either. We spent much of the night just catching up.

Instead, I thought it might cheer Penn up if I told her about Ichabod and Winston. I may have started in the middle because Penn started looking at me like I was crazy. Gratefully, she didn’t offer an opinion when I got to the end, but I suspect she may have cataloged it for later use. We did one more lap around the building and headed towards the entrance. As we walked in Penn whispered, “You distract him, and I’ll slip the poison into his coffee.”

When we got to Dogface Patch, the incident was half-forgotten. Jonathan’s half. He was oblivious. Not just lacking in the social graces — but unaware of them completely.

As it got closer to lunch, I stopped at Maet’s desk and told her about Java Jive, explained that I was going to walk over at lunch, and asked if she’d be interested in tagging along. She was and, probably because she noticed how agitated Penn was, asked Penn to come along as well.

Now I couldn’t help thinking the Java Jive irregulars had much more on their minds but the thought of me walking in with two attractive women gave me joy. I could see my reputation climbing all the way up to *not quite so pathetic!* Those thoughts were quickly dashed though, for as soon as we walked in it was clear everyone already knew Maet. Lydia and Roger greeted her like a long lost friend and the morning baristas Ally and Lita gave her hugs. Apparently, Tyr had the occasional party at his house and that caused **the** two universes to collide. Left in the wake was any change to my social status.

We all sat down at a table and Maet introduced Penn around. No one seemed particularly concerned about the death of Java Jive; Ally just saw it as an opportunity for a new coat of

paint; Lita was hoping for a week off. When I raised the question of one coffeehouse replacing another, what strategy would cause the latter to succeed where the former had failed. The table answered in unison, and with way too much alacrity, “Better bakery!”

Roger and Lydia departed and Maet took the opportunity to mention to Ally that Penn played pickleball. Apparently, Ally was all-state in tennis in High School and had just taken up pickleball herself. Penn had been playing since college. This led to instant bonding, sharing of phone numbers and promises to hook up for some open rec night. Lita changed the subject when she looked over at me and asked why I looked a little green.

“On Thursdays we go to Charlie’s,” I explained.

“Charlie’s the dive bar on seventh?” Ally asked.

“It’s not a dive bar, it’s a cabaret. And it has karaoke on Thursdays. Even Maet sings,” I answered. Her go-to song was Prince’s Raspberry Beret, and she often out-Princed Prince. Ally asked what I sang.

“I don’t,” I replied. I was still keeping a low profile since I was under the drinking age, but that excuse wouldn’t hold water for long; the next week I would turn 21. I would need to come up with a new excuse.

“Rumor has it Lou did dance yesterday though,” Maet said, as she looked at Penn. All eyes turned to Penn. “What’s the verdict?” Maet asked.

“Dorky. But Lovable,” Penn said, patting me on the back.

“That’s what I was shooting for,” I said.

Penn picked up all the empty coffee cups and bussed them over to the bin.

“What?” I asked, as all eyes then turned towards me. “What?” Maet reached over and gently tweaked one of my ears.

* * *

Things were hitting a critical stage at work. While our focus was gradually transitioning to what to do with a deliverable Pandemonium, we were still hitting snags trying to get to that point.

And, while I admit this is petty, I was grateful the problems weren't with my code. They were with Cam's. This led to a worst-case scenario - maximum attention from both Dan and Jonathan. Cam preferred anonymity.

Pandemonium was stagnant. As Dan explained, the last ten percent of any project always slowed to a crawl. Like doing the trim after painting a whole room; no enthusiasm. Unfortunately, software is binary, and until it's something, it's nothing. Believe me, the greatest danger to computer projects isn't lack of money or lack of ideas. It's boredom.

Into the breach came an unexpected hero. Freed from his relentless money raising, Tyr stepped in to complete the project. And for the first time, I got to see him in his preferred medium. I'd be hard-pressed to come up with a specific example, but somehow Tyr carried Pandemonium over the goal line. Sheer willpower. Cam being the most grateful recipient.

Wei-Chang and Penn were also proving themselves invaluable. It wasn't long before they knew Pandemonium better than anyone. Even Jonathan would defer to them on questions of usability, a fact that didn't go unnoticed by Penn. Penn would often call me late at night just to talk. I didn't mind, I could only assume how hard it would be to be the only woman in the Dogface Patch, since Maet was only occasionally there. And, just in general, I didn't mind. Maybe I even looked forward to it.

About this same time Tyr approached me with a peculiar request. He asked me to consider stepping up to be a public face of Pandemonium. He could do a lot of that work, but people tend to dwell on his past when he was involved. Neither Dan nor Jonathan, for obvious reasons, were equipped for this role. Priam would be a natural, but Tyr was reluctant to ask him to spend even more time away from the family. Me, I thought absolutely anyone off the street would be better, but I think Tyr liked the cachet of having an actual developer as a public spokesperson. I told him I'd think about it. Truth was, he caught me at a weak moment; I had other things on my mind.

* * *

The first person I broached my idea with was Cam. During one of our lunches. He was my lodestone for Eeyore-type reactions, and he didn't disappoint. He had a natural affinity for

Penn, especially given their similar relationships with Jonathan, but just pictured the chaos in such a small company should things not work out. He didn't consider what if it did work out.

Roger was a lot more Roger about it. "If you want to go out, ask her out," was his approach. He had firsthand experience and little tolerance with my tendencies to overthink.

Then I turned to my ace in the hole. The one person unequivocally in my corner. Hasu. The next time I ate at Priam's I pulled her over and made my pitch. She was all for it; if she had Penn's number, I think she may have called her and arranged it right then and there. Sharan was equally enthusiastic, although her emphasis was keeping Penn to my right when we sat down, for luck.

I let Monday pass because, well, Monday. Monday night I wrestled with the tactical problems inherent to the Dogface Patch. I knew I'd have to tread very carefully—if this information fell into enemy hands, I'd be teased unmercifully. Another issue was just overall coolness. I didn't have any. But I compensated with preparation. I practiced my lines all night until I had them memorized. Then on Tuesday morning, D-Day, I wrote a couple of little sticky note reminders that I intended to scatter innocently around my cube, just in case. You can't be too prepared for spontaneity.

Tuesday morning started poorly. It was made worse by the sudden disappearance of Ichabod and Winston. It was raining slightly, and I was in a panic that maybe they had decided to skip their morning constitutional. It took me a good twenty minutes of walking up and down the blocks by my house to track them down. And I was all but past them without any acknowledgement when I heard a rheumatic wheeze. Given their ages, it could've come from either of them. But beggars can't be choosers, and I was grateful for small mercies. I reached them just as Winston was finishing his business. And as he scuffed up the grass with his hind legs, I swear that he looked up at me and gave me a wink. The dog had thrown me a bone! I arrived at work invigorated.

Secondly, I had to time things just right or risk wasting my prepared repartee. Thirdly I had to somehow get the rest of the denizens out of the Patch. Wow, weary lies the head that wears the crown!

People filtered in and out of the Patch, but the moment never presented itself. I didn't get much done that Tuesday morning, unless you count fretting.

Finally, at about three o'clock, the skies lifted, and it was only me, Penn, and Cam. I focused my entire mental energy to telepathically force Cam up and out of the room, but no luck. Then Cam got up and headed toward my desk. I scrunched my nose as if concentrating on the world's worst problem. Cam continued past me and out of the room. Thanks Winston!

"Well, Penn, how goes it? Am I to take it that no laps around the building is a good sign?"

"Jonathan who?" She laughed. "No calamities to report. I believe I have moved onto Jonathan's to-be-ignored list, which is okay by me."

Here goes. "I was thinking..." Wait for it—don't let out too much line.

"Huh," she said without looking up. I felt that prickliness on my forehead, the precursor to some heavy sweating.

"We should go out sometime." There it was, right there on the table. Moments passed, then hours, then days. Entire species in Madagascar went extinct.

"I'm definitely up for the Cabaret on Thursday." Okay, that was a miss.

"I was thinking more like Saturday, you and me." When all else fails, smooth talk.

That got her attention. I could tell by the awkward pause. She looked up from her laptop. I got the green-eyed stare. I thought I could hear the wheels churning through her possible answers. Finally, she said "Sure, what the hell."

Yes! The four words every young man yearns to hear. "Sure, what the hell." She explained that Saturday she was going out with her roommates, and she'd love to have me join. I gave her a "Sounds good." You know, cool and sophisticated. On cue, Cam walked back into the Dogface Patch. I got up and made good my escape.

I spent the rest of that day feeling satisfied with myself. Sure, I was my usual nervous, bumbling self, but satisfied.

Late Wednesday Penn came up to my desk. “Change of plans,” she said. “My roommates backed out. So, it’s just you and me.” Woohoo! (I thought that part; I didn’t actually say it).

I had a plan. The Seattle Outdoor Cinema was showing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Any activity that might associate me with Paul Newman and Robert Redford could only be a good thing.

There were some logistical issues as well. I was sure Roger would loan me his car, but since I did all my living on foot, my world was pretty provincial. I knew Penn lived in some far-off northern suburb, Mill Creek, but I had no idea how to get there. So, I downloaded a GPS app.

The other obstacle was Roger’s car itself. It was an old Chevy Impala and worked a lot like everything Roger owned – only occasionally and with great reluctance. He assured me “Betsy” would never let me down.

Just to make sure I didn’t use up all my karma, I avoided Penn for the rest of the week. I even begged off Thursday at the Cabaret, saying Roger needed my help.

Saturday arrived. Armed with my GPS app, I set out on the world’s greatest adventure. As a peace offering, I even gassed up the Impala. I also gave myself plenty of time. For one thing, it was in my nature, and for another, I didn’t mind just finding a local park and killing time. Maybe I’d practice some of my ad libs.

Penn lived with four roommates in a town too far north to even qualify as an outer-ring suburb. They rented a dilapidated old Victorian home, probably impressive back in the day, but time and tide had taken its toll. It kind of had that seedy-with-character look one ordinarily associates with fraternities. I steeled myself and made my way up the shaky wooden stairs. Abandon hope all ye who enter here.

The door opened before I even had the chance to use the big lion-head knocker. I had to peer around the door to see who was letting me in. It was a roommate, small, waifish with very long, very curly hair. Without a sound, she motioned me in and, turned her back, and led me to the kitchen. She gestured for me to sit down at the table and without asking, went to the refrigerator, grabbed a beer, opened it, poured it into a glass, and put it in front of me. Then

she went to the counter, took out a bag of pretzels, opened it, poured some in a bowl, and put the bowl on the kitchen table. She then sat down across from me and smiled like the cat that ate the canary, clearly delighted on how well she had handled the social niceties.

I was sufficiently flummoxed, but dead set against being the first to speak. When I didn't immediately drink the beer, I saw her look downgrade from delighted to discouraged to doleful. Just when the silence was getting suitably awkward, she leaned over to me, and whispered something. What she said is lost forever.

I had no idea what to do with that. I was relieved of providing any response when a second roommate came down the steps, followed by what I assumed was her boyfriend.

"Hi, Lou, I'm Gwen. I see you've already met Sheri." She reached out and shook my hand. I got the distinct feeling I had just met the drill sergeant. She was aerobics instructor fit. Later I would learn she was an amateur bodybuilder. Gwen took one of the pretzels, and Sheri relaxed noticeably. The guy I took to be Gwen's boyfriend walked up and introduced himself. Unfortunately, I did that thing where you concentrate on your name and miss the other person's name altogether. Possibly Carl or Kyle. I was confident this would be the least of my worries that evening.

Gwen proceeded to give me a ten-minute grilling. Like any good lawyer, she didn't ask any questions where she didn't know the answer. And with that, my story was laid bare—college dropout, last job was part time at a coffee shop, lived with a seventy-year-old roommate. It was quite the resume. But then Penn came down the steps, and everything was right with the world again. The magic of a breezy summer dress.

Penn walked into the kitchen and gave me a gentle peck on the cheek. That ended the inquisition. The fourth roommate came down the steps soon after. Her name was Courtney, and she clearly represented the middle—not as intimidating as Gwen or as ethereal as Sheri. Apparently, her significant other was a nurse and was working nights, and that was what nixed the previously planned Saturday. With that the room was adjourned, and we split up into Gwen's and Roger's cars, off to our separate evenings.

Penn must have sensed some of my anxiety. She was always nice, but I could tell she was going out of her way to be even nicer on the ride over. She was curious about the car. The sight of me driving looked strange, like a dog playing poker. I glanced over when she was talking and noticed that she was wearing just the slightest of makeup. That killed me. She never wore makeup at work. That, my friend, was totally for my benefit. It's funny there isn't a word for that, when someone goes out of their way to look nice on your behalf. It's a wonderful thing.

I got a little lost on the way to South Lake Union, Damn GPS apps are better if you kinda already know where to go. We got there, parked, and got our tickets just as the movie started. Penn brought a blanket and we made ourselves comfortable. There's a reason a movie is the universally accepted first date, minimum conversation.

We stopped at Northlake for pizza after the movie. Penn was curious what I thought of her roommates. "A touch of 'one for all and all for one'," I said.

She laughed.

"But that will ease off once I pass the test, right?"

Penn thought awhile. "Probably not, no," she said.

We didn't get back to Mill Creek until well after one. We sat in the car. Penn didn't suggest coming in. "Text me when you get home," she said.

"I'll be fine. It's a straight shot," I replied.

"Just text me." And we that she looked me in the eye. Nothing is quite as addictive as having one hundred percent of someone's attention, even momentarily, especially when it comes with those green eyes. She leaned over and gave me a slow kiss. "Text me." And with that she was out of the car.

I'm home. Safe and sound.

Me too.

Sure, whatever.

In some Arabian countries
we're already married!

Good night Penn

Great. Thanks. I
had fun.

Step at a time
though, okay?

Hell, the fall'll
probably kill ya!

Okay, good night
you.



14. Changes



Penn agreed to a hike on that Tuesday off. Just the two of us. We chose the Crystal Mountain loop at Mount Rainier. And, as we got deeper and deeper into the hike, Penn started to tell me her story.

Tyr and I continued to spend a lot of time on my presentation skills. It was a fine line between picking up worthwhile habits from Tyr and turning into a Tyr impersonator. He emphasized benefits and presenting from the customer’s perspective. All the while, stopping me when I snuck in a blatant Tyr-ism. He had a pretty good handle on how I learned (having, effectively, taught me both chess and programming) so we were making good progress. He was looking a little haggard though. I asked him how he was doing.

“Pretty good. I’m sneaking in some extra hours to keep up with Penn and Wei-Chang. Right now, I’m working on getting Pandemonium installed on my server.”

“I meant your health,” I said. “You know Maet worries.”

“I know, Lou.” He turned away from his computer to face me. “I appreciate you being such a good friend to Maet. I know she does too. I tried retirement, but it didn’t take. Sometimes you just have to do what you were meant to do. Speaking of which, I looked over your code. You did a fine job. I’m proud of you,” he said.

Wow, that meant the world to me. Even if Priam had done quite a bit of the heavy lifting. I asked Tyr a question that had been in the back of my head since I started. “Thanks, Tyr. A question. I’m employee nine but I only count seven in front of me.”

Tyr looked me directly in the eye. “Ah yes, the prodigal son. We did have one employee who drifted away. Despite what Priam says, I’m not always right about people.” He shook his head, as if trying to shake off the lingering regret.

Penn and I were seeing quite a bit of each other by this point. Almost exclusively in groups with her roommates. I had gotten to like Courtney and her boyfriend Brook. Brook was almost non-stop funny; I wondered how Courtney put-up with-it day after day. Sheri was still a mystery to me; I just shook my head yes whenever she said something that I didn’t quite hear. Seemed to be working so far. Gwen was my kryptonite. Not rude to the point of actually being rude but with a perpetual look of disappointment. I asked Kyle about it, and he just gave me a “don’t go there” shrug. More importantly, Penn was still a mystery. Nothing but fun on the group outings and introspective when, as had become our custom, we texted after I got home at night. But I felt like I was in deep, fathoms deep, as she was still treading water at the surface. But I wasn’t quite sure enough of myself to probe deeper – afraid of the answer, I guess.

That next Monday Tyr called a company meeting. He officially declared Pandemonium done! He also gave rest of the week off company wide – no one allowed in the office and he asked that no one log in. He knew we were headed for some high intensity weeks post release and wanted everyone to build up a reservoir beforehand. He also asked all of us to consider a public name for Pandemonium. The “marketing team” had come up with three ideas:

- Incircino, which was, very roughly, Latin for encompass. Encompass would have a great choice, but it was already taken.
- Compendia, “a collection of concise but detailed information about a particular subject” and
- Info Maximus, kind of a play on Circus Maximus.

Finally, he declared cake and champagne available at Charlies. Everyone, absolutely everyone, made their way to Charlies.

I was standing with Alice (who was having way too much fun) and noticed Maet off the side, having way too little fun. So, I excused myself and walked over.

“Is it okay with the marketing team if I sit down?”

“I’m sorry—who may I ask is calling?” Maet said as she swung the barstool next to her in my direction. I sat down.

“Everyone seems pretty stoked, with the possible exception of your dad.” I pointed over to Tyr who was sitting by himself, just taking it all in.

“Dad lives for the journey, not the destination,” Maet said. “And right now, he knows we’ve entered a dangerous time. He says getting smart people together and creating something smart—that’s the easy part. This part we’re embarking on now, this is the make-or-break part. Little things outside of our control can reach up and destroy us.”

“Well, since you put it that way—mark me down as scared shitless. Especially by my assignment—what was your dad thinking?” I asked.

Maet just smiled. “He was thinking you’re ready for it. Besides, he wouldn’t be a mentor if he didn’t push you out of your comfort zone.”

Mentor. Ha! I decided this was a good time to change the subject. “Maet, are you happy? Sometimes it seems you spread happiness but don’t keep any for yourself. Like, where’s your dude?”

She just smiled. “I’m on sabbatical. Actually, Lou, I lived with a guy until just before you started at Heimdall”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Have you heard that Maya Angelou quote ‘when someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time?’” she asked. I shook my head yes. “Well unfortunately, I hadn’t.”

Maet tapped me on the shoulder and gestured towards Penn. “Okay, soldier, on to your primary mission. I’m off to cheer up Dad.” She got up and left. Every light in Charlie’s gently followed her as she made her way to her dad’s table.

I got up and headed towards Penn when I was suddenly waylaid by a short Indian woman who wrapped her arms around me. “Hasu! Does your husband know you frequent bars in the afternoon?”

She just laughed. “Of all the gin joints! Now, quick, tell me before Priam notices me—which one is the reason you no longer come to eat my cooking and play with my child?”

I pointed over to Jonathan. She thought awhile and then just shrugged. “Well, I have to give you credit. Those are most childbearing hips!”

“And what brings you to our little celebration?” I asked.

She spoke in a stage whisper. “Well, speaking of childbearing hips. You are going to be an uncle! Again!”

“Excellent! And may I suggest Lleu as an excellent name? Boy or girl?”

“We will keep that in mind. We have reason to believe it will be another girl.”

“Wow.” I kissed her on the forehead. With that we sat down, and I introduced Hasu to Penn. Soon they were knee deep into conspiracy, ignoring me altogether—other than to occasionally accentuate a point by poking me in the arm. There should be a word for the moment when you find yourself between your two most favorite people in the whole world. I guess right now happy will just have to do. Maybe right there right then—that was my place in the world.

* * *

Penn agreed to a hike on that Tuesday off. Just the two of us. We chose the Crystal Mountain loop at Mount Rainier. And, as we got deeper and deeper into the hike, Penn started to tell me her story.

When she was six years old, she went missing. Not lost in the grocery store missing but missing for a week. Her parents and siblings were frantic, and the entire town turned out to search for her. Eventually, four days later, she was found at a park about five miles from her house. She had no memory of how she got there. There were no signs of abuse or kidnapping, but people were hard pressed to figure out how she would have gotten so far afield by herself.

Things slowly reverted back to normal, as they always do. But Penn was convinced something was lost that week. She was still happy-go-lucky but now with a layer of mistrust. And she admitted that same mistrust seeped into all her relationships, even today. Except for Gwen, who was her best friend both before and after the episode.

I reached for her hand, and we hiked to the gondola side by side the rest of the way.

When we got back to her house, I came clean with my feelings. She wasn't exactly surprised but I had a feeling she was happier when they remained unexpressed; you can't get that toothpaste back into that tube. "We're kind of in uncharted territory," she said.

"Don't worry about me, I'm totally, completely in control," I assured her.

She laughed. "Good, keep it that way." Then she thought awhile. "I think for the time being we should both just sleep on it."

I shrugged. "I can live with that for now."

I started to make my way to the door, but instead she took hold of my hand and led me upstairs to her bedroom.

We didn't leave that room much for the rest of the week. We'd wait until her roommates left for work, go downstairs for breakfast, and maybe go out to get a coffee and then go back to her bedroom. And Tuesday slowly became Friday. When I finally left the house on Friday, I

felt lighter, untethered by the loneliness I had been carrying for years. I felt like I could've floated home. I had Roger's car though, so I decided to drive.

On that next Monday, Tyr and I had one last training for my public speaking. I still felt like I hemmed and hawed too much, but Tyr was happy with where we were at. It was getting close to lunch, so we decided to walk over to Cuppa Joe's and treat ourselves to bakery for lunch. Then an idea came to me. "Spot me black and a knight, and I'll beat you in chess for old times' sake."

Tyr smiled, reached back, and shut down his computer. "Make that white and two pawns."

15. Maukston



After the first wave of the tchotchke obsessed, the whole objective of conventioners is to avoid eye contact with the people manning the booths.

On my walk home I stopped at the grocery store. I had taken to cooking Lydia and Roger dinner on Mondays. It was my nutritional responsibility: Roger didn't count anything as a meal unless it involved bacon, and Lydia was just as likely to miss a meal as she was to eat one. Besides, it was fun to cook for people.

They were an appreciative audience. The process of producing a meal amazed them both. That day I picked up couple of trout, some asparagus, and apples. I liked to bake the trout and the apples together - two tastes complemented each other. I'd boil up some rice and then toss in some pine nuts at the last moment, using the same reasoning. The coup de grâce was

Take Two

when I deboned the trout. Something Mom had taught me. Just slightly separate the trout at the backbone with a sharp knife as the fish was cooling. Then, starting from the tail, grab the backbone and slowly lift it off with a pair of tongs. No matter how slowly you do it, even slower would have been better. And, assuming the trout was cooked to completion and the step was done slowly enough, you would be treated to an entire skeleton on the tongs with two beautiful fillets left on the cutting board. And appreciative oohs and aahs at the dinner table.

Turned out that would be my last meal at home for a while. Heimdall Research hit the ground running: Tyr was off to visit the top twenty or so likely collaboration companies - other software companies that could incorporate Compendia (as Pandemonium was now called) into their software as a value add. I would start in on trade shows and larger companies that were potentially a direct sell. We also decided that, until I got my pins under me, Priam would accompany me. That left the rest of the team to work on release 2, basically the features that fell off the Release One wagon due to time.

Priam and I headed to San Francisco, first to meet some companies and then attend the QCon trade show at the Moscone.

Our success was modest, so much so I wondered if spinning a placard on a busy street might be a better strategy. Tyr's reputation could get us in the door (and lead to the inevitable first question "What is Tyr Heimdall like?"). Nine out of ten then either didn't understand Compendia or couldn't see how it would help them. The "flat no's". One out of ten, the "maybes", often didn't have the money in the budget or a spot in their current project plan. Occasionally, a company might still filter through to "the possibles", and for them we'd schedule a second meeting. What we needed desperately was referrals, a third party to vouch for Compendia.

Penn was helping with her cousin's wedding, so I'd send rambling texts and, after a long delay, get emojis or a terse text back. Luckily, Priam could not have been a more pleasant travel companion. If I brought the youthful enthusiasm, he provided the gravitas. Plus, he certainly had the persistence of Ganesh—I couldn't believe how he could take all this rejection and still remain upbeat. But he was having a rough go of it as well. Not only did he miss Hasu and

Sharan terribly, but Hasu was having a difficult pregnancy. She was just too tiny. Sometimes we'd be in a meeting, and I'd see Priam get that faraway look in his eyes, and I'd know he was worrying about Hasu. It was at the QCon trade show in San Francisco when Priam came down to our booth looking pale (well, relatively pale). "Lou, Hasu is most miserable. I think I need to be home now. Can I take my leave and let you do this show solo?" he asked.

I was fairly confident I could maintain our abysmal success rate without Priam's help. He looked visibly relieved as he went back to his room to pack and check out.

Trade shows are peculiar animals. The first day the attendees are on a mission to grab the tchotchkes, the little freebies each booth gives out to attract traffic. After the first wave of the tchotchke obsessed, the whole objective of conventioners is to avoid eye contact with the people manning the booths.

So it surprised me when he looked me in the eye as he confidently strode to our booth. I recognized him from one of the other booths, so his arrival wasn't a complete anomaly—there is a certain misery-loves-company camaraderie at these shows. Even given that he was decidedly out of place. For one thing, he was impeccably dressed in a blue suit with a dark-blue shirt and a power-red tie. Way beyond the de rigueur khakis and polo shirt. And his hair was groomed to perfection. Frankly, he was beautiful.

He gestured at the company logo behind me. "I assume this is a Tyr Heimdall production?" He held out his hand. "Maukston. Rues."

Whether that was Mr. Maukston, or Mr. Rues I couldn't tell you. "It certainly is. Are you familiar with his work?"

"Fairly familiar. Give him my regards." He picked up one of our brochures. "Tell me about Compendia."

I gave him the abridged explanation of Compendia. It turned out he was the CEO of a network performance company. From my biased point of view, this felt like a good match. My spine tingled as it did whenever we didn't pass directly to no.

He gave me the lowdown on his company. It was called NetLocii and specialized in an algorithmic approach to improving network performance. He apparently thought we weren't entirely mismatched either. "Well, that is intriguing. Lou, isn't it?" he said, glancing over at my "Hello, my name is" tag. "How about dinner tonight? We'll talk it over."

Ordinarily on these road trips, I cherished my alone time. But since my dinner companion had just left me for his pregnant wife and my girlfriend was ignoring me, I told Maukston (first name; I checked his name tag as well) that it sounded like a plan.

At dinner Maukston was curious about my background. "You look awfully young for this much responsibility."

Not that I thought holding up the booth at a trade show constituted much in the way of responsibility, but my age was a discussion I avoided if possible. It was noticeable that I was five or so years younger than the average person at the conference. But I always thought it was to my advantage if people assumed I had accelerated my way through school. That story certainly had more sizzle than the truth. But this was the first time I had ever been asked directly, and it hardly seemed something to lie about. I explained my roundabout path to Tyr and Heimdall.

"Fascinating," Maukston said as he worked his way through his escargot appetizer. "Classic Tyr. And if I might...enjoy the moment...in a blink of an eye, you'll be the same age as everyone else, and in the next blink, you'll be older. And of the three, where you are now is the place to be. Besides, it speaks well of your self-confidence. Am I correct in assuming you're an only child?"

"Uh, no. I have a brother." What a peculiar question to start a conversation.

"And what does he do?"

Geez, this guy was slowly peeling my onion. "He passed away when we were in high school."

He put down his fork. "Lou, I'm sorry. How did it happen?"

I was starting to get that squirmy feeling again, my old premonition indicator but I couldn't put my finger on what it was regarding. "He found out he had a heart condition when we were in high school. Soon after that he contracted a flu and couldn't fight it off." Wow, if ever there was a paragraph that didn't do a story justice, it was that one.

I wasn't convinced Maukston was listening anyway. He gestured to the waiter. "This wine isn't right. Are you sure it's the 1998 burgundy? Bring another glass and the bottle, please." Having dismissed the wine steward, he once again gave me his undivided attention. "It's probably just that the tannins are still closed up, but it never hurts to complain." He paused as if to restart the conversation. "Fascinating. I've always been intrigued about how viruses always seem to somehow find the weakest."

I just sat there.

I think he finally realized how that must have come across. "Ooh, that was a touch clinical. It's just that I studied it in college. I've always been fascinated by viruses—after a while you start to wonder whether maybe we don't exist solely for their benefit; they're the ultimate insiders. But to lose someone in your family at such an early age to such a disease, it must have been very hard."

After that it turned into an enjoyable evening. When programmers get together, particularly when alcohol is involved, the stories that emerge aren't of successes; instead, it's the dumb mistakes, the unintended consequences, the what-was-I-thinking stories that predominate. Of these I had plenty, but I was pleasantly surprised to hear Maukston had his share as well. By the time we were through with the foie gras, we had bonded. We were kindred spirits. The second bottle of wine didn't hurt either.

It wasn't until the *crème brûlée* that he even brought up the reason for dinner. "Lou, my company's flagship product is not only designed to measure network performance but also to take steps to improve it. It serves as a type of automatic self-healing mechanism that steps in whenever a company is experiencing poor response time. Our developers spend an inordinate amount of time just keeping up with technology. We tend to give the performance-enhancing portion of our software short shrift in deference to the performance-measuring portion. We're always on the lookout for approaches that will allow us to boost performance with a minimum

of coding effort on our part. I see Pandemonium as packing the ideal punch in combination with our product.” With that, he laid out a surprisingly comprehensive ad-hoc strategy for integrating the two products. We parted ways, and he promised to call me later that next week.

It was one in the morning when I finally got back to my hotel room. I sent one terse text to Priam before calling it an evening. “Fish on the line; details to follow.” After all those meetings of pure frustration and disappointment, we finally had a promising opportunity. I sent Penn a text too and got one right back. There was some drama with her cousin, and she asked if I could drive up to Blaine myself on Saturday. It wasn’t until I had almost drifted to sleep that it occurred to me that Maukston had referred to our product by its internal name, Pandemonium, rather than its external name, Compendia.

My triumphant return home on Friday arrived remarkably triumph free. Priam was still at home with Hasu; Tyr was off on another one of his funding expeditions. Penn was already in Blaine. I called it a day early and grabbed some extra sleep. On Saturday I again borrowed Roger’s car and drove up to Blaine for the wedding.

I like weddings. It’s a room packed with emotion and a near-universal feeling of good will. This wedding went off smoothly. It wasn’t hard putting Penn’s family tree together. The bride’s side was a sea of slight variations on the same theme—green eyes, reddish hair, and freckles. I sat on the groom’s side—it looked as if he needed the support. The Catholics had apparently fiddled with the service since my altar boy days, but I did everything a step slow, and it all seemed to work out. It was warm enough in the church that I thought we might lose an usher or bridesmaid or two, but they all toughed it out. The early afternoon light through the stained-glass windows provided a nice touch.

Penn and the gang went off for wedding pictures, so I took a drive around town. Blaine looked pretty sleepy, and I couldn’t find a park to kill time, so I ended up at the town’s cemetery. I looked up Penn’s dad’s grave. But if he had anything to share, he didn’t share it with me.

I know it sounds a little Edgar Allan Poe to spend time at a cemetery, but they get kind of a bad rap. They're almost always tree lined, well-manicured, and idyllic. This one was no exception—there was a little river meandering on the outskirts of the plots. I lay down next to a tree and snuck in a little nap in the company of two loitering wood ducks and three turtles sunning themselves on a log. I guess they had places to go because when I woke up, I was alone. And just in time to make it over to the reception.

After the dinner while the band played, I slowly drifted to the last bastion of the stranger at a wedding—the bar. From there I could see Penn laughing and dancing with her high school friends. Gwen was in the mix as well. I figured I could go over there, but, boy, that felt like an awful lot of socializing. I knew from experience they were reliving anecdotes from the past. Those stories are meant to be retold over and over by the people involved but hold absolutely no interest for people who weren't there. Something gets lost in the translation. Besides I was happy overseeing the festivities at my perch, out of harm's way.

“That’s my sister you’re staring at.”

I turned to look at the guy sitting at the end of the bar. In his mid-thirties, he had that slightly swollen look of someone who knew his way around a drink—210 pounds squished into a 180-pound body. The fun of drinking had left town, but the drinking remained. “Actually, that’s my date I’m staring at.”

He didn’t look up. “I just assumed she brought Will.” He pointed at the guy Penn was currently dancing with.

“Seems like a nice enough fella,” I said.

“They dated all through high school.”

“Little too sure of himself though,” I added.

“Dated in college too.”

“Maybe even a little too cocky,” I concluded.

“Spot me a drink,” he said.

“You’re Justin, aren’t you?” I asked. Penn had given me strict instructions not to buy any drinks for her older brother.

“Think of me as the font of information,” he said.

I chewed on that for a while. “Whaddya drinking?” I asked.

Penn had ridden up with Gwen, but on Sunday she rode back with me. Penn recapped the wedding. Everyone was mortified at how drunk Justin had gotten. Heck, I just figured every wedding had one, and at this wedding, it was Justin.

Just before she dozed off, she remembered. “And were you the one plying Justin all evening?”

“No. We took turns paying for drinks.”

“Justin bought a round?” she asked.

“Well, no. It was all my money. We just took turns spending it.”

She tweaked my ear. “Doofus.” And as we may our way slowly back into town, Penn fell asleep with her left hand draped at the nape of my neck. Not that I noticed.

That Monday I was eager to share my NetLocii lead but neither Priam nor Tyr were at work. I spent the morning filling out my expenses and googling NetLocii to acquire as much background as I could find.

Toward the end of the day, Jonathan stepped out to go kick some dogs or whatever, and I was in the Patch alone with Dan. Maukston calling Compendia by its project code name was still eating at me. “Dan, the Heimdall employee who left?”

“Mmm, mmm,” he said. He was busy meditating on some work (doing work this late in the afternoon was not a likely Dan scenario).

“Was his name Maukston Rues?”

That caught his attention. Dan put down the manual he had been paging through. “Indeed, it was. Why do you ask?”

I explained to Dan how we had crossed paths and that he had expressed some interest in Compendia.

“Ooh rah.” Dan laughed. “Oh, to be a fly on the wall when you tell Tyr.”

“Why? What happened?” I asked.

“That, mi amigo, calls for a meeting in Conference Room C.”

Ten minutes later I was drinking beer and shooting pool in the early afternoon with Dan at Charlie’s Cabaret. We were several beers into our second game, and Dan had yet to bring up the subject at hand. But when he accidentally sank the eight ball, came back to the table, and filled both glasses, I knew I was about to hear the story of Maukston Rues.

“Maukston likes to tell that he was named for a Chechen uncle who was later executed by the KGB. Other times he’s a direct descendant from Genghis Khan.”

“And which was it?” I asked.

“I have no idea; probably neither. If I remember, he had some expat British background, but it’s all pretty fuzzy to me these days. But that’s why we hit it off almost immediately—can’t bullshit a bullshitter!”

“You were friends?” I asked.

“Friends? Heck, we were college roommates. Are you going to let me tell the story or not? The guy’s brilliant but mighty damn quirky. Take his degrees: he was summa cum laude in a dual major—math and immunology. Or the fact that in college on a dare, he once got an A in linear algebra without ever showing up for a class or opening the book—just by sitting in for the exams.”

Having never made it to linear algebra, I was suitably impressed. “And did you get him the job at Trident Software?” Trident was Tyr’s first company.

“Funny story that. He got the job without even realizing it was the same company where I worked. And man, Maukston was one prolific programmer. I would say he even outworked

Jonathan. High quality work, critical to Trident's success. And he really hit it off with Tyr—they are the two most driven-to-succeed people I have ever met.

But then Tyr got sick and took the company public and sold off his shares. Me, I'll be eternally grateful since the money I made with that offering is why I'm living in a nice house today. But Maukston felt betrayed. Felt Tyr had left money on the table and that he should have offered the company to the employees before going public. And just as everyone was starting to move to greener pastures, Maukston patented some of the code. Without informing Tyr. Well, as you might expect, Tyr fumed. Achievement is high on Tyr's list; credit is way, way down. But Maukston spun the story on the application so it read like all his idea and got two patents. That, along with some mitigating factors, ended their friendship."

Dan gave me a look. "What did you think of Maukston?"

"Seems like a nice enough fella," I said.

"He lied on the patent applications. Made up a design that never existed."

"Little too sure of himself though," I added.

"Dated Maet for a couple of years too."

"Maybe even a little too cocky," I concluded.

Suddenly my triumphant news fell a little less triumphant. "What should I do?" I asked Dan.

"Fortify, son, fortify," Dan said, slapping me on the back. "And to help, order us up another round. I'm going to step outside and medicate. You hold the fort."

I had one more beer with Dan and then hit the road for home. It was my night for dinner with Roger and Lydia. I stopped at the store and picked up some pork chops, green peppers, spring onions, and chicken broth.

This was one of my quick meals, but those afternoon beers had drained me of any motivation. First, I seared the pork chops and then browned some rice and the vegetables. Then I poured the broth on the whole bit and baked it for about forty minutes. Delicious. Almost where you

could ditch the pork chops and just eat the rice. But today I had other things on my mind besides feeding the masses. I was anxious to get Roger's take on this matter.

After dinner I gave Roger the lowdown. He was doing the dishes, but as usual, he went straight to the heart of the matter. "Lou, there's a special word for someone who lies on a patent application" he said, looking over his shoulder to me sitting at the kitchen table.

"What's that, Roger?"

"Liar."

16. Changes



It had the feel of a championship chess match. They sat across from each other and started with a handshake that seemed cordial but with an undeniable tinge of tension in the air.

I got to work at the usual time and, for some reason, Jonathan—the same Jonathan that never came in before ten—was hunched over his PC. Ordinarily I’d pass on spending time with Jonathan, but I took a deep breath and decided to ask him about Maukston.

“Oh, he’s on my list,” Jonathan said without looking up. This wasn’t completely unexpected; I was pretty sure everyone was on Jonathan’s list. I suspected I was on his list, for example.

“What’s your opinion of him?” I asked.

“Goofy. You know the whole time he worked at Trident he lived out of hotels?”

“Huh”

“Dan always thought he was just being anonymous and untraceable. Maukston was sure he had found a better way. Me, I just thought he was fucking goofy.”

“And where did you sit on the patent controversy?”

“The rooster taking credit for the dawn. That technology was as much me as Maukston. And more Tyr than either of us.”

Now that was quite an admission coming from Jonathan. He had given Tyr more credit than himself! “So, you weren’t sorry to see him go?” I asked.

“Of course, I was. Talent is hard to come by. Just look at what we’ve had to make do with since he left.” He gave me a classic Jonathan glare. I searched for a whiff of irony, but there wasn’t a trace to be found.

I knew that was the end of anything worthwhile coming from Jonathan. While I waited for Tyr to show up, I reviewed what I knew about Maukston. His LinkedIn page listed him as CTO for Trident, certainly a notch above both Dan and Jonathan. The NetLocii about page had him as co-CEO with the three original founders. It seemed peculiar to me, but I knew that titles were very important to some people.

I walked over to Maet and gave her my Maukston saga. I opted not to mention that I was aware of her involvement. Then I asked her how she thought her dad would react.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Lou” she replied. “My dad is incapable of holding a grudge.” She pointed at his office, now with the light on. “I guess you can go in and ask him yourself!”

“And what about the daughter?” I asked.

Maet laughed. “Oh, she most definitely holds a grudge.” We fist bumped as I made my way to Tyr’s office.

Tyr was just settling in as I walked into his office. “Hi, Lou. What can I do for you?” I proceeded to tell him about my interaction with Maukston, and how he was working at a

network performance company, and how he was intrigued by our product, and that it looked like a pretty good fit, and it was really our first nibble, and it would be a shame to let it slide, and that it all seemed pretty promising, and finally, I took a breath. Tyr responded with one arched eyebrow.

He hung up his coat, sat down, and smiled. “Wow, Lou! Great news!” He stopped and mulled it over. “You may have put more thought into it than you needed to.”

Amen to that, brother. I thought.

“I assume you’re aware of Maukston’s history with Trident?” Tyr asked.

“Well, I understand he might have burned some bridges.”

Tyr thought awhile. “Mistakes were made. He was young and impetuous, but I would have been better served to remove my rose-colored glasses. It was my biggest failure.”

I waited, thinking Tyr might elaborate. Instead, he seemed to be looking past me. When he refocused, he seemed surprised that I was still there. “There was one thing I never did with Maukston. Now maybe you’ve given us a second chance.”

I waited to see whether he was going to tell me what that was. He didn’t. Instead, he added “Good work, Lou—and let’s see where it all leads.”

And with that, I left Tyr’s office. That had gone better than I ever could have hoped, but my years of childhood spats with Dylan nagged at me. Forgive and forget seems a noble premise, but things are rarely forgiven or forgotten.

* * *

I spent the rest of that day waiting for Maukston to call me back. He finally did at about four in the afternoon. “Lou, I congratulate you on not being at work on Friday. A good psychological ploy: it showed me that I wasn’t in complete control.”

I explained that I had been sick.

“Don’t ever relinquish an advantage. And what was the verdict at Heimdall Research?”

“Your money’s good here.” I said.

“Excellent,” he said. I got the feeling that he was expecting, maybe even relishing, more of a fight. I detected a touch of disappointment. “I’m back in Seattle next Friday. Let’s schedule a meeting with you, me, and Tyr. And send me a link to get the manuals.”

I explained that we could just as easily send a trial link, including the product. He said the manuals would be sufficient.

As I sat down and logged in, I came to the conclusion there is no such creature as an anticipated crisis. Once anticipated, it dries up and blows away like leaves on a late-fall day. I hadn’t yet formed an opinion on unanticipated crises.

And I wouldn’t say I was feeling smug, but I felt it was mighty lucky that Jesus himself hadn’t come in and applied for work that day. The savior position was filled!

Walking home that night, I heard a familiar rheumy cough. Usually, I spotted them in the morning; this was late for their afternoon walk. When I turned the corner I was taken by surprise, it was just the old man out walking alone. We made eye contact as we crossed paths and, with red rimmed eyes, he just gave me a head shake.

I borrowed Roger’s car and made my way to Penn’s house. I wanted to share the big news. She was pretty excited too – it’d be hard not to be as this was a great chance for Compendia to hit it big. We were still buzzing about it as we laid down for the night, until Penn changed the subject unexpectedly.

“Lou, did you meet Will at the wedding?”

“No, but your brother pointed him out,” I said.

“We dated in high school and then lived together throughout college.” Penn said. I didn’t remember asking. “We both had offers from IBM and our future was laid out in front of us.

But he came home one night and told me that he didn't love me anymore. That next week my dad died. Will went on to IBM and I stayed home."

"You know I love you Penn, right?" I asked.

"Mm hmm."

"I love you Penn" I repeated.

"I know," she said.

And with that she drifted off to sleep with her head on my shoulder. I could feel her tears as they slid down my chest.

We held the meetings with Maukston off-site. Tyr also insisted I attend, although I would've rather have been absolutely anywhere else. I went in bound and determined to be seen but not heard.

It had the feel of a championship chess match. They sat across from each other and started with a handshake that seemed cordial but with an undeniable tinge of tension in the air.

Maukston started on the offensive. Certain Tyr thought the discussion would be on leasing Compendia and integrating it into NetLocii; instead Maukston wanted to buy Compendia outright. His argument seemed valid to me—NetLocii was a service company (in their case performance as a service) and, as such, they needed hooks to justify charging on a timed basis rather than one fixed sum. He wanted to own Compendia so they could hook it in with their service approach.

I knew this was exactly opposite Tyr's view of Compendia. He viewed it as self-healing software, continuously improving its algorithms without any necessary human interaction. Still, I could tell Tyr was intrigued by Maukston's proposal. His counter proposal was similarly aggressive: he proposed selling the Compendia software to NetLocii and then having dual ownership moving forward. NetLocii could take their version where they desired and Heimdall Research could take our version where we desired, knowing full well at some point they may very well end up competing with each other.

Maukston blinked but quickly recovered. He was amenable to the idea. Tyr floated a price. A big number. Probably three times what I would have suggested, had I been in that position. Certainly big enough to ensure Heimdall Research would be profitable well into the near future. Maukston countered with another addition — he wanted special consideration to allow NetLocii to quickly integrate Compendia. That's where things got prickly.

“I'm suggesting we take one of your employees on a temporary basis to assist with the installation and integration,” Maukston said.

Tyr asked “Who?” I'm sure he was expecting to have to sacrifice Jonathan to the cause.

Maukston just pointed at me with his thumb. I didn't say a word, but I suspect the ends of my ears were on fire. Tyr thought a while and then suggested another meeting the next day.

Tyr and I walked back to the office. I was simultaneously flattered and convinced I was the wrong person. Tyr suggested that gamesmanship was in play but that he also was confident I could complete Maukston's assignment. He left it entirely up to me to decide the next step.

Things were moving fast. Ordinarily that night I would have talked it over with Penn. But we had left things in an awkward state. Roger was over at Lydia's so I couldn't bounce it off him either.

NetLocii was San Francisco based so it would mean quite a bit of time away from home. I knew my biggest concern was imposter syndrome, getting exposed as a complete fraud. I couldn't come up with a convincing “no” argument so the next morning at breakfast I told Tyr I was willing, and my major concern was time away from Seattle.

The meeting with Maukston was brief. He accepted the terms, conceded to 50% remote work, and agreed to the dollar amount. Tyr and Maukston shook hands. It was done.

I had nowhere to go so I made my way back to Heimdall. I bumped into Priam as I turned the corner, he seemed to be waiting for Tyr. “How did it go?” he asked.

“Well, I'm not sure who won, but I'm pretty sure who lost. And no, I'm thinking it's nowhere near over.”

I was about to drop my bombshell when Priam started walking away. “I was hoping to speak with Tyr, but it seems he might not be returning.” He was about to close the door in his office when something seemed to occur to him. “How about dinner on Sunday? Bring Penn.”

“Sounds good.” I could tell him then. Besides, I wasn’t quite done processing the last 48 hours anyway.

It starts with a subtle glitch in one of the seams. You pick at it, sometimes on purpose, sometimes unconsciously. Then, slowly, the entire sweater starts to unravel. So slowly you don’t realize until it’s too late.

17. Decisions



I guess it was inevitable that something that started with “Sure, what the hell,” was likely to end with “It’s not you, it’s me.”

Penn loves bad movies. If she’s going to waste her time, she wants it to be a complete waste of time. She wants no part of any movie that contains any redeeming qualities whatsoever. Luckily, that still leaves her with a lot of choices.

We were just having a beer after finishing a Thai meal after yet another bad movie when she took to reflecting about the Maukston sale. “Tyr took me totally by surprise. I know I don’t know him as well as you do, but. It just reminds me that things never stay the same. They either progress or regress,” she said.

I just shrugged.

Penn was off and running. “Sometimes I feel so rootless.” She played with her empty beer glass. “You know when I was with Will, the path seemed so clear. I knew who I was and where I was going. Now it all seems so cloudy.”

I still wasn't following. "I think I'm happier now than I have any right to be."

"I love you, Lou, but it's just not that simple. If anything, you add an extra burden. For you, it's all so straightforward. For me, I'm not sure I can give you what you deserve."

That's when it hit me. Right upside the head. "Did we just break up?" At that moment, I virtually stood up and walked around behind my chair. I was simultaneously sitting there as a participant and standing there as an observer. It was senior year in high school all over. I had to ask again. "Did you just dump me?"

Penn just reached out and held my hand. "What do you propose we should do about this?" I asked. But Penn was silent, she had already done what she proposed to do about this.

I guess it was inevitable that something that started with "Sure, what the hell," was likely to end with "It's not you, it's me."

From behind my chair the observer looked around the restaurant. No one noticed the wind change; no one heard the last click as the roller coaster reached its apex; no one felt the plunge. Just me.

We paid the bill and walked out of the restaurant; Penn hooked her arm around mine. Can't say I noticed though; I was still walking a few steps behind myself, watching. I think all three of us were still processing what had just happened.

When I got home I called and cancelled Sunday dinner with Priam. I wasn't ready to face Hasu with my failures.

At this point, reader, some valuable life lessons. First, there is no amount of feeling bad that can't be made worse by going home and drinking what's left of a bottle of Baileys Irish Crème. Second, although crying in the women's bathroom at work is accepted, maybe even somewhat expected, crying in a stall of the men's bathroom will immediately clear the room. Every time.

And so went my downward spiral. I wish I could offer some explanation that would somehow defend my behavior. But I can't. All I can say is one moment I felt I had all the answers, and then a moment later I didn't have a clue. The funny thing is at both points I had the same number of answers. Regardless, I was suddenly living my life against a strong head wind.

Everything happened in slow motion. It was all I could do to keep my head up. Every decision left me winded, too weary to act. And I wasn't sleeping well—I couldn't bring myself to sleep in my bed and had taken to sleeping on the floor in my sleeping bag.

For a few days no one even noticed. Everyone else was caught up in the euphoria of the NetLocii deal— at this point only Tyr and I knew it involved loaning me out. Dan and Jonathan were knee deep in trying to extract the performance improvements promised for release two. Even I had nothing but time on my hands—the deal with NetLocii was consuming all our corporate energy, and there was a respite to my travels. And with practice, I got good at feeling bad. Moping, sullen silence, hours spent kicking myself. Bathing irregularly, shaving less, wearing the same clothes for days at a crack, breaking out the Morrissey playlist.

Feeling sorry for yourself is peculiar. Like any hobby, it can take up as much or as little of your time as you want. It's always there waiting for you; let your guard down, leave the door open a crack, and it's back. And if you're not careful, if you're not diligent, feeling bad becomes the best part of the day. It's more than a little intoxicating and more than a little addictive. And it's always the easiest solution.

By early the next week the entire Dogface Patch knew. And that's when my troubles began. Maet was first, I assume Penn told her. Maet was constricted because she was good friends with both of us. Eventually, though, she couldn't fight her nature and gave me a steady dose of big brown cow eyes. Sympathy is water on a gas fire. It just spreads the grief around.

The boys in the pen handled it the way they handled most social situations. With silence. Awkward silence that would follow me into the room and then leave with me as well. Truthfully, I was grateful.

Only Roger threw me any lifeline. He provided some empathy—he and Lydia were currently on the outs. Plus, the man had complete loyalty to me. Even to the point of remembering Penn with warts and all—warts that weren't there a mere week ago.

But the worst part was not more than twenty feet away from my cube. Penn continued to be nice to me; she's a nice person. What killed me was the undercurrent of relief. She was

relieved. I could see relief in her face. And when I looked, her eyes were still that agate green. But the flames were gone. Maybe I had only imagined them anyway.

I must've been plenty pathetic. At some point, sulking stops being a mood and starts being a way of life. Late one evening Maet plopped down at my cube. We were the only two left at work.

“Lou, can we talk?” she asked, but it didn't look like no was one of the possible answers. “I know what you're going through, but you need to snap out of it.”

Maet could be an irresistible force, but she had yet to meet the unmovable object. “I think you're mistaken. Besides, you don't know what I'm going through.”

She just looked at me again. “You might be surprised, Lou. Everyone has felt heartache. Just remember, we are all here for you. Here for Penn and here for you. That's how it works.” She must've been good and agitated—she immediately got up and walked away.

This was one situation where I knew I was right. Even a broken heart is right twice a day.

Eventually I had to quit wallowing. Heartache is a powerful emotion, but it can't stand up to the inexorable drip, drip, drip of pure boredom. At some point you just get sick of the stink. Instead, I came up with a solution. When I walked into Tyr's office and told him my strategy, he counseled against it. Of course, he was oblivious to any of the current office intrigue, so I had to backfill all the details.

He was still resolute. “Lou, my experience is that it's altogether too easy to let unhappiness in one part of your life bleed over into decisions about other aspects. In my case, these have almost always become decisions I later came to regret. This decision is totally yours to make. I just hope you're not making a mountain of a decision to address a molehill of a problem.” And with that, he got me to agree to take Friday and Monday off to think it over. I told him I'd let him know by Tuesday at the latest.

On Sunday I went over to Priam's for dinner. My knock on the door was met by a beautiful three-year-old resplendent in a deep-golden *shalwar kameez*, the combination tunic and pajama bottoms that fit tightly around the ankles. When I asked who this vision in gold was,

Sharan just giggled and took my hand. She led me to the living room and then ran toward her father. Priam caught her and sat her down on his lap. “Where’s Penn?” he asked.

“She had to beg off. Said she had some work and that if she could do it on Sunday, it would make her whole week go better.” Lies sure roll easily off the tongue.

He let his daughter down to the ground and gave her a tap toward the kitchen. “You could learn a lot from that girl.”

I followed them into the kitchen to greet Hasu. There are no two ways around it—a five-foot woman eight-months pregnant is as wide as she is tall. But Hasu carried it well. I told her she was looking healthy as I peered over to check what was for dinner.

“Ha! Healthy! Most sagacious, Lou. Tonight—*murg sagwala* with *aloo naan*. I’m afraid my stomach can’t take anything too tasty these days. And my energy was not sufficient for more than one entrée. I am disappointed Penn couldn’t make it.” This last part may have been a bit perfunctory; I wasn’t exactly sure that Penn and Hasu particularly hit it off. I suspected it was more of a situation of them liking the same people rather than liking each other.

It turned out Priam had stayed late at work on Friday to talk with Tyr. And in the process Priam had been let in on the money details of the negotiations. It sounded like Tyr had gotten the best of the deal. He was able to negotiate both a flat purchase rate of \$500,000 and a kicker of \$15,000 for every customer with 20 percent maintenance fee. Maukston had let on that NetLocii felt their top one thousand customers would be willing to pay for a premium version of their product that included Compendia. I did some quick math in my head. Even allowing for some rounding errors, it sounded like \$15 million. Suddenly struggling Heimdall Research wasn’t quite as struggling as we had been two days ago!

They had also settled the code ownership in a conventional way. We would put the code in escrow and sign it off to NetLocii in case Heimdall should either go under or fail to meet any of the provisions of the contract. Tyr agreed to provide one more yearly enhancement release with the understanding NetLocii would merge the code. From then on Compendia and NetLocii would go their separate ways. Hearing this, I could only assume Dan and Jonathan

had made some significant progress on the design for the enhancement release. For our sake, I hoped so.

I asked Priam whether Tyr had told him about me being included in the deal. Priam said Tyr had dismissed that as a typical Maukstonian maneuver—an outlandish point that he could then concede when the moment was appropriate to acquire some other negotiation point.

Hasu's simple meal of lamb in spinach sauce was delicious. I couldn't help but notice that, once again, Priam seemed distracted. But this time it couldn't be related to the NetLocii deal. I just assumed he would tell me why when he was ready.

As we sipped tea after dinner, Priam must have decided that the time was right. "Lou, you know how rough this pregnancy has been on Hasu and myself. I had a long discussion with Tyr, and we both agreed that it's just not appropriate for me to be traveling so much at this point. Actually, I felt so guilty that I wasn't putting the required effort into work lately. I also told Tyr that Corsse Bank has made me another offer. One that would not require any travel."

I raised an eyebrow and waited patiently for the other shoe to drop.

"After some consultation, Tyr and I reached what I believe to be the best solution. On Friday, with Tyr's blessing, I resigned from Heimdall and accepted a position as the vice president in charge of network performance at Corsse Bank. It is a nine-to-five job with no travel."

My mind raced. "Wow" was all I could think of to say. When I recovered some equilibrium, I gave him and Hasu hugs. "This sounds like a wonderful opportunity. You're perfect for network performance! But what will we do without you? What will I do without you?"

"I keep forgetting that you are new to the industry. You watch, Lou; the first week, you will be missing me, but the second week, you will be blaming me for everything that goes wrong. By the third week, no one will be remembering my name! And as for you, the time is right."

"Not likely. It just seems as if you've done all the heavy lifting, and just as we're reaping the rewards, you're leaving," I said.

"Maybe the success was in the creation, not the realization. Don't worry, Lou; I can still enjoy it. And Hasu and I will be so much happier with the working arrangements at the bank."

I realized then that I was being selfish. “Of course, this is great news for you. But first we’ll have to plan a big blowout. When is your last day?”

“I’m afraid it was last Friday. Corse has regularly scheduled new employee training sessions, and one starts this Monday.”

My mind raced. “Wow” was all I could think of to say.

When I got home, I talked it over with Roger. This decision was partially his too—I didn’t want to leave him in the lurch. “Funny you should bring this up right now, Lou. Lydia and I just this afternoon decided to give it a go,” Roger said.

“You dog. I thought you two were on the outs?”

He blushed. “I guess that was the storm before the calm. What can I say? Women find me irresistible!”

“And when were you planning on telling me?”

“Well, I was all for just changing the locks on the doors. But Lydia had me convinced to bring it up once you had finally come to your senses. Which, by the way, you show no sign of yet.”

“I know, Roger, I know.” I had to admit that he was right. “Even I’m not particularly enchanted with me these days. Turning the corner is a tricky endeavor when you’re falling. But maybe it’s not up to me. Maybe I just have to wait until these feelings dry up and evaporate. Or maybe I need to take a drastic step to speed up the process.”

Roger sat down on the couch alongside me. “You know, Lou, I’m in your corner and always will be. And having been down that road myself once or twice, I certainly agree that life is too short to feel too bad for too long. But no matter how you resolve this one, there will come a time when you eventually just have to.”

“Have to what?” I asked.

“Pick your fights. And let the other stuff slide.”

Well, I hated it when Roger was right. And he was, more often than not. That Sunday night as I laid myself down in the sleeping bag on the floor of my room (I still couldn't bring myself to sleep in the bed), I had a lot to think about.

I woke before the alarm rang on Monday morning. It wasn't hard since I wasn't sure I ever actually fell asleep. I called on my cell phone on the way to work.

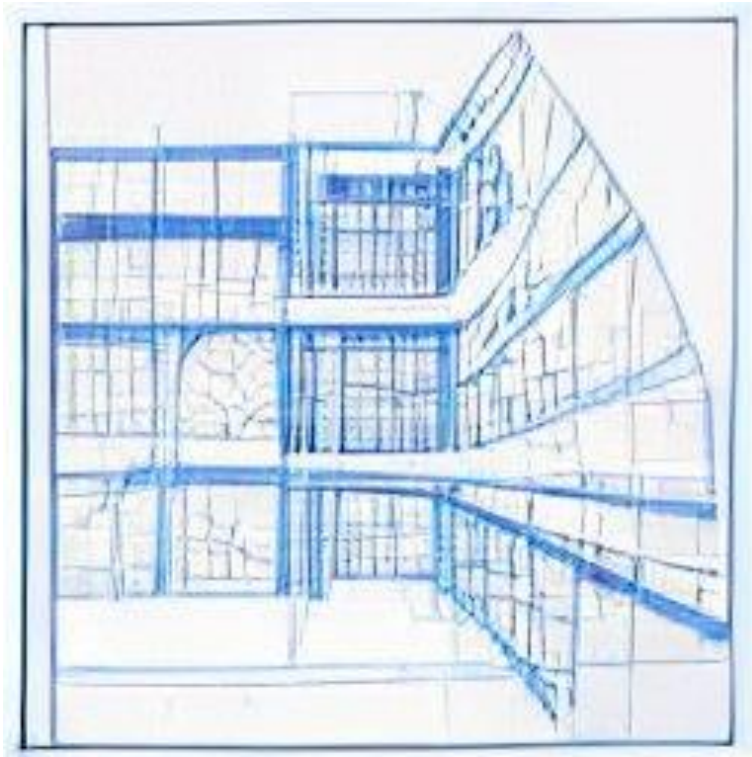
"Good morning," I said as soon as he answered.

"Well, Lou, it's a joy to hear your voice so early this morning. What's your pleasure?"

"I won't take up much of your time. Just calling to find out when you would like me to start." I swore I could hear Maukston smiling over the phone.

Somewhere a rooster crowed.

18. NetLocii



The NetLocii office took me by surprise. The atrium level was one giant glassed-in conference room and the second floor seemed full of generic office space.

That Sunday night found me at my new home, a hotel in San Francisco's Union Square. My walking to work days were over though, it was too far. I had bus routes all picked out for the morning. Maukston agreed to meet me at NetLocii at nine.

I was still parsing my feelings. In some ways Heimdall was my comfort zone but, with Priam gone and the whole Penn thing, the Heimdall I remembered even two weeks ago was no longer. This rent-a-body arrangement with NetLocii seemed to have come at a good time. I showered and shaved that evening to give me more time in the morning. Once more unto the breach.

Waiting for my first bus on Monday I happened to glance over and see a lady and her dog waiting for the walk light. They had obviously been playing fetch at some park. The lady was

now in charge of the dog, holding him in the crook of her elbow. But the little terrier was still clearly in charge of the stick—he had it firmly in his mouth while he looked up at the lady and wagged his tail furiously—pure contentment. Not exactly Ichabod the man and Winston the dog, but not a bad substitute either. I thought it portended well.

The NetLocii office took me by surprise. The atrium level was one giant glassed-in conference room and the second floor seemed full of generic office space. Luckily Maukston was waiting by the conference room door. He greeted me but apologized that today was a busy day for him. He led me up the stairs to the generic offices and told me to pick any one, that there wasn't assigned seating at NetLocii. Then he handed me my introduction packet, my laptop, again made apologies, and was gone.

Using the introduction packet, I logged in, completed the paperwork, and was informed a key card would be forthcoming. After viewing a thirty-minute video called *Me, You, and NetLocii*, I was accepted into the fold. The packet also included a work assignment that felt suspiciously like an interview test.

I could peer into the atrium conference room from my workstation; Maukston was in intense discussion with three other people. I assumed that was the CEO team I had read about on the home page. Clearly, strong opinions all around.

The layout of the office space had kind of an Escher affect to it – like the second floor was an endless loop and you could look over and see yourself, staring back at yourself, from one of the spaces across from yourself. I put that all aside and finished my assignment by the early afternoon.

Just after I pressed post on my assignment, I found myself talking to a friendly voice. A call from Priam.

“Greetings, stranger. I just called to see whether you have already started climbing the ranks. How goes the first day? I had the most trouble locating you. Are you using an alias?”

“Remarkably quiet. Although I am talking to you from my luxurious new office. However, I did find it odd that it's full of mops and brooms,” I said.

“Ah, yes, I’m familiar with the concept—‘other duties as assigned.’ I also wanted to offer you congratulations—once again you are an uncle!”

I offered congratulations to Priam and Hasu and asked about the new baby.

“I have reason to believe it is a full-blooded Lahd son. Goes by the name of Anshul. It means radiant. Mother and son are doing great. I have my in-laws here for two months to help with Sharan.”

“Two months! You must really get along!” I said.

“Yes, we must,” Priam said diplomatically. “You should be able to meet the entire crowd when you come to install your product. Maukston was just here last week pitching it, and it seemed like everyone at Corsse was most enthused. Turns out Corsse is a NetLocii client.”

“Hmm, well it’s not quite soup yet. This is just my first day.”

“Anytime tomorrow would be fine,” Priam said. But he went on to confess that Corsse Bank had been promised significant enhancements within the next six months.

Just then there was a knock on my office door. There was a woman trying to get my attention.

“Priam, I have to run. There is someone at my door. Must be a spill somewhere with my name on it. Give my regards to Sharan and Hasu. And Anshul.”

It turned out to be the office manager. “Hi, Lou, my name is Linda. I’m the floor administrator. I know you’re new here, but I just wanted to let you know that we try to discourage personal calls. We find they interrupt the productive flow of the office.” As she spoke, she dropped my key card onto the desk.

Well, with that I turned sufficiently red faced and mumbled an apology.

She also handed me a note. It was from Maukston. It had yet another key card and directions to get to the roof. He asked for the pleasure of my company on the roof after work.

I made my way up the stairs to the roof. When I used the key card to crack open the roof door, there was Maukston sitting on a lawn chair drinking a beer. “Thanks for indulging me,”

he said as he pointed out over the skyline. “When I was young, I spent a lot of time on my uncle’s farm in Kenya. Well, not really an uncle, more of a shirttail relative. But it always felt like my safe space. It left me with a sincere appreciation for sunsets. It’s hard to describe, but the sky was just bigger there. I can close my eyes and still see the sun setting over Lake Naivasha. In many ways, the perfect end to a perfect day. Even days that didn’t go particularly well. Sipping beer at dusk as the city awakes to the night.”

He gestured at the cooler. Heck, I’m easy, I thought and reached down for one. As I cracked it open, I said, “You can even just make out the Big Dipper,” pointing toward where the twin stars Alcor and Mizar blended into one bright glob.

Maukston smiled and remarked that Naivasha was almost exactly on the equator and so the Big Dipper and the Southern Cross were both often out of view. With that he pulled up a lawn chair next to his and changed the subject. “Lou, I brought you up here because I felt I owed you an explanation. Maybe even an apology.”

He had the advantage over me. I prided myself on understanding how people click, but I hadn’t figured him out yet. With every hair in place and his creased shirts, he was the antithesis of a classic techie. Yet he was extremely technical. And he tended to stare at you intently as he spoke. It felt like rapt attention, but when you looked a little deeper, it was almost as if he was looking through you, at something behind you that was slightly more interesting. It injected a need to please into every conversation, like the onus was on you to maintain his interest. Add to that his history of recklessness, and I kind of felt like the moth to a flame. The need to please is a powerful motivation.

“I’d like to start out by apologizing once again for my rudeness regarding your brother. It’s just that my studies in college led me to approach everything as a problem to be solved rather than to consider the human condition. I’m sorry. And I’m glad you’re here.”

“Why am I here, Maukston?” I asked.

“Muddy Waters used to say, ‘If you have something good, keep it in your pocket.’ Instead, Tyr flashed you around like his newest bauble. I knew immediately you were his diamond in the rough. And I jumped. I saw our chance to grab a valuable employee and steal something

from Tyr in one move.” Again, he appeared to be looking just over my shoulder. But just for a moment, his upper lip caught on his teeth as he smiled. I wasn’t positive it was a flash of temper, but it was undeniably carnivorous. Just as quickly as it happened, it was gone. “Of course, at the end of the day, the choice was all yours.”

He was right. I was here because I chose to be here.

Maukston continued. “I know our work approach will seem radical to someone used to working with Tyr. We use a technique we call OPMP, one-person microprojects. Every week you’ll get one small unit of work. Complete that work. Then we’ll take all those small projects and merge the components farther down the line.

It really helps fight deadline slip. It may seem counterintuitive from your perspective, but complete your task each week with quality work, and you’ll see that life at NetLocii will be good. And rewarding, I promise you. Each programmer satisfactorily completing their weekly task gets a five-hundred-dollar bonus that week. Including you, even though you aren’t an official employee.” His smile led me to believe you didn’t want to consider what happens if you don’t complete your weekly task. “After all that hard work, the finished product is just a matter of connecting the dots. You’ll be amazed at how quickly we create product here compared to Heimdall.”

He went on to explain his plans for Compendia. He wanted to hook it into the NetLocii networking product and run the corporate data through it, giving a site an unexpected cache of recently accessed information. Since recently accessed data are often about to be accessed again, he felt it could give a significant performance boost.

Long range, he’d like to integrate Compendia into the Internet of Things so that data could be easily shared across disparate devices like vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, TVs, iPads.

Finally, he wanted a call back function to allow Compendia to call into NetLocii to open the possibility of tuning the devices remotely. I found this incongruous; Jonathan had intentionally not provided for this capability. But NetLocii was an “as a service” organization and needed strategies to justify their monthly bills. I could see some head-butting in the future.

As quickly as Maukston finished his vision of the future, he lost interest. He looked over at the sunset and seemed to forget I was there.

“Thanks, Maukston,” I said as I stood up and made my way towards the door.

That seemed to momentarily reach his consciousness once again. “Leave the roof key card please.” I turned around to ask him about all these key cards, but it was too late. His back was turned to me, and he was once again soaking up the sunset. I had been dismissed. I left the key card on the lawn chair and made my way off the roof.

Despite all the weirdness of my first day, I was satisfied. Not sure I was exactly happy, but at least I wasn’t down in the ultraviolet as I had been the last few weeks at Heimdall. I was back in a world with color. I had made a commitment, and I vowed to keep my part of the bargain. Look out, world—I’m about to chew up my OPMPs and spit them out, one week at a time!

It didn’t take long to realize life revolved around the microprojects. You got your assignment on Monday and turned it in before Friday, complete with unit tests that proved your code passed. If it was completed on time and the quality was judged as good, you got a \$500 bonus. If your microproject was incomplete or the quality was judged as suspect, you’d get called out on the carpet, you would have your project reassigned to someone else, and you wouldn’t get the bonus. The \$500 a week was a powerful incentive; that’s another twenty-five grand over the course of a year.

The judge and jury were the owners (I called them the Gang of Four) that occupied the windowed office in the atrium: Maukston, two Asian men, and one Asian woman. You could see them in all their glory, but they couldn’t be reached. My key card didn’t grant me access to the conference room. They would analyze the projects as they came in—raucous affairs with lots of yelling, hair pulling, and garment rendering. They would then spend the rest of their time incorporating the various microprojects into the end product. As best as I could tell, none of the worker bees had anything to do with the actual finished product. Although the Gang of Four were spectacularly hardworking, they engendered more fear than respect. All their communication came via the internal texting system—sarcastic messages came from Maukston, and short clipped messages came from one of the three Asian owners. (“Your code crap” was my current favorite.)

I had taken to coming into work very early. A remnant from my Java Jive days, it minimized my commuting hassles and freed my afternoons to explore San Francisco. Certainly no one at NetLocii cared or even noticed. Attendance was optional; completing your microproject was mandatory.

As fall yielded to winter, my work hours began in darkness. Often, I would be the one to turn on the lights at NetLocii; often for the first few hours my pod would be the only one illuminated. But then I started to notice another early riser. It was a touch disconcerting since it was the pod directly across the atrium from mine—the very same one where I had once imagined myself looking back at me.

Eventually curiosity got the best of me, and I decided to break the rules and walk around to meet my doppelganger. Once I saw the pod light go on, I walked over and knocked on the door. But when I peered in, the pod was empty. The light was on, but no one was home. I turned off the light, thinking maybe the cleaning crew was somehow doing something. But when I looked across the atrium—my light was off too! I was getting a Schrödinger’s cat vibe as I made my way back to my pod.

When I turned my light on, I was startled by another voice. “Sorry, man—just messing with you!” Sitting in my cube was a short bowling ball of a woman. She reached a hand across my desk. “G’morning. Name’s Dakota She/her.” She picked up a thermos she had apparently brought from her side and poured us both cups of coffee. It was excellent coffee. She raised her cup and said, “*Diem perdidit.*”

Dakota and I were two of the few that actually came into work on a regular basis. Dakota because she had three unemployed roommates and me because I lived in a hotel room. She started at NetLocii about three months before me.

She was as perplexed about the code promotion process as I was. She was a lot more laissez-faire about it than I was – she took to the philosophy of “He who writes the checks makes the decisions.” Dakota liked my Gang of Four reference; she had been calling them the Caesars.

Dakota and I quickly became work friends. We’d play online poker for a half hour or so in the early morning. She moved over to the cube next to the one I generally took – we both

thought it was a little spooky to be the only two here and sit across the atrium from each other. We kept our poker playing under the radar—we'd still get down to work well before anyone else showed up, and we wouldn't go out to lunch or talk during the day. Dakota had a lot of Dan about her—affable but in a gently confusing kind of way. A tendency to mumble to herself. It was kind of relaxing once you got used to it, a steady hum like a vacuum cleaner.

Maukston was certainly right about the money rolling in. Besides the weekly \$500 bonus (and believe me, you quickly came to expect them), every employee benefited from every sale. It was a percentage on a sliding scale, and I suspect you'd have had to slide all the way to the bottom to find me. Still, for someone who not that long ago was making do on tips at Java Jive and even less long ago was at a company that struggled to meet payroll, I was now pretty flush. Of course, it didn't stop me from grouching about money, but it sure did make those memories of Roger and me trying to make ends meet and of Tyr struggling to keep Heimdall open grow fainter and fainter.

The cadence of our weeks took shape. I integrated Compendia into NetLocii and added a call to a callback function to pass it some performance statistics. Then I added some really soft tuning knobs, mostly to turn Compendia off in certain cases. How these would work together was beyond me since it wasn't included in any of my OMPM assignments.

We had a myopic view into NetLocii. We didn't even have access to all the source code – just that needed for the weeks microproject. Dakota and I shared our OMPM assignments – she was mostly working on routines to read and write data. And we'd see the Gang of Four arguing every Friday after the assignments were turned in. Then early the next week a new version of NetLocii would be available for customers. Priam would install the new version and measure the results. So we had our small view into the sausage making with Dakota and my projects and then a view into the end result once Priam installed it at Corse Bank.

Early results were outstanding. Compendia did indeed reduce the network response time at Corse Bank. And, apparently, at other customers too. NetLocii issued a press announcement with references from two other banks and an insurance company.

Life proceeded smoothly. Until it didn't. And it all started with a Wednesday call from Priam.

19. What just happened?



Then he showed me some CCTV footage from the garage, taken late last night. And there was Maukston, large as life, sneaking out the back door.

Wednesday, 3:00 pm

Priam was lucky to catch me at work. I was usually gone by early afternoon but this week I was trying to get a jump on my OPMP assignment. I asked about the kids.

“Oh, everyone is fine. Anshul is growing by leaps and bounds and Sharan asks about you at dinner.” Then he paused. “This, however, is more of a business call.”

He explained that Corsse had been experiencing some data related failures and at first glance it seemed to tie in timewise with when he promoted the most current NetLocii release into production. He asked if I had heard of any other company having issues.

Take Two

I had to confess that I don't hear from customers at all. If it wasn't for Priam, I wouldn't even know that anyone had installed the version of NetLocii with Compendia inserted. I did tell him I hadn't noticed any flurry of activity with the Gang of Four, which you would certainly expect if customers were having issues.

Priam said Corse was still looking at the issue as an internal bug and that he'd get back to me when he has more information.

Thursday, 8:00 am

Priam called back. I was waiting for the omnipresent Linda the floor manager to tell me not to take cell calls at work but, gratefully, she didn't appear to be in.

Priam said Corse had ruled out any internal issues. As a precaution he rolled NetLocii back to the last version he had that was pre-Compendia and informed Tyr about the issue. We scheduled a zoom call for later that day to strategize.

Thursday, 2:00 pm

I took the zoom call at home. Tyr looked really anxious and said he had Jonathan and Dan reviewing all the tests Penn had built to make sure they weren't hitting any data issues in-house. He also asked about my integration of Compendia with NetLocii. I explained that it was mostly black box and certainly didn't involve touching any data. It didn't occur to me until later to mention the callback logic; for me that was more marketing than technical. He asked if I had some tests I could run on my end - I had to explain to him how OPMP worked and that the only people that see the end product are the four CEOs. He didn't seem surprised that Maukston ran such a tight ship.

I felt bad for Cam. The code that touched the data the most was all his; I could only imagine the self-flagellation he was doing at this point. He took everything so personal.

We decided a three-pronged strategy. Priam would install the current version of NetLocii in Corse's sandbox system. It was nearly a side-by-side implementation of their production system so he was confident that, if the problem exists, it would show up there. Tyr would continue poring through the Compendia code and would tap me on the shoulder for my memory of changes I made during the integration process.

Missing from the strategy was any mention of bringing Maukston into the process. I rationalized that, thinking that if I saw any Gang of Four activity, I would bring him up to speed. At this point I was still hoping it was a Corse problem. Besides, I hadn't spoken to Maukston directly since our meeting on the roof over three months ago.

I did text Dakota and told her of the drama. She felt it was a little weird to not tell Maukston, but it had been forever since she had talked with him either. She was ahead on her OPMP

project and, God bless her, she agreed to take mine over and finish it as well. Not so much for the bonus money but more so to avoid any unnecessary attention.

Friday, 7:00 pm

It took Priam longer than he thought to set up their sandbox system but once he started cranking transactions through it the problem did indeed resurface. One troubling aspect was that the problem wasn't reproducible - Priam would roll back the sandbox system and go through the same transactions and the problem may or may not reoccur. Computers do what computers do - if a problem appears non-reproducible that means you don't yet have a complete picture of what triggers the problem.

Jonathan and Dan had no luck finding any issues with the Compendia tests and Tyr couldn't see anything walking through the code. I watched over Tyr's shoulder and tried to fill in my integration changes as best I could remember. Maukston didn't allow us access to the code so I couldn't say for certain.

The week was over, but I knew at some point I'd have to contact the Gang of Four. Not a conversation I was looking forward to.

Dakota did finish my mini project and it passed muster with Gang of Four, so that bought us some more under-the-radar time.

Saturday 3:00 am

We had a mini breakthrough.

Tyr and I were walking through the code, and we hit one of the points where I had implemented the callback to NetLocii. I mentioned it just in passing and Tyr's eyes lit up. Up to this point he was unaware of this change. I told him the call was there but that it was just a stub, not currently in use.

We told Priam and he agreed to roll back his sandbox system to a NetLocii release that included Compendia but was prior to me adding the callback stub. Here the OPMP philosophy was our friend; since we were going production every week there were versions available along the way. This was my main contribution to the whole process, remembering when I did the OPMP that added the call backs.

Saturday 9:00 pm

Priam ran the Corsse battery of tests though the non-callback version of NetLocii and didn't hit any problems. This was really good news - for Cam! It put the spotlight on me though. I was certain my integration code just black-boxed Compendia and didn't touch any data.

Tyr was interested in watching the code run and, luckily, Priam had one more trick up his sleeve. He would put the callback version back onto the sandbox and then turn on tracing software so we could see any data that passed through the callback functions.

Working with Tyr and Priam again was invigorating, just like the old days. But the stakes were high. Not only did we need to find the problem as quickly as possible, but we also had to hope the problem was specific to the bank. The first was under our control, but the second was yet to be determined. I did my best not to consider the possible repercussions. I doubt any of us got any sleep that night.

Sunday 9:00 am

The tracing monitor did show information flowing through the callback functions. I immediately texted Dakota; this confirmed her long held belief that the Gang of Four were actually changing our code during the review process and one reason there were so secretive is that they didn't want the staff to get a clear picture of the whole product.

Unfortunately, the information flowing from the callback functions on Priam's sandbox system to NetLocii's server was encrypted. So we could see something was being sent but had no idea what. Another mystery is how this would lead to corrupted data; it was just a one-way flow of information and there wouldn't be an obvious need to change anything just to relay performance information.

I felt at this point I needed to bring Maukston in. Tyr asked me to give him one more day walking through the code. We compromised and I agreed to wait until dinner time Sunday.

Sunday 5:00 pm

I pulled the plug. I hadn't talked to Maukston in months, but I still had his contact info on my phone. He was surprised to hear from me.

I rapidly, very rapidly, explained the last week. There was a long pause before he answered. "You handled this most unconventionally Lou. If I'm understanding this Tyr and Priam both know of the situation?"

"Yes. We wanted to rule out any internal Corse Bank errors and then we were hoping that if it was a Compendia issue, we could come with a solution in hand." Not a great explanation but it was the only one I had.

Another long pause. "Well, nothing is going to get fixed on a Sunday evening. Meet me at work in the morning and we'll address everything then." With that, he disconnected. He sounded calm but I couldn't help but think of the time I saw a flash of his temper.

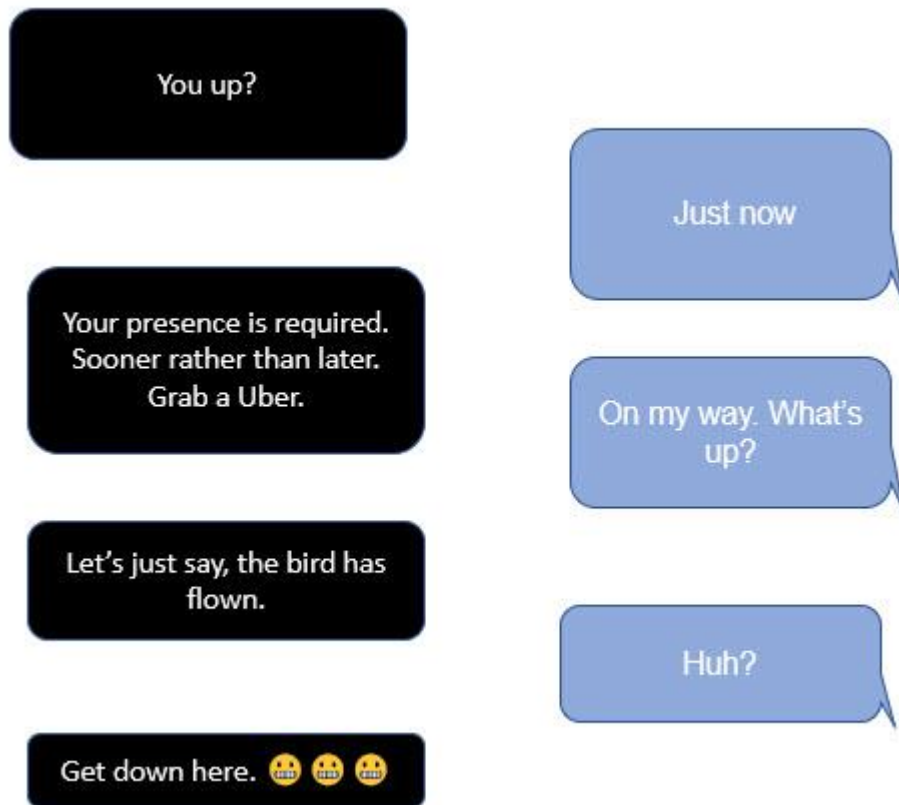
I texted Tyr and Priam to let them know I had brought Maukston up to date.

Monday 6:00 am

If asked I would have sworn I didn't sleep a second that night, but I must've dozed off because I missed a kind of cryptic text from Tyr.

The map is unrolled and
the dagger revealed. Check
your voicemail.

Apparently I missed his voicemail too. I was just about to check it when I got a text from Dakota.



So, I grabbed an Uber and made my way to work. I was too amped to listen to Tyr's voicemail - I figured I'd call him from work instead.

Monday 6:30 am

When I got to NetLocii it was pure commotion. There were fire trucks and police cars blocking the street. I walked to the front door and saw Dakota standing there, waiting.

Take Two

I peered in. The glass conference room was a mess. “Geez, the cleaning crew?” I asked.

Dakota just shrugged. I looked again and saw the server room open and the servers all trashed. “Wolverines maybe?” I asked.

Dakota was about to answer when a man in a suit interrupted. “Is this the guy you told us about?” Dakota just nodded.

The man took me into what was left of the conference room. He showed me his ID – he was from Interpol. I always thought that was a made-up organization for television purposes. What he was doing here, and how he got here before me, well, that was a mystery.

Apparently when a major software company basically disappears overnight and its customer list is the who’s who of the Fortune 500, well, things happen fast. He gave me a terse summary of their working theory – I don’t think he was convinced I was an innocent bystander quite yet. Then he showed me some CCTV footage from the garage, taken late last night. And there was Maukston, large as life, sneaking out the back door.

From what they could tell the four CEOs met at NetLocii in the dead of night, removed all the hard drives from the servers and then set out to parts unknown. Interpol already had them on a watch list because three of them were Chinese nationals, but they had slipped out from under that noose. The current working theory was that they may have been using NetLocii to hack into the Fortune 500 companies that were their customers.

It was then that I remembered Tyr’s voicemail. The Interpol man was interrupted by one of his cohorts and I was just about to check my voicemail when my phone rang. It was Maet.

“Wow, Maet, you wouldn’t believe it down here! I just got interviewed by someone from Interpol. Apparently that’s a real thing!”

“Lou,”

“It seems Maukston took down NetLocii and then vanished into the night! They think it might be corporate espionage or hacking. I think I may have accidentally warned him about it!”

“Lou,” it was then I noticed the shaky tone in her voice. I quit talking.

“It’s my dad.”

End of Part 2

Part 3

20. Interpol



In a classic Tyr maneuver, Maet had reserved a front pew for the Irregulars from the old Java Jive

10 things you need to know today

1. Software failure cripples part of the Internet

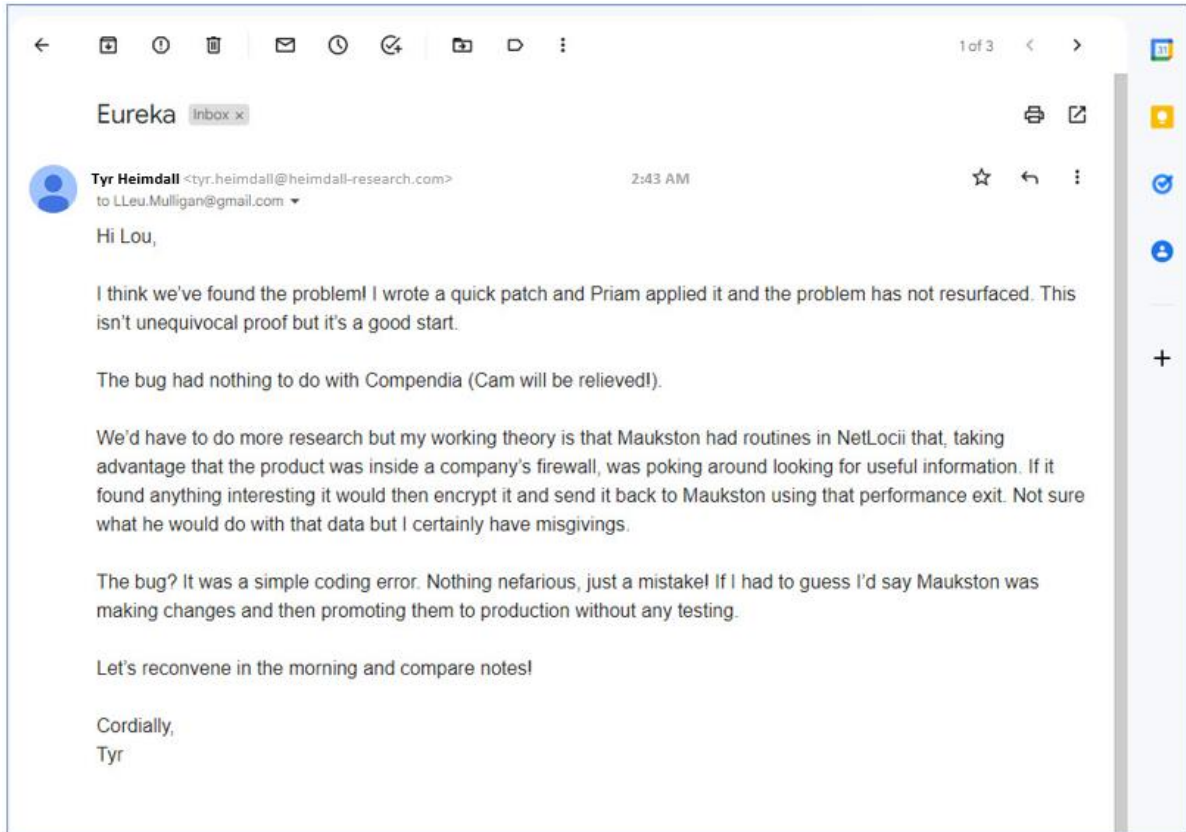
An unusual software failure in the early morning hours of Monday caused an outage that affected many financial websites. Details are sketchy but it is believed all affected sites were running a network security package designed to improve internet performance. The software, from a San Francisco based company called NetLocii, quit responding on Monday and eventually sites had to come down while the package was removed. NetLocii could not be contacted for comment, but it is believed a criminal investigation has started.

Most companies were back up within a few hours. [[San Francisco](#)

[Chronicle](#), [Wall Street Journal](#)]



With Priam's help, Tyr's email, and background information from the Interpol guy we were able to piece together exactly what had happened. We had a social engineering advantage too - we knew how Maukston thought. Tyr's email was short but right on target:



There were two key breakthroughs. The first was when Priam was able to reproduce the bad data on his sandbox system. Then he could reset the system and try the exact same activity to try to establish a sequence of events that lead to the problem. But when he ran the same requests through his sandbox, he didn't always get the bug. This led Tyr to assume that the activity wasn't associated with the issue; rather something going on under the covers was causing the bad data. The second breakthrough was when I mentioned, casually, that Dakota and I had reached the conclusion that the Gang of Four were changing our code as it left our project and before it hit production. Armed with this information and knowing how Maukston's mind operates, Tyr was able to locate the bug, fix it, and give a pretty compelling rationale as to what Maukston was doing.

* * *

Tyr's funeral was well attended. It included the haves and the have-nots; the who's who of the software industry alongside the ordinary people Tyr had touched along the way. In a classic

Tyr maneuver, Maet had reserved a front pew for the Irregulars from the old Java Jive (which was now called Tall, Dark, and Steamy as I was informed by Lydia). So the captains of industry sat behind Tyr's favorite people.

The New York Times

Tyr Heimdall, noted software entrepreneur and philanthropist

Tyr Heimdall, a software entrepreneur who founded the Fortune 500 company Trident and then retired for health reasons, died on October 12 in Seattle, Washington. He was fifty-eight. The cause was heart failure said his daughter Maet.

Born in Trondheim, Norway, on June 23, 1964, Mr. Heimdall moved to the United States as a child. He received his PhD from MIT and started his first software company soon afterward. Then in rapid succession, he started three other companies and sold them all before ever going public or ever selling any software. These companies varied across the spectrum of computer software, including some early forays into cloud computing and data analysis.

His most significant company was Trident Software, which created software originally used to analyze MRI results. He stayed with this company until 2008 when he sold it reportedly due to deteriorating health. He then stayed active in Seattle civic projects but did not create another startup until Heimdall Research in 2020.

Heimdall Research has recently been in the news as being involved in the Internet shutdown that affected over half of the Fortune 500 companies. There was no indication of any foul play by Mr. Heimdall.

"So many entrepreneurs start with what they think can make money and then work backward to product creation," he explained in a 2009 interview. "This removes the soul from the work. Instead, I heartily recommend finding something that captivates your interest and then working forward to how you might monetize it."

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Heimdall is survived by his wife of thirty years, Helen, of Seattle, Washington.

As in all funerals for someone who was beloved, there was a lot of sadness but a lot of affection as well. Tyr wasn't there but his spirit was and that made everything alright. Although the circumstances weren't ideal, it was really nice to see everyone. I was staying with Roger and Lydia. Bumped into Penn and she looked great. We shared a big hug and a gentle peck on the cheek; the past was left in the past. Hasu was tiny once again. Sharan greeted me with a shy smile, but as soon as she remembered who I was, there was a constant tug on my shoulder to

tell me this and to tell me that. The new baby was gorgeous. Dan and Jonathan were Dan and Jonathan, spending most of the afternoon arguing about the relative merits of the various hors d'oeuvres. Maet looked diminished - even the church lighting seemed to be letting her down. Priam gave a nice talk, touching on both Tyr's business accomplishments and the social causes he had worked on over the years. Maet stood up to talk about her dad and mom, but she couldn't get through it. Priam came to her rescue and stood alongside her, calming her down with his presence and the gentle touch of his ever-protruding stomach until she regained her composure. A couple of famous CEOs also got up and said a few words.

Throughout it all, I was in a daze. I hadn't been to a funeral since Dylan's but the two experiences had very little in common. I had only known Tyr for a few years, so it felt as if I could look back and replay every moment I had spent with him; from the very first time he kicked the chair in my direction at Java Jive, to the late nights at Heimdall Research, all the way to the last flurry that brought down NetLocii. He had taken me from an underemployed college dropout to, well, an unemployed college dropout. But what a ride.

Meanwhile the Interpol guy was my new best friend. I shared Tyr's email with him, and we used it to help build a case. The strategy in play was very Maukston-ian. Companies were installing NetLocii inside their firewall and it would improve their performance and security. But it would also take advantage of being on the inside to poke around and look for things of interest. Emails, documents, spreadsheets - that type of thing. Not to steal money but to steal information, which it could then sell to competitors. In this way, for instance, he could simultaneously take money from Crosse Bank to improve their network performance while taking money from Crosse Bank competitors to provide dirt about Crosse Bank.

This confirmed Interpol's theories. I had my doubts as to whether said theories existed prior to the implosion but I was just grateful they were engaged. The other three from the Gang of Four had crossed the Interpol radar because of their ties to Communist China. Now Interpol was trying to piece together what companies were engaged in buying the rogue data. That was made difficult since NetLocii didn't use the cloud and all their server hard drives were removed during the midnight ramble. There was no paper trail.

Where I had considerably less success was in the apprehension phase. The Interpol guy was sure the gang of four had fake passports on the ready and had split to parts unknown. He was also confident that at some point one or all of them would screw up and rejoin the grid. And Interpol would be there waiting.

On the other hand, I was convinced that Maukston had inadvertently revealed to me where he was headed. Our one conversation when he had wistfully spoken of his safe space, his relative's farm in Kenya. I couldn't vouch for where the other three went but I was convinced Maukston was there, right now.

This was met with a decidedly underwhelming response. Maybe this wasn't the Interpol guys' department but for all the slavish attention I got while we were piecing the crime together, this theory was met with indifference. His return calls came slower and slower and then not at all. When I left countless messages, he finally returned a call - but only to tell me to quit calling; they had it under control. And, until I had a picture of Maukston sunning himself on the beach, I should quit hounding them.

I knew my modus operandi; I wasn't stupid. When the going got tough, I disappeared. It happened when Dylan died, when I started college, when Penn dumped me. It wasn't behavior I was proud of. But I couldn't go back and change those. But I didn't have to repeat them either. With no real plan except the conviction that I was right, I looked up the visa requirements to visit Kenya.

21. Jacaranda



He seemed satisfied with my answer. “Oh yes, very nice. You will find the Jacaranda Inn most adequate.”

Thus

began the internal battle – my obsession to see things right versus my inclination to just bail.

I bought the tickets to Kenya, assuming I would just cancel them at some point. I got the e-visa knowing there was no obligation to use it. I made sure my shots were up to date, but when isn't that a good idea. On the day I took a Uber to SeaTac, knowing I could just as easily turn around and Uber back to Roger and Lydia's. When I boarded the plane I thought, well, I could just end the trip in London. Everybody likes London. And when I got off the plane the first time, the airport was full of smiling, reassuring, English-speaking people. I bought a

Take Two

breakfast of bangers and mash, bought a copy of *Viz* and some caramels, and waited. And, after all that, I surprised myself when I found myself boarding the plane to Nairobi.

As people stowed their belongings, it looked like an equal mix of tourists and Kenyans. And me. I stuffed my bag into the overhead and found my middle seat. The seat to my right was empty, but at my left sat a very black man, wearing a nice, albeit slightly threadbare, pinstripe suit. He smiled and nodded as I pointed at the middle seat. "Welcome," he said in a thick accent as he stood up to let me in.

We both settled in, and I was acutely aware that as soon as the wheels hit the air I was now a stranger in a strange land, while he was homeward bound.

He took to reading a *London Times* that he had brought with him. I just stared at the back of the seat in front of me. He must have noticed my *Lonely Planet Kenya* guidebook because he pointed at the weather forecasts in the paper. "It should be the start of the rainy season, and yet it looks most sweltering." I looked where he was pointing. Nairobi had a predicted high of 27°. Celsius. Great, Celsius. I nodded agreement.

"Joseph Ndube." He held out his hand.

"Lou. Lou Mulligan." We shook.

"Well, Mister Lou, what takes you to Nairobi? Safari?"

I gave him a look to try to determine whether he was having me on. There was no sign of guile in his face. I decided misdirection was the better part of valor. "Yup." Then I feigned sleep to avoid any other questions. A little too well, I guess; Joseph had to gently nudge me awake so I wouldn't miss the first meal.

He peacefully continued to read his *Times* as I ate the dinner. Joseph looked over. "Well, since our destination is Nairobi, I say *karibu*, 'welcome,' to you. I want to tell you that the airport is amidst one of our national parks. So, you may very well start your safari before we even alight."

I could ask him some of the questions I had meant to research before we took off. "Mr. Ndube, how far is Nairobi from the airport?"

“Please, Lou, it is Joseph. Not so very far. And where are you staying?”

“The Jacaranda Inn,” I said. Probably the only thing besides my passport and shots I had actually arranged beforehand.

He seemed satisfied with my answer. “Oh yes, very nice. You will find the Jacaranda Inn most adequate.”

I smiled and thanked him. Since he had reminded me, I decided I should do some of that research. I took out my travel guide and started reading. Joseph peered over my shoulder but was too polite to say anything. Within moments I was back asleep.

I slept sporadically the entire rest of the flight. Didn’t see any of movies, didn’t read more than ten pages of my tourist guide. I would wake up, stretch, get up and walk around, get a drink of water, come back to my seat, and fall asleep.

He didn’t nudge me awake again until the plane had almost landed. When I came to, he pointed out his window. “*Twiga*,” he said. I looked down below, and not only had we almost landed, but sure enough—we were flying over giraffe galumphing across the veld. And that’s when it hit me. This was really Africa. And this was really me in Africa. Joseph just smiled when he saw the recognition come across my face. “Seeing a giraffe as your first African animal portends a good visit.” I could only hope he was right.

I stuck close as we deplaned and picked up our bags. It wasn’t until he pointed me out of the Kenyan citizen’s custom-check line and into the international line that we parted ways. I looked for him once I cleared customs, but he was gone, and I was awash in a sea of African faces.

I grabbed my bags, used the ATM to get some Kenyan shillings, switched my phone SIM card and made my way through customs. I was standing in line for the bus to City Centre when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Joseph. “Please, Mr. Lou, do not take the bus. It is full of thieves and pickpockets. You will be so much happier with a taxi.”

I decided to heed Joseph and made my way to the taxi stand instead. He was right—the driver took me directly to the Jacaranda Inn. I parted with the first of my Kenyan shillings and made

my way to the hotel lobby. A solemn man in a blue uniform and a gun held the door for me. In no time, I was sitting on the bed in a hotel room in Africa. I meant to go out and get my sea legs and maybe the lay of the land, but instead I just continued to sit on the bed as dusk settled in.

The next morning, I was awoken by a knock on the door from the cleaning crew. I hollered back that there was no need today. And there wasn't—I had fallen asleep in my clothes on top of the sheets. I had a splitting headache, so I had a breakfast of a couple of leftover caramels and a sip of water, changed out of my clothes, and got into the bed this time.

My mind must have been racing because I woke up in a jolt in what felt like the middle of a conversation with myself.

I made up my mind to make my way outdoors, but when I looked out it was nighttime in Nairobi. From the window I could see the lights of a nearby bar and hear the reggae music pouring out. People were having a good time. From the sound of it, probably too good of a time. Closer I could see solitary men standing in the doorways leading up to the hotel. I assumed these were more doormen or armed guards, but in my mind's eye, they were all watching my room. It served to totally intimidate me, so instead of going outside, I put my earbuds in, played some music, and pulled out my travel guide.

I remembered Maukston mentioning Lake Naivasha so that's where I started. It was the closest I had to a starting point. I cursed myself for not doing this sooner (like when I was stateside, for instance), but I opened the index and looked up Naivasha. My stomach grumbled as I sat in the chair, which made me curious as to just how potable the water was in Nairobi. I had another caramel and dived into the book.

Naivasha was a town about ninety miles northwest of Nairobi along the Great Rift Valley. It was an area known as Happy Valley, where many of the British white expatriates had settled and accumulated much of the fertile farming land. The guide even provided a list of the bars and clubs frequented by the aging settlers. Somehow I had to get up there and poke around. Since I was in the book anyway, I looked up the recommendation about the water. They said to make sure the seal hadn't been broken (otherwise it was likely to have been refilled with tap

water). I looked at the half-empty bottle sitting on my nightstand. Well, no sense crying over a broken seal. I had the last of my caramels for supper, finished the water, and went to bed.

I woke up with a plan. I needed to get up to Naivasha and just start hanging around the places where the expats hung out, like a shy teenager courting his crush. At some point I would bump into Maukston and have my proof to deliver to Interpol. Not great, but a plan.

The catch was that I couldn't seem to talk myself out of my hotel room. On this side of the door, with my iPhone and my caramels, was America. On the other side of the door was Africa. I was stuck in the cocoon of this smelly, beat-up hotel room. I had hotel-room agoraphobia.

Funny, I had predicted multiple places where my tendency to give up would surface; this wasn't any of them. Feeling momentarily resolute, I was out of my hotel room for the first time since I had checked in. I walked down the stairs and into the restaurant on the first floor. I was plenty hungry for some breakfast, but I was too late. So, I ordered lunch instead—quite possibly the world's soggiest, greasiest french fries. They were delicious.

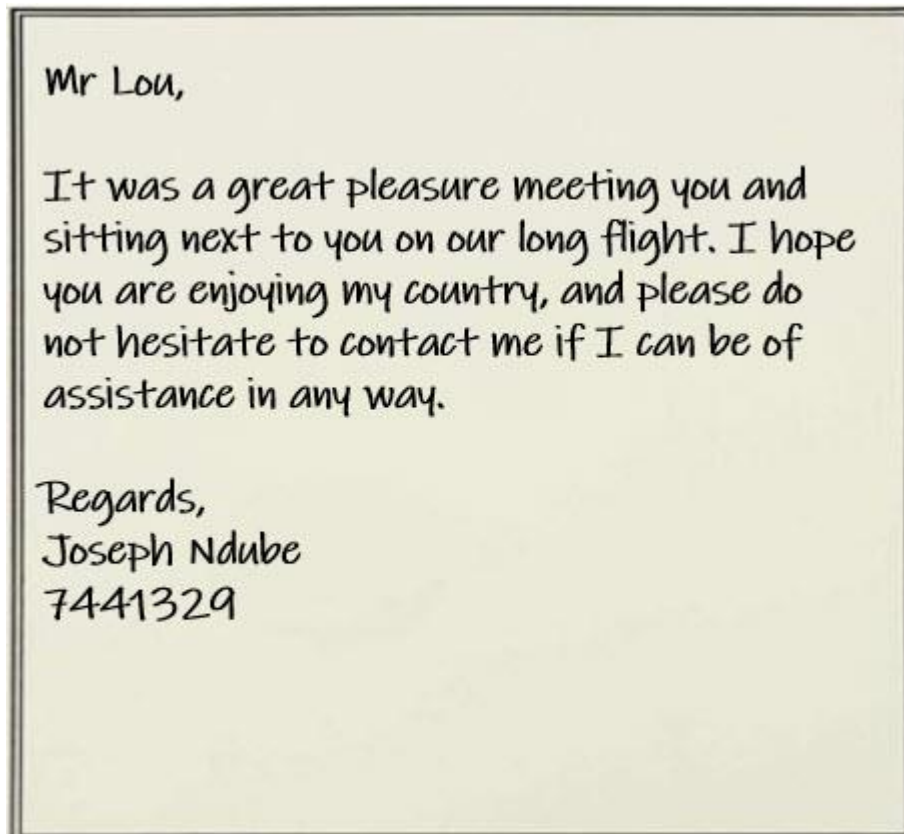
While I was eating, I looked out at the street scene. People were scurrying about their business. I couldn't tell you whether I had ever seen so many black people in one place. Right outside the door was a collection of street kids. They'd run up and beg from anyone that stepped out of the hotel, not stopping until the armed guard came and chased them away. Only to repeat the exact same sequence when the hotel door opened once more.

As the waiter handed me my check, I knew I hadn't quite broken the spell the Jacaranda Inn had over me. I had successfully made it out of my hotel room but still hadn't left the confines of the hotel. I eyed the drugstore at the end of the block. If I could just make it there and back, the spell would be broken. Hell, I could even buy more caramels and a fresh bottle of water.

But apparently not today. When I stepped out of the hotel, I turned around and went right back up the stairs to my room. At that moment I was as disgusted with myself as I had ever been. But it didn't stop me from skulking right back into the room. Who was I kidding? I had flown nine thousand miles in some scheme to track down Maukston and bring him to justice,

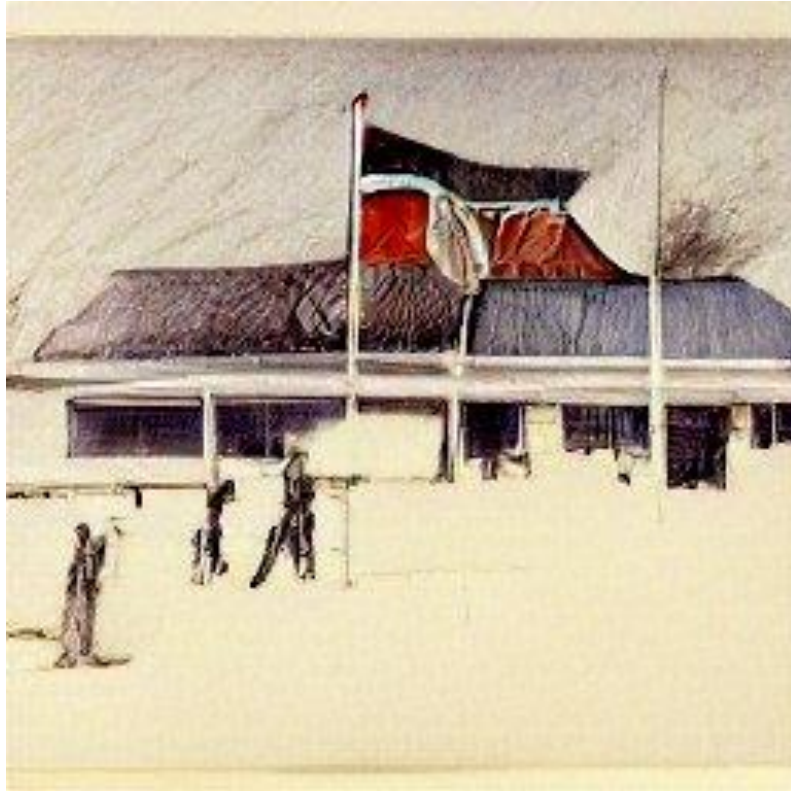
and it took all the energy I could muster just to get me out of my hotel room. The great white hunter! I made up my mind to call British Airways and see whether I could move my flight up and take the next one home.

When I sat down on my bed, I noticed a letter had been slipped under my door. I assumed it was from the maid staff (I had repeatedly declined their offers to clean my room). But I was mistaken.



When the only person you know on an entire continent offers help, well, that's not the time to start counting teeth. I picked up the phone in my room and asked for an outside line.

22. Naivasha



I was driven to a nearby police station, a clay brick building with the Kenyan flag flying and policeman loitering outside.

Joseph greeted me at the table. He looked sincerely happy to see me. I was sincerely happy to see him. He sat down and ordered chai for both of us.

I told him everything. I had that old uneasy feeling of simultaneously standing behind him, eavesdropping on the conversation, but I didn't leave anything out.

There was a long pause after I finished my story, extending quite a bit past awkward. Another man would have got up and left but, instead, he summarized my main points so as to make sure he understood my predicament. He had it exactly right. I had been done wrong by a descendant of a white settler, and now I was playing a hunch that he had returned to Kenya. He looked down at his hands and then back up at me. "This does not appear too difficult." My heart skipped a beat. It was only much later that I realized Kenyan culture required this

type of answer. (“not too far”, “not too hot,” “not too late”). Regardless, it was lifeline, and I grabbed hold.

There must be a little bit of the Hardy Boys in everyone, because as Joseph barraged me with questions, I could sense his skepticism slowly being replaced with enthusiasm. Who doesn't love a lost cause? His questions were rapid and right to the point—he wanted to know the uncle's last name, Maukston's physical characteristics, the location of their family's homestead. It felt a little like speed dating.

Joseph quickly had a strategy in place. He explained that Kenya is a country comprised of dozens of tribes and each geography was likely to have a dominant tribe. Joseph was a Kikuyu, the predominant tribe of Nairobi and the Great Rift Valley. He remembered having some distant cousins living in Naivasha and felt confident they would know the town and its comings and goings. As I told him more about Maukston, he also felt it was likely he was spending time in Nairobi, that Naivasha was too small and too sleepy for a sophisticate like that. When all was said and done, Joseph was surprisingly upbeat. He shook my hand. “I am most confident we shall have this criminal apprehended and brought to justice.”

My return ticket was in ten days.

The game was afoot! Joseph gave me my first assignment. He drew a map from the Jacaranda Inn to the Hilton and one to another hotel called the New Stanley. He felt that as a *mzungu*, I would be able to go in and out of these hotels without any questions being asked. He thought that if Maukston was in Nairobi that is where he'd be, and he wanted me to loiter and see what there was to be seen. Joseph would track down his contacts in Naivasha. He promised to get in touch with me in three days.

Being given an assignment seemed to shake me out of my agoraphobia. Early the next morning, I made my way out of the hotel, past the beggars at the gate and headed to the Hilton.

Once out and about, Nairobi started to feel like a regular bustling metropolis, although there was no denying I was part of a distinct minority. That all changed once I stepped into the

lobby of the Hilton. It was an island of white in the sea of black. Joseph was right, people took little notice and no measure of me. I sat down and started reading some of the safari tour information that had been thrust in my hand by the *touts* as I approached the hotel. One was particularly interesting—“Come see the hippos of Lake Naivasha.”

I took a shot in the dark and used the lobby phone to ask for Mr. Rues’s room. Never heard of him. That was really no surprise; Interpol was convinced the Gang of Four had set up alternative identifications. Nothing left to do but loiter.

In those first two hours, I saw an equal mixture of businessmen and upscale tourists, but no one familiar. Joseph was right about the clientele. If Maukston was somewhere in Nairobi, it would be here. In a weird way, I was back in my element as well, seen but not noticed. When it started to get dark, I made my way back to the inn and slept the sleep of the just. Today I had actually done something.

The next day I made my way to the New Stanley. It was the Hilton, only more so. Less businessmen, but the tourists were even more upscale. I didn’t see any pith helmets, but they wouldn’t have been out of place. It was a different type of hotel—more a set of cabanas than regular rooms. No record of Mr. Rues here either. I sat back and took in the bustle. Sitting there killing time, I looked down and noticed my fingernails were dirty. I could tell the air in Nairobi was grimy, but I had never been anywhere where the air was so dirty you actually got dirty just being in it.

After spending the morning at the New Stanley, I circled back to the Hilton and took Joseph’s advice to sign up for one of the safaris. I signed up for a day-trip to Lake Naivasha. I knew Joseph was researching the Naivasha connection, but what the heck.

The next morning, I boarded an SUV with four Japanese tourists. They were keyed up to spend the day at Lake Naivasha; I was more interested when the tour guide mentioned we’d stop in the village of Naivasha to pick up some provisions before making our way to the lake.

I thought I’d get a chance to read my tour book on the way up, but I ended up white knuckling the whole drive. He drove the SUV as if it was stolen—alternately flooring the gas and jamming the brakes. And driving on the left was clearly more of a recommendation than a

rule in Kenya. I breathed a sigh of relief when we finally made it out of the traffic of Nairobi and out into the more deserted countryside. Even in the country, there were countless Kenyans going to and fro, some walking, some riding bikes so overloaded as to defy the laws of physics. Still not sure how we managed not to hit anyone.

We made one stop at an overlook of the Great Rift Valley. I stumbled half-asleep out of the van and didn't really focus until I walked over to the ledge. And that was the first time it hit me. Africa in all its glory. The bluest sky showed above walls of sloped farmland reaching down to the greenest valley I'd ever seen. Below us, hundreds of Kenyans scurried about their business, oblivious to the splendor. The Japanese did it credit with their high-powered cameras; not sure my iPhone did.

We reached the town of Naivasha about thirty minutes later. There wasn't much to distinguish it from the surrounding area, but we did pass one elderly white man walking toward the post office as we made our way to the market to pick up supplies. I stared intently as he slowly disappeared, as if somehow he would do something that would reveal him to be Maukston's shirttail uncle. It occurred to me later that if I had gotten off right there, he may very well have known the family. But the opportunity passed as quickly as it had arrived, and we continued down the road.

Once I gave up on spotting Maukston by the side of the road, the rest of the trip was delightful. Saw hippos on the way to Longonot National Park (well, we were on the way; not sure where they were headed) and then a tower of giraffes munching on acacia tress.

When we made it back to Nairobi, and I made it back to my hotel room, I was both invigorated by the trip and disappointed not to have any messages. I was hoping for a progress report from Joseph, but no luck.

So it was with renewed vigor that I took up my post in the lobby of the New Stanley the next morning. I even brought along my tour book—part of me thought it completed my disguise, and part of me wanted to look up other possible daytrips before time or money ran out.

I noticed the Kenyan policeman as soon as he walked into the lobby. His uniform was clearly marked as a cop, but it was the fatigue green of a military uniform. That and the AK-47

strapped around his neck commanded complete attention. He walked up to the concierge, shook hands, and exchanged greetings. His eyes worked their way around the room until they found me. There they settled, and there they stayed.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention as he walked toward me. My white-man-gains-immediate-credibility theory blew away like dust in the wind. He stopped in front of me, and my mind raced. He cleared his throat and spoke. “May I see your passport, sir?” I took it out and handed it to him. He studied it for a good five minutes, as if planning his next move. Then he said, “Could you please to be so kind as to follow me.”

As I walked out, the doorman help open the door. The only thing I could assume was that I hadn’t been as invisible as I believed, and the help had called me in as a vagrant. I was expecting a talking-to and a dismissal. Instead, without further words, he led me to his car, and we drove out. No explanation was given or asked for.

I was driven to a nearby police station, a clay brick building with the Kenyan flag flying and policeman loitering outside. Once inside, I was shown a chair in the captain’s office. He came in holding my passport. On his desk was a manilla folder and a nameplate identifying him as Nicolas Bure. Nicolas Bure, the man with my passport.

“Mr. Mulligan.” He started talking, and his eyes focused away from me and onto the closed folder. “You are a guest of the Republic of Kenya. Kenya has a long history of welcoming guests with open arms. However, it has also become known for you to be engaged in suspicious behavior.” My mind raced—peculiar yes, suspicious no. “We mean you no harm. We also believe you may have been misled by a Kenyan national. This Mr. Ndube is not your friend,” he said. With that, he stood up and walked toward the door. Opening the door, he shouted down the hall, “*Úka haha.*” And in walked Joseph.

Joseph had been beaten. His left eye was completely shut, and his jaw was so swollen I was convinced it was broken. He took the seat next to me without so much as a glance in my direction. Captain Bure resumed. “As a foreigner, you are not expected to be aware of Kenyan rules and customs. Unfortunately, there are locals who should know better and yet behave most poorly. Now I am afraid I must charge you both and set up a hearing for next month. We will hold your passport until that time.” My return ticket was in six days. The

whole time he looked only at me. “However, if you so choose, you can pay the fine and clear up this incident today without any paperwork.” He paused. “The fine is ten thousand shillings.”

I couldn’t stay another month; I couldn’t leave without my passport. Not trusting my hotel room, I had taken to Nairobi’s streets with all my money in a small purse tucked into my left shoe. I took off my shoe, took out the wallet, and counted the money. I was 1,500 shillings short.

Captain Bure was amused by my security strategy but looked at me with disgust when he counted the money and saw that it was short. However, he took the money and put it into his top drawer. “Since you are a friend of the Kenyan police, we will accept the more modest amount. This transaction is complete. You are free to go.” When I glanced at Joseph, he added, “Alone.”

I looked down at the manila folder and then back up at Joseph. He gave me a slight nod. There was one more thing; Nicolas Bure had neglected to return my passport. The silence grew longer and more awkward until I realized he was waiting for me to ask for it back. “May I please have my passport?” It was the first thing I had said since I had walked into the police office.

He smiled at me, having accomplished his point. He picked me up from the chair by the elbow. But before escorting me out the door, he did hand me my passport. One gentle push, and I was outside looking in. The door closed behind me.

I made it back to the hotel right at dusk. I took out one hundred dollars out of the ATM at the lobby—about 11,000 shillings. My intent was to pack up, check out, and head for the airport. Even if I had to wait twelve hours for the next stateside plane. There was no place I’d rather be than in a boarding area. I quickly packed and then walked back down to the lobby to explain I was checking out. It didn’t matter to me if they decided to charge me for that night or not. I wanted out. I was sick and tired of passing out misery wherever I went.

But when I got down to the lobby, there was Joseph waiting patiently for me in one of the chairs.

I apologized profusely. He signaled to take the conversation outside, away from the lobby. I explained that I was leaving for the airport but that once I had the taxi fare, he was welcome to the rest of my money. He raised one finger to get me to stop talking. He paused as if to say something, but first he had to collect himself. Then he took out a pen and paper. He wrote down four words. "He has been found."

23. Kakamega



The birds broke the spell and the four of us rushed to the top of the hill. There was nothing to see though, the forest had swallowed Maukston without a thought.

I started to barrage Joseph with questions, but he grabbed my hand instead. We cut across the park to the reggae bar, which was already rowdy at two in the afternoon. Joseph grabbed a table in the back and got us two beers. He took a sip and a deep breath. It was only then that he was ready to tell me what happened.

He had to whisper but he was able to get his story out. His first day in Naivasha started slow. His cousin knew nothing about Maukston, but she did know one thing: Tuesday was market day. And, knowing how gossip works, if there was anything to be known, everyone who works in the white highlands would know it.

Joseph and his cousin were there when the market opened on Tuesday. They spoke with each customer until they finally bumped into someone who was a kitchen porter at a white settler's house. She was extremely reluctant to speak, but eventually she pointed out someone who might be of assistance.

She was intent on picking out the best tomatoes and didn't notice Joseph and his cousin. The cousin touched her gently on the shoulder and asked "Sister, can we have a moment of your time?" She shrugged but agreed.

Joseph started in, speaking in Kikuyu. "I am seeking a man who is wanted for crimes most egregious. It is believed that he found his way to Kenya and may be staying with Kenyan relatives here in Naivasha. He is a *mzungu*, white, tall, and distinguished looking. He may have arrived within the last four weeks." Joseph showed her Maukston's picture.

She thought long and looked around before softly replying. "He is no longer staying with us." Joseph was deflated. But then she added "It is known that he has gone to Kakamega to do some research at the rain forest."

Actionable information! Joseph went back to his cousin's house. Unfortunately, gossip travels at speed in both directions. Maukston's uncle caught wind of this activity and called in some favors owed by the Kenyan police. The next morning as Joseph was loading his car to return to Nairobi, the police pulled into his cousin's driveway. They took Joseph away and, with considerable alacrity, extracted my name and dissuaded him from any further activity.

I listened in silence. We were close but in the end it wasn't meant to be. "Joseph, I can't risk any more violence. I think we have to call it quits."

He thought awhile. "Mr. Lou, this is no longer your quest. Now it... is now our quest."

* * *

Joseph had a plan. He thought we could make our way to Kakamega, snap a picture of Maukston to prove he is in-country, and get back all before the police were the wiser. We made plans to leave the next morning.

I had no idea where Kakamega was. Turns out, it was far. Took us almost the whole day just to get up there. We got a hotel room and prepared to track down Maukston in the national forest in the morning. My return ticket was now in four days.

Lonely Planet Kenya said the Kakamega National Reserve was the only remaining rain forest in East Africa. It had two rivers, the Yala and the Isiukhu, running through it. You were allowed to walk the trails; no guides were necessary. The park's most noticeable features were the water birds and the monkeys. They strongly recommended a raincoat and insect repellent. All I had was a baseball cap. They mentioned supplied housing. My eye was particularly drawn by the mention of luxury bandas. I couldn't help but think that if Maukston was here, that was where he would be.

We pulled into the parking lot of the Kakamega National Reserve just as I was telling Joseph about the bandas. He agreed to start there but added that, if that failed, we should split up. And we needed to keep an eye out for the police - he didn't think we were followed on the drive, but he couldn't be positive.

We headed for the bandas. As a rain forest, it was legitimate. Joseph was wearing dress shoes and a suit, but it still appeared to me that I was getting the worst of the treatment. The colobus monkeys overhead went blithely about their business, which seemed to be to chase or be chased by other colobus monkeys. With their sleek black coats with splashes of white, well, whatever "it" is, they knew they had it.

When we got to the bandas, there was one that particularly showed evidence of a long-term stay. There were boxes of dirt and a rudimentary sluice set up just outside the door. My pulse quickened. We were about to sneak up and have a peek inside when the entry flap opened. Out of the banda stepped Maukston Rues. We shot off the trail and dived into the woods.

My heart raced. He looked the same; Kenya had not worn him down in the least. I was convinced he had spotted me—could there be anything easier to spot than a white guy crouching in an East African rain forest? But he gave no indication of even having heard us, which was even more surprising given I was hyperventilating like a steam locomotive. Instead, he set up a mirror and put down a washbasin and proceeded to start shaving. He had his back to me, so getting a photo wasn't an option. We made our way farther off the trail and deeper into the rain forest itself, to wait for a better opportunity.

Maukston spilled out his washbasin and went back into the banda. We stayed crouched in the rain forest for what seemed like an eternity, waiting for Maukston to reemerge. My legs were

starting to cramp when again the flap pulled open and Maukston stepped out with a rain jacket and a backpack. He headed up the hill on what appeared to be the main trail.

Joseph whispered to me that he was going to follow Maukston off-trail on the right and that I should proceed off-trail on the left.

It was heavy slogging and quite noisy, but I hoped Maukston would chalk it up to a clumsy colobus. I dashed from one set of trees to another, serpentineing up the hill and trying not to lose sight of Maukston in the distance. The tall grass had me breathing hard, and even though I was the chaser and not the chased, I had had the same combination of fear and adrenaline as back when Greg had chased Dylan and me up our alley so long ago. Only this time there was no Dylan.

I had just reached one set of trees when I heard a large rustle nearly directly above me. Startled, I looked up just in time to see something huge drop to the ground. I let out a yelp as I came face-to-face with a baboon.

It was no accident. He had come down for a closer look or perhaps to establish who was king of this particular jungle. If I had been a cat, it would have cost me one of my lives.

He eyed me intently but without any noticeable fear or concern. Although he was big enough to snap me like a toothpick, he didn't appear dangerous. Instead, his eyes met mine, as if he was just curious as to what led me to that spot. I could have explained, but he would have just thought less of me.

After a while, he must have given up on the possibility of any answers. He stood up to his full height, paused, grabbed a branch, and made his way back up the tree. Point taken. It wasn't until he was completely out of sight that I felt safe enough to start breathing again.

The interlude over, I looked back up the trail, convinced I had lost Maukston. But I was just able to catch his backpack as it disappeared onto one of the thin tributaries off the main trail. I decided common sense was the better part of discretion and started to follow him on the trail, although at quite a distance.

The trail—and I wasn't convinced that this qualified as a trail—proceeded to go up at an incredibly steep rate, all the time getting narrower and narrower. No switchbacks to help, just a straight climb up. The forest got so thick that even though I could still hear the rain, none of it was making its way to the floor. It wasn't long before I was breathing quite heavily again, every breath drawing in the fertile smell of the forest.

As the path got narrower, I started to worry that it would peter out altogether and that on my way up, I would bump into Maukston on his way down. I got my phone out just in case a photo opportunity revealed itself. As I did, I looked behind me to see the hill I had just traversed. And off in the distance, two Kenyan policeman on the trail. They were intent on the hill and didn't notice me. I looked over to signal Joseph, but I couldn't see him. This had all the makings of my worst-case scenario.

Nowhere to go but up. At the thickest part of the growth, I popped out into a clearing. And with that, I was almost at the top of a hill overlooking the forest below. It reminded me of that moment on a plane when you pop out of the clouds and into a deep-blue sky with the fluffy white of the cumulus below. In this case, it was the same deep-blue sky, but instead of clouds, the horizon in every direction was an endless canopy of dark green. Still, it had the same calming effect.

I must have stood there spellbound for quite a while until a noise to my right broke my reverie. And there, not more than twenty feet away, at the absolute top of the hill, stood Maukston Rues.

“Lou, this is an unexpected pleasure.” He looked exactly as he did the last time in the office—tanned, rested, practically perfect in every way. I didn't reply. I was suddenly acutely aware I had nothing to say. I did point my phone and turn on video though.

Maukston, on the other hand, had plenty to say. “I must admit I was disappointed in you, Lou. All those television interviews, and the best you could do was that tired Trojan horse analogy. You of all people. I expected better.” He turned his back on me and surveyed the forest below. “NetLocii and Compendia were my own personal experiment; my living thesis—evolution as a computer system. Accelerating the time necessary to correct through trial and error.”

“What crap,” I shouted. “Tyr quickly saw through your sandcastle.”

He put his hands in his pockets. “That was unfortunate. I was keen to analyze that further. In nature, parasites eventually have to force themselves to be expelled before their host perishes. In a way, NetLocii took on a life of its own and took independent action.”

Then that flash of anger I had seen on the roof of NetLocii surfaced once again. “And Tyr died trying. Few people cross me. No one crosses me twice. Tyr learned the reason why. He just wasn’t up to it.” He took a deep breath and regained his composure. “Which brings us to today’s question: What are you doing here, Lou?”

I answered with the only thing I could come up with. “Why, Maukston? Why?”

He looked directly at my phone recording him and bowed. Just then another head popped out of the woods and into the hilltop clearing behind me. It was Joseph. “Mr. Lou,” he said as he took a few steps until he was alongside me.

Maukston took one small step backward. And a touch, just the smallest hint really, of smugness left his face. And at that point, I realized why I was here. Not for redemption, revenge, or closure. It was for this exact moment: when a shadow of doubt finally flashed across his face.

We had what we came for, video proof of Maukston in Kenya. But, before we could leave, two more people crested the hill. It was the Kenyan policeman.

Again, this caught Maukston by surprise, and for possibly the first time ever in his life, he took yet another step back. And, in the blink of an eye, he disappeared. He was gone.

The four of us stood there transfixed. It wasn’t until his body hit the treetops below and scared hundreds of birds that then flew over our heads that we realized what had happened. The birds broke the spell and the four of us rushed to the top of the hill. There was nothing to see though, the forest had swallowed Maukston without a thought. Maukston had just ceased to exist. The forest had barely acknowledged it.

I could have sworn we were the first people ever to look over that cliff. But when I looked down at my feet, there was a small pedestal commemorating Richard Leakey opening up this viewpoint to the public.

* * *

The Kenyan police radioed for assistance, then escorted us down the hill and drove us to the Kakamega station. They had a strong desire to arrest us for something but, with four eyewitnesses including two policeman and a video, the evidence was hard to refute. They told us not to come back. That was a given.

We drove back to Nairobi in near silence. I kept replaying those last moments. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn Maukston walked backward through the exit. Just like Dylan all those years ago.