



Ho Lin

## Work Triptych

1.

Although he was scheduled to arrive at the office at 9:00 a.m., it is 8:37 when he taps his new keycard to the sensor and the door clacks open. He wonders if the sensor is pinging his specific keycard ID to note his entry and exit times. Some would take this as confirmation of the Surveillance State and usually he might sympathize. But at this moment, he is pleased with the idea that somewhere it has been officially recorded that he arrived for his first day of work twenty-three minutes early. Such a gesture will please his new boss Mr. Pitt.

Mr. Pitt isn't related to Brad Pitt the actor. Mr. Pitt had opened the job interview with that fact. (But I'm better looking, Mr. Pitt joked, or maybe it was a half-joke, or even a quarter-joke.) Mr. Pitt looked at him after he said the joke, and after a decent half-second interval he laughed, then Mr. Pitt laughed. Mr. Pitt also revealed that he followed a particular football team. After the interview he sent a thank-you email to Mr. Pitt and signed off with a "Go Bears!" He regretted the decision as soon as he hit "send," but two days later he was informed that the job was his. He will never be sure whether his mention of the Bears clinched him the position or not. It wouldn't do to ask Mr. Pitt now—gift horses and mouths and all that. Still, he considers the Bears to be good luck, a karmic madstone. He has read up on the team and learned that their head coach moves the clocks in the meeting rooms forward ten minutes, so being "on time" actually means being ten minutes late. The coach also insists on the team being present five minutes before the

meeting start time on the clocks. If the team is scheduled for a 3:00 meeting and a player enters the meeting room at 2:56 according to the clock on the wall, the player is fined a thousand dollars, even though in reality the time is 2:46. For a multi-million-dollar quarterback, such a penalty is negligible, but it would be crippling for a minimum-salary tryout player. That is essentially who he is, a tryout player, so he is adopting the same mentality for his first day of work. In fact, he has decided to arrive eight minutes before the mandatory fifteen minutes prior to the actual start time (game time), and eight is more than half of fifteen, so one can say he is over 50 percent better than standard. He anticipates the patter with Mr. Pitt when Mr. Pitt enters at 8:45 and they greet each other: —*If you're not fifteen minutes early, you're late, right?* — *Right on. Fourteen minutes early doesn't win you Super Bowls.*

The office is empty, so he walks the floor. Clocks line the walls, all of them set to actual time: 8:40. Curious, but no matter. Being early must become a state of mind, without need of external stimuli. One of the desks next to the windows is empty. It has been wiped clean, so clean that he can only see a single dust mote on the corner of the matte white surface. (He wipes it off with his sleeve.) Which means little—the desk's occupant might have taken his or her laptop home over the weekend. But the lack of any other evidence of ownership—3x5 picture frames, mugs, chewed-at pens, even the telltale remains of dead skin—suggests that the desk is indeed unclaimed. On the other hand, the owner could also be a minimalist. *Own less, live more. To craft the life you want, get rid of everything you don't.* He himself has not yet made the full commitment to minimalism. Inside his backpack are stamps, tatters of receipts, business cards from previous job interviews, rubber bands that have long since dried out. As long as he this contagion is contained, as long as no one opens the backpack, he will be safe amongst the minimalists.

He places the backpack on the empty desk. For him, a desk next to a window is a must. Like a reverse vampire, he requires sunlight to function. Temperature is also a consideration. It's possible that facing south like this will be like the proverbial ant under the magnifying glass. He could request an increase in air conditioning. But that would penalize the unfortunates seated well inside the office, trapped in their own shady Siberias. He shakes his head; these quibbles can wait. What matters now is sun. He relocates the backpack from the top of the desk to the side, resting it upright against the leg. Less threatening. Someone may approach him later and ask: Is that your backpack here? He will smile and say, Yes, sorry, I wasn't sure whether this desk... (He will let it trail off like that, an attractive *mea culpa*.) By that point he will have had a chance to explain his affinity for the sun to Mr. Pitt, and Mr. Pitt will have revised the seating plan. He should have mentioned his preference for sun during their interview. Isn't that what the platonic ideal of an interview should be? Voicing each other's exact likes and dislikes, reducing the probability of unwelcome surprises to zero? Impossible to explain a lifetime's predilections and quirks in ten minutes, of course. But not mentioning the sun, something so central to his character, was a bad slip on his part. He must couch it in the right context when he explains it to Mr. Pitt. It's about increasing productivity. He can barter with the desk's current occupant if

necessary. Free rounds at the dive bar around the corner, extra help on projects, as long as their expertise is similar. And if not, he will learn. In today's workplace, everyone must know how to do everything. What do they call it? Longitudinal expertise? Something to look up later.

8:47 now. Still no one. He scans the walls for surveillance cameras. If he finds them, he will stand before them, wave, or flip a crisp salute. He will show he is present, here, ready. In their interview, Mr. Pitt had asked him a single question: Tell me about yourself. He had studied up for this one. Relate everything to the job. He had looked over the job description. Punctuality was a requirement. (Thus 8:37.) Organizational skills another. (Keep the mess in the backpack, don't let the mess out of the backpack.) Flexibility. Dangerous word, flexibility. Much like one's knee can be flexible until the instant it tears apart. But he needed the job. He still wrestles with the word *job*. Jobbed in the past, requires a job now. Both prospects frightful. During the interview he described himself as ready and happy to work long hours, and as he said it he visualized it: the reflection of his LCD monitor in the office window overwhelming the flickering evening lights of the city below, his back and neck knotted up, as they always are when consumed by tasks. Happy to work long hours, he said, and he monitored himself as he said it. No frowning of the brow; no set to the jaw. Perfect baseline.

At 9:01 he has completed the circuit around the empty office floor five times, like a professional golfer walking the course prior to the championship. He has always been terrible at golf. He must learn. Mr. Pitt looks like one who knows golf. He can only infer that from how Mr. Pitt walked in and out of the interview room. Mr. Pitt had a swaying saunter to his gait, as if strolling on the green, sharing a joke with his caddy about whether Callaway irons were forgiving or not. He would never be as good as Mr. Pitt as golf, he was certain of that. But maybe good enough to earn a management position someday. That was the whole point of it: get to a senior role where you really don't have to work, and you have won. Would a handicap of twelve do it? Something like that.

Has he entered the wrong office? No, the keycard wouldn't work otherwise. But this company may have numerous offices in the same building, on the same floor, even. Strange that a new employee would be given access to all of them, but not unheard of. Human Resources often does the bare minimum, forgoing any sense of nuance. He should check the rest of the floor, go back down to the lobby and ask the security guards who know how to look everywhere but at the person they're talking to. But what if he's wrong and he leaves now, just before the employees who are here to onboard him enter the office? He consults the post-it he has written to himself. The suite number is current. But maybe he wrote it down wrong. He could check the original email reminder on his phone, but cell reception up here is near non-existent. (Why don't phone mail apps store received messages in memory instead of forcing you to reload them again and again? He adds this to the "list of innovations" in his head he will follow up on someday, when he has venture capital, the right tech people, gumption.) He checks his wifi connections. "GuestWIFI" is an option. Yes! But even the guest network requires a password. Of course it

would. Every good company ensures security. Where have you been all this time? You should know this. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He takes a deep breath. Four seconds in, eight seconds out, like the yogis suggest. He takes a step towards the office entrance, stops. Turns around to face the windows, where he left his backpack. Turns back to face the entrance. 9:05 now. Could this be a test? First-day challenge? Perhaps cameras are on him, disguised as mugs and computer monitors. How will he perform under stress? Not the sort of tactics he would expect Mr. Pitt to employ. But that could be just what Mr. Pitt wanted him to think. Maybe there's a more innocuous explanation. Maybe the entire staff is in a meeting room, ready to pounce with a "Surprise" when he walks in, red velvet cupcakes spread out on the conference table like strategic emplacements. He has already seen all the conference rooms, though. Or at least he believes he has. These office buildings often have unexpected nooks and doorways.

9:12. Maybe everyone will arrive at 9:15. Such a maneuver would have a symmetry to it. The new guy will arrive fifteen minutes early, so we'll be fifteen minutes late. Har har, do you get our very esoteric little joke? He will laugh of course, while his shirt droops under his armpits from all the sweat. He is back at the desk where he left his backpack, but the backpack is no longer there. He blinks, shakes his head, willing himself into a reboot. The backpack probably tipped over and is now outside his line of sight. Look again. Slow. He does, and the backpack is not there. Maybe he's at the wrong desk. Why did he wipe away the dust mote? That would have been an identifying feature. He did notice quite a few empty desks during his circuits around the office. Natural to be disoriented, given the first-day jitters. But he did pick this particular desk because it faced south. Not that it's all that clear anymore that he is facing south, as sunlight is bouncing off the walls, emanating from everywhere, to everywhere. Or he is exactly where he is supposed to be and someone has taken his backpack. Opening it, regarding the contents, spreading them out like a corpse on a table, logging them. He must consider all possibilities. Maybe he's going crazy, but that would lead absolutely nowhere, because even if you know you are insane, that does nothing to help you get out of it. Best to proceed as if you are not. In which case, perhaps the job was fictitious, a ruse designed to get him to this location at this time of day, all to relieve him of his backpack, because something important was in the backpack. Ridiculous, worse than insanity, the stuff of cheap thrillers. He has backed himself up against a wall. Better to defend himself. Against what?

The clocks on the wall are at 9:17. The second hands on each clock are in perfect synchronization as they tick silently, the hands reluctant as they linger on each second, as if they are being pulled against their will, before they move to the next second. He is retracing his route around the office, accelerating his steps, stopping at each desk. No backpack, no easy landmarks to follow. He is not sure he remembers which door he entered from at 8:37. And now there is a scent in the air, something tangy. Someone making breakfast? No, harsher than that. Like a new piece of furniture just unwrapped. What does it mean? Where is it coming from? Don't know, don't know. He comes upon a framed photo of Mr. Pitt on a wall, or more accurately, a cutout of a business magazine article that features Mr. Pitt, the photo taking up more space than the article.

Mr. Pitt is in a suit, the collar of which eclipses his neck. His hair seems fuller, his skin a deeper shade of tan, and he wears a smile that one might call goofy, his features distorted to the point that he doesn't resemble Mr. Pitt anymore. The article says his name is Pitt, so it stands to reason that the man in the photo must be Pitt, but is it the same Pitt he met? How easy would it be to doctor up a mock article, change names and faces, and frame it? The quality of the paper does seem cheap. To know for sure, he would have to open the frame. He dares not. Forbidding his hands from doing something they shouldn't do, he thrusts them into his pockets. His left fingers curl around cardboard. Business card. Mr. Pitt's business card. With phone number. He forgot he had it. He will find a place where his phone has reception, he will call Mr. Pitt, and Mr. Pitt can assist him. Mr. Pitt will explain everything. Or is this part of the test? How bad would it look if he was forced to call the big boss on the first day? What if he was in a critical meeting? (What he wouldn't give for access to an Outlook calendar.) Surely Mr. Pitt would understand. Dealing with a confused employee on his or her first day couldn't be a rare occurrence. Again, maybe it's all a prank. Ha ha ha.

He holds his phone out like a divining rod, stepping to his left, to his right, seeking a signal. On the surveillance cameras, he must look comical. The smell he detected earlier is growing stronger, so he must be going in the correct direction, or at least in a direction that will provide some sort of explanation. He nears the far end of the office, which is now bleached with sunshine, light that grows amorphous as it reaches out towards him. It is not just light now, it is curlicues of smoke, and as soon as he distinguishes the smoke he smells it, like rotten eggs and metal, so strong that he must breathe through his mouth instead of his nose. The back of his throat seizes up in reaction. Behind the smoke, just beyond clear sight, are flickers of what could be fire, or might be flickers of sun bouncing off desks and walls. An alarm is dinging, but it doesn't sound strident enough to be a fire alarm. More like a gentle wake-up chime. Is that how office fire alarms sound these days? He turns to search for the office entrance once again but now the smoke is everywhere, churning in front and behind. He looks up to see it rolling across the ceiling like storm clouds, the gentle breeze of the central air system easing it along, as if it's meant to be here. He has ended up against the wall, just under the framed face of the man who may or may not be Mr. Pitt. Through tearful eyes he sees that his phone has a bare bar of reception. He dials Mr. Pitt's number. The glass of the picture frame is melting and Mr. Pitt's face now looks like nothing he's ever seen. He sinks down, a sliver of blue sky visible where a far window meets the floor. As the smoke swarms him he presses his face to his phone, both his skin and the phone sweltering, collapsing, each melded to the other, wanting Mr. Pitt, real or fake, to answer, and tell him when the workday starts.

2.

When she finally decided to kill her boss, the idea emerged fully formed from nowhere. Up to then, it hadn't qualified as even a notion; it was mere discontent. She was no spring chicken, she knew how the rat race worked—God she was now using her boss's metaphors. One fucks, one gets fucked, and both sides acknowledge the arrangement through conversations sporting terms such as “collaboration” and “sacrifice.” Concerns are voiced, acknowledged and ignored, promises are made about bonuses and title changes in the near future, and after that it's back to small talk about the latest TV show.

She had been assigned to a purported Big City (it said so on the Excel sheet), servicing rich clients, daily per diem of \$15 a meal, including tax and tip, which was absurdly low for that city, unless one committed to takeout pizza or McDonald's for every meal, and whatever else she was “sacrificing” for the gig, her health and figure were not among them, so it was wilting salads salads salads for the duration. After four weeks of it she had returned home to find her apartment had been broken into. A bunch of hopped-up teens, judging by what had transpired: all her ballpoint pens broken down to hollow tubes and scattered about after being used for drugs, cigarette holes in her pillowcase, every single light source smashed, with fragments of bulbs littered about like snow, her toilets plugged up with shit and who knew what else, and nothing of real value missing. She made the standard police report but given the frequency of crimes in the area and the lack of theft and violence in this case, the police were pointedly disinterested. No visits to the apartment, no pictures or fingerprints or DNA swipes. We advise setting up motion cameras, ma'am, was all they said. Given the neighborhood, this was about as good an outcome as one could probably hope for, and it only reminded her that she was stuck in this neighborhood because she couldn't afford anything else, and that if she'd actually been given a raise to at least keep pace with inflation, she'd have moved out at this point and none of this would have happened, and she fucking deserved some sort of compensation because she'd put in a lot of overtime and travel hours the past year, not to mention the clients, those slimy clients who demanded so much, their eyes all over her even when they weren't looking at her, thinking she couldn't see them. She had endured all of it because her boss had made vague noises about a new employee stock purchase plan, and even the possibility of opening satellite offices in Miami and Paris (and who wouldn't want to jet off to Paris for the week?). What it all boiled down to is that she shouldn't have slept with her boss (don't shit where you eat, another boss-ism). The worst of it wasn't the actual sex, but the aftermath, the two of them facing each other in a simulation of affection, his sour-milk breath raking her face, every bit of her being wanting to turn away from him but unable to, because of how such a maneuver might look. A few times she smelled hazelnut latte on him, the same kind of hazelnut her co-worker Brenda drank every morning. He talked about Brenda a lot. A few times he even suggested they have a threesome together. His

eyes would go limpid every time he brought it up, as if it was happening right there. If he put as much work into the business as he did in to trying to get that threesome, they'd have a stock purchase plan already.

So months passed, the fucking and being fucked proceeded apace, and finally she worked up the courage to ask: So about that stock purchase plan... And her boss nodded, eyes squinched and lips pursed, like a fish bobbing just under the surface of the water, focused only on food, and told her: Yeah, I'm working on it babe. Give me a few more weeks. And then just like that, he had departed the firm for new opportunities—why fight for Paris when you can join another org that's already established there? His VP position was taken by a man with his own ideas, because that's what happens, someone comes in and regardless of how successful the enterprise has been up to that point, the newcomer must make his own mark, show people that he has something “exciting” and “innovative” that justifies his presence. Fundamental change, he said. Hard-won processes and ways of doing things upended, just so everyone can learn how important and different the new guy is, and each online all-hands meeting becomes a series of virtual high-fives: Word from ELT is that YTD revenue is solid and looking better by the week, which means that the long talked-about company off-site in Hawaii will happen soon, and good news will be broken over rounds of Mai Tais, and maybe, just maybe, there will be more stock options and a date for going public, and the all-nighters she was pulling would finally be justified. There was talk about a new office, and several people had actually been dispatched east to scout out locations, and fuck, if the company was opening new offices then *something* must have been going right.

So she tolerated the new, and the revamped systems of client evaluations and sign-ins, checklists that needed to be adhered to, new customer service and billing apps, all of which she was responsible for every time she met a client in a hotel room, often with the curtains thrown open so those across the street could see them and get their fill of her body on his, his body on hers, tangles and tangles of movement, and of course with the lights on because the clients wanted to see what they were getting. Meanwhile, revenues were dipping as employees struggled to unlearn what was working before, but it was all okay because a profit dip was expected with a management change, and this would all work out for the better because with this new way of doing things, the company would make even more than previously planned, even though the “even more” was getting relegated to further in the future, to a time where stock purchase plans and promotions might be feasible once again. For now, everyone needed to stay the course, since the economy had experienced a downturn and revenue streams have taken a hit, and everyone had to endure a little pain in the present to benefit down the line, we appreciate your sacrifice.

So, still getting fucked, in short, even though she wasn't being literally fucked by her boss any more, not that her new boss was ugly, but every time she talked to him on Zoom she felt inconsequential, as if his interacting with her was something he had to get over with, like taking a shit in the morning. (Don't shit where you eat.) Finally one night she came home at three a.m.,

after a particularly hard night with a client who wanted more than what she had been contracted to give him, resulting in compromises and promises of extra payouts which essentially meant she had given him everything he had requested, with only a whisper of a promise that she would be reimbursed for the pain and trouble, and so she stumbled in through the front door, the arches of her heels screaming, her legs like weights, even her neck twisted in knots from the positions she had assumed during her session with the client, and as she entered the living room there he was, a kid with sunken eyes and cropped hair in a black hoodie, hunched up in the sofa, sucking on something from a tube that had once been a ballpoint pen, the smoke in the air smelling rotten and industrial, and the kid looked at her for a moment, as if she wasn't really there but just something from his imagination, and then he coughed out: Who the fuck are you? She answered without thinking, really the kid didn't deserve any kind of answer, but it just came out of her in a rush: I live here! The kid took a few seconds to understand what she had said, and his eyes remained dull as he rose, made for the door, moving quicker and quicker, like a fast-forward button hit repeatedly, but all of a sudden she felt none of her exhaustion, only something in her upper chest that had seized the rest of her, the world out of focus except for that fleeing little shit of a boy, and she ran after him. He was at the top of the stairs, his back facing her squarely, and she kicked out at it with her high heeled-foot, making satisfying contact, point of heel in mid-back, the clop-whomp-clop of his body tumbling down the stairs loud as gunshots. She walked down to the bottom, her eyes on the apartment doors on the ground floor, wondering what she would say if one of them opened, but none did, not because people were disinterested or lacked concern, but because of survival instinct. When she got to the boy he was still breathing, his body in a curlicue, and she dragged him outside by his legs, towards the curb, her adrenaline still singing, the body sliding across the sidewalk easy as you please. She placed him right in the crook between curb and road, one arm flopping onto the sidewalk. Very carefully, she removed her heels, and then lashed out with her stockinged feet some more, at his neck, his head, the crumpled black of his chest and arms only a bit darker than the black of the road. Headlights from a passing car scored her vision, but the car didn't stop—it had been moving too fast to even notice. She kicked a few more times, until something cracked. Skull? Larynx? She couldn't tell. She left him like that, and she had almost forgotten about it the next morning until she opened the front door to the street. She expected to see him still lying there, limbs jutting at odd angles, the smell of drugs and death hanging heavy on him, his arm still on the sidewalk, thrust in her direction, as if announcing *Her, it was her!* But nothing was there, not body or blood or police tape or chalk outlines, and the complete absence of it all, the lack of anyone in her vision, all the way the street in the bracing morning air that has its moment before the smog of the day beats it down, got her dizzy, as if the wind was scraping across her brain, jolting her towards new thoughts, and foremost among them was *I can kill any motherfucker I want, including my boss.*

First she had to decide which boss, old or new. They both deserved it in their own ways. Somehow it seemed more appropriate to murder the one she was more familiar with first, or was it just because they had fucked? That was the reason, surely, just her sheer disgust over what she'd done. Killing the only other person who was aware of her mistake would be like erasing



history. On the other hand, there would be a certain joy in offing her current boss after he'd ignored her all these months. Watching his face as the life fell out of it: *Yeah, you have to pay attention to me now, don't you?* The obvious answer: both had to go. As for who would go first, she tabled the decision for later and moved on to weapons. She knew nothing about guns, so she did some anonymous Internet research at the local library and found a list of "best handguns for women"; the SIG P238 would be the best option. Chambered for .380 ACP rounds, easy to conceal in a purse, no tools needed for field stripping, not that she ever planned to field-strip the thing, but she liked the idea that it was an uncomplicated mechanism. Even the ads she had seen for the gun had attracted her: woman in a smart ponytail and sensible purse, even the safety glasses she wore while firing the gun fashionable, her knuckles white around the butt of the weapon, a tiger aspect to her eyes. But when she found a friend of a friend who could procure the weapon, she was told that a revolver had already been secured. The friend knew someone who knew someone with no previous record of anything who owned a Ruger Magnum .357. The gun would be reported missing and/or stolen on a certain date; as long as her plans were carried out after that time, no problem.

So she finally had the gun, encased in bubble wrap, looking like a toy. She handled it with bicycle gloves, even though she'd never had a bicycle and couldn't recall where she had received the gloves—maybe a client had forgotten them, or was it some cheap giveaway at a workers' rights seminar?—but she liked their aquamarine stripes, the way they made her feel like a football receiver, or a superhero. Maybe a bicycle would be a good purchase. She needed to get in better shape. She had made her decision and her former boss would go first; if she killed her current manager the company would no doubt fold, and she needed extra time to get her mind and body right, check some job postings, clean up the apartment so she wouldn't be charged extra when she finished her lease. She would quit her job, all the better to eliminate any motives for killing the new boss—why kill someone when you've already voluntarily left the firm?—and move to a new neighborhood where she could keep a bicycle in her apartment without fear of theft. And even though the prospect irritated her, she knew she had to wait on her new boss because there was a slight, slight chance that the purchase plan might come through after all, and all those PowerPoint slides with the juicy-looking pie charts and graphs where the lines climbed higher and higher, scaling Everest heights, would come true.

She called her old boss on a burner phone (Yes, it's me—new phone, new me) and suggested a get-together at his pad, to which he said Yes, of course, of course, not even trying to conceal his horniness. She bunched her hair up under a baseball cap that she tugged low over her eyes and dressed herself in a coat that was several sizes too big for her. (Yes, officer, she looked heavy, but it was hard to tell, with that big coat she was wearing...) No one gave her a second look as she rode the stainless steel elevator to the penthouse floor and punched in his door lock code without thinking—it hadn't changed, of course. Those who have security never need to use it. His bedroom was wall-to-wall soundproofed, the kind of foam baffles they use at recording studios—her boss fancied himself a thwarted musician, and in the past he had strummed her a

few blues tunes he had written, songs that had a wronged man at the center of them. You took my dick and now you want my money, that kind of shit. When he sang he looked like he meant it too, like all this had happened to him. Anyway, the soundproofing would come in handy this time. Except it wasn't just him and her—Brenda was there too, Brenda dressed much like she was, except she had a fat fedora on her head. She didn't know Brenda that well, they never exchanged small talk when they saw each other, they never really said anything much of all to each other, but it was a comfortable sort of non-talk, as if they both understood that interaction wasn't a necessity. It wasn't so comfortable now. Why is she here? Brenda asked. Ditto, she said. I thought we'd have some fun, her old boss said. Well fuck, she thought, I guess murder will have to wait. Not that she looked forward to spending the next few hours with them, but she couldn't leave. Her old boss had moods; diss him even once and he'd go all little-boy petulant. She would lose the chance to meet up with him again. Fuck fuck fuck.

Her old boss had undone his bathrobe, the front of him exposed, his balls dark and graying, even as the rest of him had an even tan. She wanted to puke, even as her boss curled his index finger at her, come hither, and she took a few steps towards him as if on a string, still clutching her purse, feeling at the uneven borders of the Magnum inside, not wanting to get rid of it, wishing she could hold the purse even as she got fucked. Her old boss must have seen something in her face because now his grin was modifying itself, his mouth growing a bit wide in puzzlement—what was wrong with her, she didn't look like she was ready to have fun, had he gone too far by inviting Brenda over? Then he had two mouths: his open one, and then another one opening just above his eyes, a mouth that was a third eye, and then that eye lost its form amid a gush of blood that erupted from it as he fell back. limbs demure and his two original eyes still grinning at her, as if he knew something he wasn't telling, and then he was on his back on the bed and she could smell the smoke of Brenda's gun. Brenda held it in both hands, in textbook shooter pose, left palm cupped under the right, just as beautiful as the woman in the ads. Brenda lowered the gun a fraction, and then looked at her, and even though they had never really talked, she knew exactly what Brenda was thinking: Can I let her walk? Can't take the chance. And her own purse was on the floor now, the Magnum in her own hand, pointing at Brenda, just as Brenda was pointing her gun at her.

What was it? she said. Was it his stock purchase plan bullshit?

Kind of, Brenda said. I was more pissed about the promotion promises.

I got that too. Administrative management opportunities.

Yeah. Exactly.

That's a SIG P238. I actually wanted that one.

Funny, I would have preferred that Magnum.

So what are we going to do?

I don't know.

I don't know either.

She and Brenda faced each other, guns pointed at the other, the bed underneath her boss sighing a gentle squeak as the last remaining breath went out of him, blood spatter on the covers, as if he was an art exhibition, someone's phone pinging, perhaps a reminder for an upcoming meeting or a call from the office wondering when they were going to come in.

3.

It took years, but he finally had the dream, and not a moment too soon. Every morning he had looked at himself in the mirror—caved-in eyes, sag of a double chin that was hanging lower and lower with the passing of time—and recognized that the best of himself was over, with little sign that a reward would be forthcoming for all he had given. There had been moments, brief instants, in which he had entertained the thought of starting anew, going to a rival company, write the coming-of-age novel. But a point of no return had passed. One has a finite amount of energy to release in one lifetime, and the bulk had been spent. He knew there had to be a specific term for this mindset, the determination to continue doing something you don't want to do because you've already put in too much time, and you're driven to see things through to the finish, even if the finish portends only disaster. One day he would maybe look it up.

The dream started after he won the weekly office lottery and was invited to dinner with the firm's executive team (he would have preferred the second and third place prizes of symphony tickets and a free cruise around the bay). At the table he was seated between the two oldest partners, one smelling of mothballs and the other with liver spots up and down his face and arms. At one point Mr. Mothball said to Mr. Liver Spot, talking over him, as if he wasn't between them: *If we're not careful, this table is going to be overrun by women and black people.* Big guffaw all around, even from the lone female partner at the far end of the table, and just as he turned to look at Mr. Liver Spot, a piece of masticated steak ejected itself from the man's chortling mouth, right into his. Everyone was too busy laughing to notice. He fled to the bathroom, his puke coming out as a stringy, half-digested mass. He looked down at his trembling hands and for the first time, saw the flecks of what likely were liver spots.

Maybe his upset stomach was the reason he had the dream—he always had his craziest dreams after overeating, as if he had sucked in enough calories to fuel both his waking and dream selves. He forgot about it all upon waking up, but when he sat down at his desk in the office, his shoulders bunched up far too much (as they always were whenever he was under stress, under deadline, or both, or in-between), he remembered. Also sitting at his desk, behind at work, a hand massaging his shoulders, loosening them, gently forcing him back to an ergonomically correct position. His hand. Only it couldn't be his hand, because he was still typing with both hands, but it had to be his hand, because he could feel the knots in his back through his fingertips. The memory of it invigorated and disturbed. Then the necessities of the workday overwhelmed him, as memos and virtual training took hold, and the dream receded back into the fog of his brain. But that night he had the same dream, and every night for a few days after that. He mentioned it to a colleague over lunch, in between complaints about the commute and the awful new monster-like mascot the marketing team had come up for the company logo. *Really? That's great*, his colleague said. *You know who else has that dream? Everyone in senior management.* Naturally he thought his colleague was kidding so he laughed, and yet he stuffed himself with an extra ham and cheese sandwich at dinnertime, hoping to be full enough to have the same dream once again.

After another week of the same, he consulted with one of the partners. He even mentioned what his colleague had said to him. He figured the partner would chuckle at that: *Ha ha, good one, sounds like you need to go on a diet.* And just like that, he would be shooed back to everything he had known, which didn't include growing an extra arm and joining senior management. On the other hand, wouldn't the more fantastical outcome be preferable? Or at least different. Too late; he would get what he expected, just as he always had. *Very funny, no you're not getting promoted, get back to work.* But instead, the partner said: *Just roll with it. You'll be looked after when the time comes.* Thrown by that cryptic remark, he wanted to know more, but the partner was already hustling down the hall to a meeting with Mr. Mothball.

Later that afternoon he was at his desk and typing, eyes pulsing with exhaustion, another 16-hour day looming, when someone patted his left shoulder from behind. *Not now*, he wanted to say, but realizing that it could be a partner, he turned around, accommodating smile locked in—*Yes, I'm ready to do anything you tell me to do*—only to see empty space. Yet he was still being patted. It was a naked hand. His, but not the two hands he had grown up with, the ones with the liver spots. This was a pink, slender, almost translucent hand, as if it had just emerged from a cocoon. He ran to the bathroom, locked himself in and wrestled off his shirt. No mistake: third arm, third hand. Somehow it had emerged from somewhere just under his left armpit, the size of a child's, and now it was just there, a fact. He couldn't quite control it—*Stop it!* he would say, and the hand would listen for a few moments, but then it would be off doing its own thing, like rubbing the side of his chest, or plucking at the back of his neck.

Swaddling himself in his overcoat, he left early, forced to burn his last bit of PTO for the year, and spent the afternoon in front of his mirror at home, his third hand and arm all la-di-da and hanging out. Sometimes the hand would curl into a shape that might have been some form of sign language, or maybe the hand itself was dreaming, grasping at imaginary pens, typing at invisible keyboards. Maybe this was all a dream, he was still asleep and he would wake up soon. Still, as he cleaned his plates and utensils at the kitchen sink that evening, mind still numb, the third arm was chipping in, giving the fork an extra polish, wiping down the counter. It was a very industrious arm, far more energetic than he would have given himself credit for. Even while sitting on the couch staring at the TV, the arm was smoothing out the cushions, reaching over to straighten out the lopsided picture frame on the wall, scratching at the dried-out sauce stains on his pants and flicking them away, bit by bit. *What do you want?* he thought, and then he asked it out loud. The hand paused, as if caught in a criminal act, and then continued the merry activities it was occupying itself with. He got drunk enough on four beers to wonder if the hand would be amenable to pleasuring him, just to feel what it would be like, but the hand seemed too chaste to him, somehow, too industrious. Even as the rest of him got dull and senseless and he stumbled from room to room, it busied itself with cleaning, organizing, smoothing, as if it was directing him on where to go. When he finally collapsed on his bed, the hand was patting his head, and he decided to take it as a good sign, as if the hand was telling him, *Don't worry, everything will be fine when you wake up.*

He dreamed of the hand again, only this time the hand had been joined by an extra leg, sprouting from his left hip, and as he stood on his two original legs he listed to the left, the additional arm and leg throwing off his equilibrium, to the point that he could only stand there, his new left arm joined by a just-emerging right arm, his four arms stretched out like an Indian god of destruction, and then a head joined the arms, coming out of his shoulder, the new head not even looking at him even as he looked at the head in profile, the head looking remarkably like his own from this angle, the new head straining outward, along with the new arms as they pushed and shoved at the rest of him, as if his old body was just a thin-skinned fruit that demanded to be split open, and then he wilted as the new him emerged full-bloom with the appropriate number of arms and legs, skin pale and unblemished, trunk and head stretching towards the sunrise outside his window, a throaty cry coming from the newborn grinning mouth, the sound of it reverberating through the chest of his old body as he stared up from the floor at the new body as it finally savored freedom.

When he woke all spent and sweaty, any trace of the third arm was gone. All a dream, yes, absolutely. But after a life-saving cup of coffee, he checked the HR intranet on his laptop, which noted that he had indeed taken the afternoon off the day before. Must have been sick. Even hallucinating. Is that what hallucinating was like? Scary to think that he could live an entire day like that, unable to distinguish between reality from illusion. Just another sign that he was losing his grip. But when he arrived at the office, the partner and Mr. Mothball were waiting for him in the lobby. Congratulations were in order, they told him; well done, well earned. They led him to his desk. His new self, the self from the dream, was there, shirt well-pressed, headset on, flipping

him a jaunty salute, fingers flying over the keyboard at over 100 words a minute, just like he did it in the old days. *He can take it from here*, his supervisor told him. Mr. Mothball presented him with a check, the first of many, he promised. He was now officially a director. *You've got it made, so to speak*, Mr. Mothball said, grinning with Pepsodent teeth. *Enjoy life. Your boy's got this.*

He had many questions. He looked at his new self for some sort of acknowledgment or explanation, but his new self wasn't looking at him; he was already busying himself with the minutiae of the day, and yet he must have sensed his stare, because he gave him a thumbs-up, and even though he was staring at his computer screen, the screen that used to be his, rather than him, he said with a voice that hadn't yet gone gravelly with age, *Relax buddy, we're all good.* And before there was time for anything else, his partner and Mr. Mothball were all but shoving him out of the office, back to the elevator, *HR will be in touch, they'll explain all the benefits, you have any issues at all you let us know*, and out of the building forever.

It took him some time to get accustomed to his work-less routine. He consumed numerous six-packs, reestablished contact with old friends he hadn't talked to in years and took long walks into parts of the city he had never visited. Most of all, he enjoyed the air, even when it was smoggy or clogged with dust. He was even making notes for that novel he wanted to write, the one that he had put off for so long. Of course he'd never establish himself as one of the greats at his age, but at least he could finally scratch that itch, find an indie publisher somewhere, at least get the pleasure of seeing his book on Amazon. Every so often his other self at work would shoot him a friendly message: *How goes it? They finally got around to changing the production ticketing process. How the hell did you put up with the old way for so long? You've got way more patience than I do.* And every other Friday a director-level check would be deposited in his account, after appropriate taxes and related charges had been subtracted, far more than what he needed to live in comfort. It was time to travel to some of those far-off places he'd forever been meaning to go to. Morocco, for one. He had an idea for a story titled "May in Morocco," in which the lead character was named May. He didn't have much beyond that, but he was excited by the idea. Ideas at their very beginning were always the best, before they were corrupted by development and pruned possibilities. He could say the same for a lot of things. Like the friends he had reconnected with, whom he had come to realize weren't all that interesting, or at least they had grown less interesting since the time he had first known them, or maybe it was more charitable to say that he had changed. The city, too, was losing its fascination, as his walks took him to neighborhoods that resembled other neighborhoods, and soon only the negatives registered: the same chain restaurants and stores, the smell of piss in the streets, car radios turned up too high, so the music was only a distant mist lost behind the *thump-thump-thump* of the beat. Even the thought of a trip was losing its appeal—he needed to renew his passport, and he'd heard that people had been waiting for a year or more to get it done, and just the thought of bureaucracy gave him heartburn. And as he perused his notes for his new novel, he couldn't decipher half of them—his handwriting had gotten much worse over the years—and the crushing feeling that

he'd written down something important, something vital for the book's success, only to lose it through lousy handwriting, discouraged any progress.

One morning, a few months later, he phoned his work self. They hadn't communicated in a while; one of them had requested a phone chat, the other had said it wasn't a great time, and that had been that. But on this morning, staring at the detritus of cereal in his bowl, he was gripped with the need to talk. He called his desk line and his new self responded. *Sure, I can chat, but I need to hop off for a meeting in about five minutes.*

He asked his new self: *How are things? Are you happy?*

*Happiness is relative, isn't it? But by most metrics, I guess I'm okay.*

*They're not overworking you?*

*Eh, depends. Last week I had three sixteen-hour days instead of four. That's something. How are you doing? Enjoying the fresh air?*

*Not so fresh today. More wildfire smoke coming too. Gotta stay inside.*

*Yeah, I saw that. Orange skies at noon. What a time to be alive, huh?*

*You ever take PTO?*

*Naw, haven't used it yet. Bastards changed the policy, down to one week a year. Too much here to do anyway. Can't fall behind.*

*Sounds exhausting.*

*You have no idea. Ha, no, of course you have an idea. But I tell you, I'm really glad you're getting to enjoy life. Tell you what, I wouldn't mind switching places with you right now. No, not meant to be a threat, don't take it that way, haha.*

The phone clutched like a life preserver in his hand, staring straight at his cereal bowl, he thought: *It would be nice to switch places, maybe.* A call to his old boss, even Mr. Mothball? Had such a request ever been made? Or even something less permanent. A trial run, maybe? Or part-time? Surely they would be all right with part-time. But no, his new self was operating at peak efficiency—why would they take the previous him back, even if just for a few hours every day? And what if his new self got too comfortable with non-work life? Still, at least with work, there were less things to get hung up on. Only time to do and react. He could always ask. No harm in asking. Maybe he would ask. He would call Mr. Liver Spot and laugh about their dinner,

then suggest that maybe there were ways he could still help out. Or maybe Mr. Liver Spot and Mr. Mothball had turned all the decisions over to their other selves, having made the transition long ago, and these other selves would not countenance any Originals trying to muscle their way back into the business. The HR team had said as much when they briefed him: In exchange for these benefits and salary, you agree to relinquish etcetera etcetera. Things had always been run a certain way, and they would continue to be so—the success of the company all but ensured it. It would just be a waste of time to fight it.

He let out a long breath. *I was thinking of going to Morocco, he said.*

*Oh yeah?*

*I thought about writing a story set there.*

*Story? Funny, I had a dream the other night. I dreamed I was taking notes for a story. Something in Mongolia. I was just reading about Mongolia the other day. You should visit it before all those grasslands and plateaus disappear. Over-tourism and climate change and all that.*

He had never thought of Mongolia before, not once. He said: *Maybe*, even if he was quite sure it wouldn't happen.

His work self said: *One of these days I'll get started on a story. I have a few ideas.* Already his voice was fading a bit, slowing to a drawl, his attention drawn to something else. Another meeting, another QA session.

He said to his new self: *One thing we're never short on is ideas.*

*Uh-huh. Sorry, running late for the meeting. Talk later?*

*Later, sure.*

He began to add *Don't put off what you want to do*, but his work self had already rung off. Something somewhere was burning. He looked towards his oven, at his stove, the crusted pans and pots there. Then his gaze was pulled towards the window, towards the office towers that crowded the view, with white-gray pockets of sky beyond, as if they were all stuck somewhere in the sky, far from any identifiable location. Smoke gathered around some of the buildings in the east, either the smog of morning or a fire that was just beginning to erupt.

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